KUCHH YAD RAHAA
KUCHH BISAR GAYAA
Part-2

AADHAR

(English Translation of original Hindi Book 'आधार')

ANIL KUMAR LAKHERA



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"Everything recorded in
this book was fated to happen
long ago – occurring either
to me or around me during
my middle school years and
my five years of college.
At the time, I was perpetually
bound by the illusion
that whatever transpired
was caused by my own actions
or by those around me.
However, fifty to sixty years
have now elapsed since it all
occurred. What is written in
this book is simply as memory
served.
Naturally, even now, it feels
as though I am the one who
wrote this. Yet I know
today- that this, too, must
have been predetermined
all along."

To

URMILA JI

Preface

I have already explained, in the preface to *Aarambh* (*The Beginning*), why the strange urge to write my own stories-to attempt something resembling an autobiography-took hold of me.

Whatever I had written then, rough or polished, eventually found its way into print in 2022 as the first volume of my memoir, *Aarambh*. Some dear ones read it with great affection; some others did too; many perhaps did not. Yet the book came into existence, and that alone gave me quiet satisfaction.

I had never nurtured any ambition to reach literary heights, nor any desire to be known as a writer. The only thing I wished for was to lighten a burden I had been carrying for years. In writing *Aarambh*, I relived the innocent, foolish, sweet, bitter, awkward, and unforgettable episodes of my childhood with renewed delight. Then I gathered them all into a single bundle and released them into the current of time.

Whatever had already faded from memory simply dissolved into time's infinite expanse.

It is often said that in existence nothing is truly added and nothing is ever lost. Nothing is born anew, and nothing really dies. If that is so, then whatever existence had entrusted to me for a few fleeting moments, days, or years, it quietly reclaimed as well. Where it has preserved those moments now, in what form and under what name, only existence itself can know.

Adhaar (*The Foundation*) is an account of the eleven or twelve years that followed *Aarambh*-the years I lived, or perhaps more truthfully, the years that existence chose to make me live. Whatever fragments survived in memory have found their place here. This book records the gains and losses, the credits and debits, the countless visible and invisible influences that shaped the person the world knows today by the name I bear in this lifetime.

This is by no means a declaration that I existed before this birth or shall exist again after it. I possess no such knowledge. Nor can I claim with certainty that I carried another name before I was born into this life, or that I shall bear another in some future existence.

Within these pages I have once again lived through every remembered story from that span of nearly twelve years following *Aarambh*. The memories that endured have been retold. Those that vanished have vanished forever. Their whereabouts are known only to themselves-or perhaps to the One who first created them.

The journey in this volume begins with my days at Model High School and concludes during my years at Government Engineering College, Jabalpur. The path between these two milestones was long and filled with many halts, encounters, and transformations. To arrange every incident into a perfectly chronological narrative would have been difficult, if not impossible. I have therefore written only what memory chose to preserve, and only as my limited understanding allowed me to comprehend it. Those recollections have been gathered into ten chapters.

Like *Aarambh*, writing *Adhaar* has brought me immense peace.

I have an unwavering faith that there exists a Reality infinitely greater than us - a Presence seated somewhere beyond our understanding- which, by the sheer force of its will, gives birth to every moment, whether it appears to happen or not. To that Presence I offer a humble prayer: may everyone who reads this book discover, through these words that have passed through me, something of lasting value for themselves.

□

One question naturally arises:

If Aarambh was published in 2022, why did Adhaar take another four years?

The answer is simple.

During 2023 and 2024, life became crowded with so many complications and unforeseen difficulties that although the first three chapters had already been written, the work could not move forward.

Then came 2025.

On 9 January 2025, my wife, Urmila Ji, suffered a fracture in her right ankle. Recovery became a year-long journey. By January 2026, although she had improved considerably, physiotherapy still remained. The surgical wound, together with one complication after another, demanded patience from both of us.

Yet the story that destiny-or perhaps the One above-had already written unfolded exactly as it was meant to.

On the night of 7 February 2026, at around ten o'clock, Urmila Ji breathed her last in my arms.

All the rites and ceremonies that tradition required were performed.

On 17 April 2026, I left Jabalpur and came to Bengaluru to live with my son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter. My daughter, son-in-law, and grandson also live here.

There was no work waiting for me.

There were only memories.

Memories of forty-three years of companionship-sometimes sweet, sometimes difficult-that were slowly settling into an immense silence within me.

To learn to walk alone at the age of seventy is never easy.

There remained only one choice: to immerse myself in a task that could at least give shape to my days.

The framework of *Adhaar* had already been prepared. Three chapters were complete. I revised them, and on 21 April I began writing again. On 4 August, the manuscript of this ten-chapter book was finally completed.

The twenty-first of April is my birthday.

The fourth of August is also a day of special significance in my life. That story, however, belongs to another time.

By then the manuscript had grown to well over three hundred and fifty pages. According to the original plan, the memoir was to consist of twelve chapters, but I deliberately concluded it with ten. The remaining memories will find their place in the third volume.

There was a time, during 2024 and 2025, when I feared that the story would remain forever incomplete-that there would be only *Aarambh*, and nothing beyond it.

But now, *Adhaar* is in your hands.

If the Supreme Truth that watches over us so wills, *Aakaar* (*Form*) and *Aabhaar* (*Gratitude*) shall also one day reach you.

Even then, the story may still not be complete.

But that is a journey for another day.

Here, as I recall the loving memories , companionship and shared journey of *Urmila Ji*, I bring my narrative to a pause.

Anil Kumar Lakhera
Bengaluru
6 August 2026

Acknowledgements and Disclaimers

(A Plain, Straightforward, Honest Word)

The incidents and memories narrated in this book belong to a time more than fifty years in the past. They unfolded over a span of ten or eleven years. Naturally, anyone determined to verify every date with a calculator may discover the occasional discrepancy or find reasons to ask, "How could that have happened?" My humble request is this: read these pages as a companion, not as a detective.

-The stories in this book are rooted almost entirely in my school and college years. In fact, everything here unfolds within that world. Many of my friends may feel a little disappointed that their names do not appear in these pages. To all of them, I offer my sincere apologies. Every one of my friends-those from school, college, and elsewhere-lives vividly in my memory, whether or not they find a place in this book. Each of them has played a part in shaping the person I became, and all of them will remain in my heart with affection and gratitude.

Throughout this memoir, I have made every effort to ensure that not a single line is written against anyone, even inadvertently. Yet, if any passage causes hurt or offends someone's feelings, I offer my heartfelt apology here and now. I harbour no bitterness or ill will towards anyone-please believe me. Everything recorded in these pages actually happened, and time cannot be rewound to alter it. There is little value in arguing with the past. If an old thorn still pricks, or if a forgotten wound is reopened while reading these pages, I can only request that it be accepted with grace, as part of life's inscrutable design.

-One chapter of this book repeatedly refers to "the girl." Let her remain simply "the girl." Those who know who she was may keep that knowledge safely within their hearts. Those who do not know are

kindly requested not to speculate. She is no longer among us. Let her memories be treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

-This book is neither a confession, nor an explanation, nor a white paper. It is not a scholarly work, nor does it claim to be an authoritative document. It should not be cited, relied upon, or interpreted as evidence or as a legal or official document in any civil, criminal, or other judicial proceeding.

In a few places, I have added a little contextual information-either to lend some greater weight to what I am saying or simply because it seemed relevant and appropriate to me. If you find any of it unnecessary, please feel free to disregard it; and if anything appears inaccurate, I ask for your forgiveness. All such information is readily available on the internet, and that is where I have taken it from as well. So, I would request you to treat it in that spirit-and please forgive me for that indulgence too.

-Every incident, narrative, and description contained in this book is based entirely upon personal memory, personal interactions, and information received through such associations. What is written here reflects either my own recollections or those of the individuals concerned. Memory inevitably fades and loses precision with the passage of time. Consequently, minor inconsistencies or inaccuracies may occasionally appear. It is also well recognised that events repeatedly remembered in a particular way often become permanently imprinted upon the mind in that very form, until they seem indistinguishable from what actually occurred. Some passages in this book may have been shaped by that very nature of memory.

-Memory is a curious thing. It tends to preserve events either as vivid images or as remembered conversations. Neither the scenes nor the spoken words are exact recordings of every passing moment. Memory has its own limitations and, at times, must inevitably fill in small gaps. Wherever memory faltered, I have, sparingly and with great restraint-less than the proverbial pinch of salt in a pot of food-added a few words, a sentence, or an occasional detail, or allowed imagination to

bridge the silence, without altering the essential truth or the deeper meaning of the events described.

-A sincere effort has also been made to leave behind anything that might generate bitterness or serve no good purpose. The intention of this book is neither to investigate nor to judge. It does not seek to pass verdicts on people, places, or events, nor to diminish, criticise, or humiliate anyone.

-Even after all these acknowledgements and disclaimers, if I have unknowingly erred or caused unintended hurt, I once again offer my heartfelt apologies.

Above all, I request that this book not be read as an authentic historical record, an official document, or a work of reference. It is, quite simply, a collection of remembered stories-a memoir-and should be read in that spirit alone.

The Author
Bengaluru
7 August 2026

"Deepest gratitude. . .

to everyone who,
directly or indirectly,
through their living presence
or by frequenting
my memories,
endlessly inspired
and assisted, thereby
transforming a vision
into reality and
giving form to ....

AADHAAR"

Translation note-

This English edition of my book, **'आधार'**, grew out of a long conversation between the stories I wrote in Hindi and the readers I hoped would find them in another language. I began with the original manuscript, written in my voice and shaped by the places, faces, and memories that gave rise to it. To bring those pages into English I used AI-assisted translation tools to prepare a first draft and to help with recurring phrases and idioms, while I personally reviewed, revised, and reworked every chapter.

As the author and the translator-editor of this edition, I take full responsibility for the content, choices, and final wording here. The AI helped with drafting and consistency; it did not replace my judgement, my revisions, or the decisions about tone, cultural nuance, and meaning. Wherever a literal translation would have flattened an expression or hidden context, I chose phrasing that I believe best preserves the spirit and emotional truth of the original Hindi, and I edited details so that English-language readers can understand the cultural references and subtleties.

For clarity and transparency—whether for readers, publishers, or any legal or contractual review—this note records that:

- the original work was written by me in Hindi;
- AI-assisted tools were used to produce initial translation drafts and to aid consistency;
- I edited and authorized all final English text and accept full responsibility for it.

If you find passages where you feel a different nuance would be truer to the original, I welcome that conversation. Translation, like writing, is a human act of interpretation; this edition reflects my best effort to remain faithful to the source while making the book accessible in English.

- Anil Kumar Lakhera

Author of 'आधार'

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1

Aadhar-Shila

(Model High School Days)

Model High School is connected with that foundational terrain of my life where the first distinct outlines of my personality began to emerge. The earliest years of childhood are, of course, tender and somewhat unformed, yet the truth is that it is during those very years that the seeds of values, habits, attitudes, and ways of looking at life are silently sown within us. Even so, one's manner of thinking, one's vision of the world, and the understanding that gradually takes shape within acquire their true form only when a child steps beyond the threshold of home and encounters a larger world for the first time.

Like most children, my first doorway into the world beyond home opened through education. If I look at it more closely, the process of laying the foundations of life had, in fact, begun in primary school itself. It was there that I first learned to remain away from my family-especially my parents-for a few hours each day. Hidden within that small separation was the first whisper of self-reliance. It was also during that time that my mind began to absorb knowledge, experiences, and the influences of a new environment.

Naturally, I speak here only in the context of my own life. These were the days when I first entered primary school. It is true, however, that the initial period of my first year of schooling was spent studying at home. I have already described that phase in detail in the chapter titled *Beginnings*.

Yet, as I have mentioned earlier, the true foundation of my life was laid at Model High School. Looking back now, I realize that it was not

merely a school; it was a living environment that quietly shaped my personality from within. During such years, subtle seeds are sown seeds of character, conduct, and the strength to face whatever circumstances life may present.

If one wishes to understand the Model High School of that time, it may best be viewed as a modern-day ***Gurukul***. I do not use that comparison casually; it arises from a deep personal experience and an abiding conviction.

□

From 10:20 in the morning until 4:20 in the afternoon, we remained there. It was not merely a period devoted to study; it was an environment in which the small and large lessons of life quietly entered our being. Throughout those hours, the atmosphere of the school resembled that of a traditional Gurukul-disciplined, immersive, and deeply nurturing. The only difference was that our classes were not held beneath the shade of trees but within solid classrooms, and instead of sitting on the ground, we occupied sturdy wooden desks.

If examined carefully, many differences between the ancient Vedic Gurukul and this modern institution become evident. Yet beneath those differences lay a remarkable similarity: both regarded education not simply as the imparting of information, but as the shaping of a student's life and destiny.

This was the period between 1967 and 1972-the phase of my life during which I studied from Class Six to Class Eleven. Therefore, when I say that Model High School was truly like a Gurukul, it is not merely a sentimental assertion but an experienced truth. As these memories unfold, that truth will become increasingly evident.

Much has changed since then. Gradually, that atmosphere too underwent transformation. Some traditions still survive, but their form is no longer the same. Whether the relationship between teachers and students retains its former character, I cannot say with certainty.

One significant change is that boys and girls now study together there. And the institution we once knew as Model High School is today known as Pandit Lajja Shankar Jha Higher Secondary School.

Yet when I look back, it becomes clear that the real beginning of my life-or rather, the framework upon which it was built-was formed there. At the time, I could not have understood this. It seemed merely a school, a place one attended every day. But now it appears to me as something far greater: not simply a place, but a new dimension of life in which, day after day, I was becoming someone more than I had been before.

The hours between half-past ten in the morning and half-past four in the evening were undoubtedly long, yet one scarcely noticed their passing. A substantial portion of each day was spent there, and perhaps that is why the school gradually came to feel like home-or perhaps like another world altogether, separate from home, with its own rhythms, silences, and disciplined routines.

To call it a Gurukul may sound like a straightforward conclusion, but no single word can fully capture the experience of those years. What I can say is that there existed a rare concentration of purpose there-a kind of invisible discipline, a bounded sense of propriety, a strict yet inwardly satisfying order. No one imposed it upon us by force, and yet we observed it with remarkable care.

The pattern of our daily routine seemed permanently etched within us. Students, teachers, and everyone else associated with the school moved according to that shared rhythm.

There were, of course, differences. We did not sit beneath trees. We had classrooms enclosed by walls and wooden desks upon which we spent our days. Everything was more organized, more modern. Yet within that modern structure lived something that had preserved, deep within itself, the ancient Indian ideals of teaching and learning despite the glitter of modernity and the accelerating pace of changing times.

It was not a written rule, nor a part of the curriculum, nor a motto displayed upon the walls. Rather, it was a silent ethos dissolved into the very atmosphere-something ancient, almost unspoken.

The relationship between teacher and student was never confined to lessons and examinations. It contained warmth, trust, and that enduring tradition which regards knowledge as a light capable of illuminating life itself. When a teacher taught, he imparted more than information; he shared a portion of his experience, his perspective, and the wisdom accumulated through living. And the student, too, did not learn merely to obtain marks. Somewhere within, he sensed that knowledge makes a human being more humble, more sensitive, and ultimately more human.

Even amidst the formalities of modern education, the spirit of the old Gurukul tradition remained present like a subtle thread. A simple remark from a teacher, a gentle correction, or an affectionate hand placed upon one's shoulder could offer a direction that lasted a lifetime. Learning was not regarded merely as a profession or a means to an end; it was also a moral and cultural responsibility.

Today, when I look back, it seems to me that those unspoken values were the very soul of the entire system. They elevated it beyond mere education and transformed it into *sanskar* - the shaping of character and consciousness.

Those were the years between 1967 and 1972. It was during that period that I completed my studies from Class Six through Class Eleven. After so many years, it is easy for me to say that the place still lives somewhere within me-like a story that reached its conclusion and yet somehow remains unfinished; a memory that returns again and again to whisper that the journey which began at Model High School is still continuing, and will continue to do so -

until the very end,

as long as breath endures.

□

Now I hear that much has changed.

Model High School is now known as Pandit Lajja Shankar Jha Higher Secondary School. Boys and girls study together. Time has continued its onward march, and such changes are only natural. Life never remains fixed in one place; it keeps transforming institutions, names, customs, and ways of living as it moves forward.

Yet amidst all these changes, one question still lingers within me.

What once existed there-what, when I look back, I am tempted to call a *Gurukul*-does any trace of it still remain?

I am not speaking of the buildings, the curriculum, the uniforms, or the external rules of discipline that time repeatedly alters. I am speaking of that invisible atmosphere in which teachers were not merely instructors, nor students merely candidates preparing for examinations. Between them existed a bridge of affection-unspoken, informal, yet profoundly alive.

Education there did not come solely from books; it filtered through personality and character.

Sometimes through a glance, sometimes through silence, sometimes through a mild rebuke, or an unexpected word of praise.

Learning was not merely an exploration of subjects; it was also the cultivation of values.

Today, I feel that perhaps this is the very element that prevents a school from becoming a mere institution and transforms it into a *Gurukul*. If that essence still survives there-if teachers are still more than teachers and remain gurus, if students are more than pupils and remain disciples; if within that campus the purpose is not merely teaching and learning but also shaping the direction of young lives; if in its corridors, classrooms, and on its hockey ground the same old fragrance of discipline, culture, and dignity still mingles with the

breeze-then one may say that time, despite changing everything else, has failed to alter what was most precious.

Perhaps that spirit belonged only to that age...

Or perhaps it exists only within us.

Even now, fragments of that period drift around me like clouds-clear, luminous, and white. Their shapes keep changing, but the stories remain the same.

Our entire days were spent there-

in classrooms, bent over our desks...

Yet studies were not everything.

There was something more, something that resists expression in words-

perhaps the very thing that now seems easiest to call a *Gurukul*.

But as I said, this was not the kind of Gurukul one reads about in books.

There were no trees here, nor their shade.

There were walls, rooms, and hard wooden desks-

upon which we were slowly learning how to sit within ourselves.

At times, it seems that the real education was precisely that-

the kind that was never spoken aloud.

The kind that descended quietly, of its own accord,

in the pauses scattered throughout the day,

in some silent moment.

1967 to 1972...

Five years-they sound so brief when spoken.

Yet perhaps they were the longest years of all.

Something from that time remains suspended there even today...

And something from there continues to move within me still.

It amazes me how many decisions are even now shaped by those years. The values and habits formed there continue to send their messages across time-telling me what ought to be done, or what would be the right thing to do.

That period is now more than half a century old, yet it remains alive. Piercing through all the intervening years, it still reaches me. And I believe this is true not only for me but for every student who passed through Model High School.

The very name-*Model High School*-opens the door to some long-locked chamber within me.

A chamber where the first faint stirrings of my identity were recorded-softly, almost imperceptibly.

Those early years of childhood...

when everything is taking shape, yet nothing has acquired a definite form.

Like wet clay-

bearing the impressions of fingers but promising no fixed design.

Values, habits, unspoken codes of conduct-

all of them seep inward silently, without announcement.

In the beginning, however, I had not yet become entirely separate from home.

Part of my first year of primary schooling was spent studying at home-

as though a river, before beginning its journey,

must linger for a while beside its own source.

Perhaps that pause was preparing me

for the current that lay ahead.

The first day...

Looking back now, it seems less a date or an event than a feeling-
as though something unknown was quietly shifting within me.
The school building was not especially large,
yet at that time it appeared to me like a vast new world-
where every face was unfamiliar and every voice unknown.
Listening to the sound of my own footsteps,
I was joining that crowd,
yet somewhere inside there was hesitation-
as though I did not entirely belong there yet.
That first awkwardness...
was not only toward others.
It was also toward me.
Would I fit into this place?
Would my voice be heard?
Or would I remain merely another face among many?
Gradually, a few faces began to feel familiar.
My first friends-
perhaps we were united not by our names,
but by a shared hesitation.
In that new world,
we became small sources of support for one another-
without speaking of it, without drawing attention to it.
And sometimes, amid that crowd,
a strange loneliness would descend upon me-
as though, despite being surrounded by people,

one still stood somewhere alone within oneself.

Yet perhaps those were the very moments

when a new voice was being born inside me-

the voice of my own identity.

Many incidents that seemed insignificant at the time now appear rich with meaning.

It was there that the story of my life began to grow more vivid.

Dinesh Gupta-the boy who sat beside me at the same desk-was my first friend.

Among countless unfamiliar faces, I found him seated next to me.

We did not say much to one another.

Words themselves still seemed shy.

Yet there was an ease in his presence,

as though an understanding was forming even without speech.

He was my first friend at school-

or rather, the first person who made that unfamiliar world feel a little less strange.

We sat together at the same desk-

sometimes bent over our books,

sometimes gazing idly around,

and sometimes exchanging a faint smile for no reason at all.

It is curious how friendship rarely begins with grand events.

Sometimes it is born simply

from two people sitting side by side.

Today, when I think of it,

it seems that on that day, at that desk,

it was not merely two children who sat together.

The foundation of a first human bond

was quietly being laid in an unfamiliar world.

Dinesh possessed a remarkable love of reading.

For him, books beyond the syllabus were not merely study material-

they were gateways into other worlds.

He excelled in his studies as well.

In the sixth-grade examination, the two of us secured fourth and fifth positions in our class with good marks.

There was a healthy competition between us,

untouched by envy-

only a quiet rhythm of growing and advancing together.

Yet there was another side to him.

He would become utterly absorbed in detective novels.

And when he read, a different light appeared upon his face.

By the time the last period of the day arrived,

he would have finished an entire book.

And I...

I became a silent character in that story-

a watchman.

My eyes were never on the book.

They were fixed on the classroom door and on the possibility of a teacher's arrival,

lest he be caught.

He read, and I kept watch-

without any formal agreement between us,

as though this were one of the unspoken rules of our friendship.

It was not his daily habit, of course.

He was not always lost in novels.

But whenever an opportunity arose,

he would step into that world

where mystery, adventure, and imagination

filled his eyes with a special brightness.

Looking back now, it seems

he was not merely reading books.

He was creating an inner world of his own.

And I, without realizing it,

was becoming the first witness to that world.

Dinesh Gupta-

the boy who once disappeared into detective novels-

would one day rise to become a General Manager in Planning and Design at Larsen & Toubro.

He earned his B.E. in Electronics from Jabalpur Engineering College, while I chose the path of Mechanical Engineering. My own journey led me to the large power stations of Madhya Pradesh Power Generating Company, where I served from Assistant Engineer to Chief Engineer, and eventually retired in 2015 as Executive Director.

Yet time has its silent side as well.

Before I reached my destinations,

Dinesh had already departed from this world.

Like a story that comes to an abrupt halt, unfinished.

Sometimes, when I look back, that small episode of being a "watchman" illuminates something deep within me.

At the time, it seemed nothing more than a game-

standing guard for a friend.

But perhaps, unknowingly,

it was there that a vigilant observer was born within me.

An observer who not only sees,

but hears approaching footsteps before they arrive.

Perhaps it was this quality that later enabled me, as a maintenance engineer, to detect the slightest irregularity before it became a problem, and later, in managerial responsibilities, to perceive the delicate balance hidden behind every decision.

How strange it is-

the great truths of life often lie concealed within small incidents that are almost forgotten.

Today it seems that while I was quietly keeping watch for a friend,

I was, in truth,

awakening within myself an eye that would remain with me throughout my life.

Sometimes I wonder-

was that "watchman" really me?

Or was it merely a role that life had assigned to me?

Dinesh remained absorbed in his book,

while I kept a careful eye on the teacher and the classroom door.

Now it seems

that watching was not directed only outward.

Something within was awakening too.

Perhaps in those moments,

without my knowing it,

the seed of the *Witness* was planted within me.

And in the act of seeing itself,

a different kind of understanding is born.

In later years, when I lived among machines, systems, and responsibilities,

that Witness remained active somewhere within.

The one who hears the signal hidden behind every sound,

who senses the possibility concealed within every movement.

Those small moments with Dinesh were not merely memories of friendship.

They were also the beginning of a deeper inward journey.

As though life had offered a sign long ago:

You must learn not only to do, but also to see.

And perhaps...

seeing is the deepest form of doing.

In the flow of time,

there are certain scenes

that never entirely pass away.

They continue to burn within us

like a gentle, enduring light.

Those moments with Dinesh Gupta-

the shared desk,

his detective novels,

and my unspoken watchfulness-
still stand exactly where they always stood,
as though time itself has never touched them.
Only their meanings have changed.
Then, it was merely friendship-
an innocent companionship.
Today, it feels like a sign,
pointing toward a deeper layer of life.
We often measure our lives
by what we have done-
where we arrived,
what we gained,
what we lost.
But perhaps life has another dimension as well-
one in which we do not merely *act*,
but also *observe*.
That observing...
which does not interfere,
yet carries within it a profound awareness.
Perhaps that Witness
continued to take shape within me,
quietly,
without proclamation,
without effort.
And now, when so much seems to have receded into the past,

I feel that although I remain myself,

I am no longer quite the person I once was.

So much has been left behind on this long journey.

Yet the Witness remains-

still present,

still beside me.

Calm, detached,

and fully awake.

"While quietly guarding someone else's story, I gradually became the silent witness of my own."

□

When we lived in Western Ghamapur, Model High School stood about two kilometres from our home. There were two routes by which one could reach the school.

The first was the direct route along the main road-turning left at Ghamapur Square, passing through Beohar Bagh, and continuing up to the High Court. Model High School stood directly opposite the High Court, on the right-hand side of the road-and it still stands there today.

The second route was somewhat different, as though it belonged less to the city's formal roads and more to a world of footpaths and narrow semi-paved lanes. It passed through the Ramlila Ground, skirted the football field and hostel of the Vocational School, and eventually joined the main road near Beohar Bagh. Taking this route saved nearly a furlong and a half, and I usually walked to school this way.

I did not own the canvas satchel that hung from the shoulder, which many students carried. Instead, I had a large khaki cloth bag that held my books, notebooks, and various small belongings. That bag had a world of its own filled with the mingled scents of paper, dust, ink, and

childhood. As I walked, it would sometimes bump against my shoulder and sometimes swing against my back, as though it too were a companion on that daily journey.

Even this shorter route could be shortened further. If I passed in front of my primary school, bypassed the Ramlila Ground, and joined the Vocational School Road directly, I could save a little more distance. Beyond the hostel compound, instead of passing in front of Dr. Pandey Hospital, one could cross a small barren field and emerge straight onto the main road. At times, I chose that route as well.

Model High School stands opposite the Madhya Pradesh High Court and beside what is now known as Dr. Ambedkar Square. During my years there, Dr. Ambedkar's statue had not yet been installed. In those days, the intersection was variously known as Tehsili Chowk, Telegraph Office Square, or High Court Square. I no longer remember which of those names was most commonly used.

If I were to describe the school's location in the simplest possible terms, I would say that it occupied the corner where the road running from the High Court towards Dr. Rajendra Prasad Square met the road leading from Tehsili Chowk towards Chhoti Omti.

Looking back today, I feel that the true distance of those roads was never measured in kilometres. They were pathways from one age of life to another-along which a thin boy, carrying a khaki bag on his shoulder, walked through dusty footpaths and lonely fields, slowly making his way toward the world within himself.



There was yet another route.

Instead of passing beside Beohar Bagh, one could weave through the lanes of the Beohar Bagh neighbourhood, emerge onto the Chhoti Omti Road, and enter Model High School through Gate Number One.

I mention this route because it is connected with an important episode in the early story of my relationship with Model High School-an episode whose memories remain as vivid today as they were then.

The results of the fifth-grade examination had been announced, but the mark sheet had not yet arrived. Summer vacations had already begun. In those days, schools closed for a full two months, from the first of May to the thirtieth of June. Results were usually declared on 30 April, and students returned directly on 1 July.

There was no provision for supplementary examinations in primary schools then. One either passed or failed-quite simply. The curriculum was comparatively easy, and students were made to work consistently throughout the year, so failures were rare. Those who failed had to repeat the same class the following year.

As I was saying, the result had been declared, but the mark sheet had not yet reached the school. Since the fifth-grade examination was conducted by the Primary Education Board, the mark sheets had to be prepared and dispatched from there.

The last date for submitting admission forms to Model High School was approaching-perhaps sometime in May-but our mark sheets still had not arrived.

It had already been decided at home that I would study at Model High School. Information from my primary school indicated that I had secured 82 percent marks. Yet the absence of the official mark sheet caused understandable anxiety at home.

By afternoon, Bai had made up her mind.

Whether the mark sheet arrived or not, the admission form would be submitted.

We waited until the very last date. Still, no mark sheet came. Bai first visited my primary school to make inquiries and then took me directly to Model High School. We already had the admission form, almost fully completed.

After confirming that the deadline would not be extended, she filled in the marks section herself. Calculating from the information available, she entered marks totalling 328 out of 400-precisely 82 percent.

The form was submitted.

According to the rules of the time, however, the final admission process required the student to appear with all original documents, among which the mark sheet was the most important.

A few days later, the mark sheet finally arrived.

Naturally, the actual subject-wise marks did not exactly match the figures Bai had estimated. In some subjects the marks were slightly higher, in others slightly lower. There was every reason to worry that this discrepancy might affect my admission.

But Bai remained completely calm.

Again and again, she reassured me:

"Nothing will happen. We shall simply tell the truth. We have done nothing wrong. We acted out of necessity. Mata Rani and Kanhaiya Ji will set everything right."

Her faith in the Divine Mother and in Kanhaiya Ji was absolute.

Then, amid those days of uncertainty and hope, a list of selected students was posted on the notice board of Model High School.

I went with Bai to see it.

My name was there.

I had been admitted to Class VI, Section B.

The notice also specified the date on which selected students were to report with their original documents and complete the admission formalities.

At last, that day arrived.

I went to Model High School with Babuji. By then it was probably the first week of July. Bai's school had reopened, and she could not take leave, so Babuji accompanied me instead. He had taken a day off from the factory for the purpose.

Looking back now, it seems that this was not merely an admission to a school.

It was a small confluence of the hopes, anxieties, limitations, and aspirations of our entire family.

That simple admission form carried far greater importance in our household than many official documents.

Babuji and I set out on foot.

My fifth-grade mark sheet, school-leaving certificate, and character certificate had been pinned together and rolled carefully inside a sheet of paper. I carried the roll myself.

We walked through the Ramlila Ground, past the Vocational School hostel, and through the lanes of Beohar Bagh. By the time we reached the neighbourhood, a light drizzle had begun. The rain was not heavy enough to force us to seek shelter, so we quickened our pace and soon reached Model High School.

We quickly found the room where admissions to Class VI were being processed.

I stood in line with Babuji.

When our turn came, we found ourselves before a desk covered with registers. One particularly large register lay open. Two gentlemen sat behind it.

One of them was Mr. R. K. Pandey, a middle-school teacher, though I did not know that at the time. The identity of the other gentleman has faded from memory.

Mr. Pandey asked my name, located my form, and then requested my mark sheet and supporting documents.

I immediately untied the paper roll.

But there was nothing inside.

For a moment, the ground seemed to vanish beneath my feet.

Babuji stared in disbelief-first at me, then at the empty sheet of paper in my hands. Only moments earlier it had appeared to contain all the documents upon which my admission depended.

Now they were gone.

Mr. Pandey, too, looked at us and at the empty roll with astonishment.

For a few moments, time itself seemed frozen.

Then, gradually, movement returned to the scene, though within me everything remained still.

Strange sounds rang in my ears. Darkness and light seemed to blur together before my eyes.

Then I heard Mr. Pandey's voice:

"Perhaps they fell somewhere along the way. Go back and look for them."

By then, other people had stepped forward behind us. Babuji took my hand, and we walked out.

Outside, we were both silent.

But within me, fear and anxiety churned violently. No doubt Babuji's mind was equally troubled.

We retraced our steps.

Now we walked slowly, scanning both sides of the road with desperate attentiveness. Anyone observing us would immediately have known that we were searching for something.

We crossed the small bridge over the Omti drain. Beyond it stood rows of identical houses-probably government quarters-single-storey buildings with sloping tiled roofs. Their front doors opened onto the street, and wooden latticework lined the sides of their verandas.

We were walking along the same road by which we had come to school.

Then, suddenly, the door of one house on the right opened.

A gentleman emerged. He wore striped pyjamas and a white vest.

Calling out to us, he asked directly:

"Are these the papers you're looking for?"

In his hands were my mark sheet and every one of the missing documents.

The moment we saw them, we recognised them.

Our relief knew no bounds.

The gentleman explained that his son had been playing outside. When the rain began and the boy was returning home, he had found the papers lying on the road and brought them back.

Babuji thanked him and briefly explained their importance.

The gentleman smiled.

There was a deep satisfaction and quiet human warmth in that smile.

I bent down and touched his feet in respect.

Then Babuji and I turned once more towards Model High School.



A little later we stood again before Mr. Pandey.

As he compared the marks entered on the admission form with those on the original mark sheet, his attention was drawn to the rain stains scattered across the paper.

Ballpoint pens were not yet in common use then. As far as I remember, we students were not even permitted to write with them. In examinations, their use was strictly prohibited. Mark sheets too were filled out entirely in ink.

Because of the rain, some figures had become blurred and difficult to read. In some places one digit remained visible while another had dissolved into an ink stain.

Reading the marks accurately had become almost impossible.

In the end, Mr. Pandey accepted the figures already entered on the form and completed the necessary entries in his register.

It was a simpler time.

People generally trusted one another.

And both those who placed trust and those in whom trust was placed understood its value and honoured its dignity.

Photocopying did not yet exist.

I no longer remember whether the original documents were ultimately deposited or returned. All my certificates were once kept safely in a file. Later, during my years away from Jabalpur for work, that file disappeared. If it still exists, it is probably with my younger brother.

I still possess a few documents from my college days, but the certificates and papers from that earlier period have vanished somewhere into time.

Once again, I have wandered away from the main story.

But stories often wander.

If they did not, they would remain mere facts and never become tales.

And after all, I have sat down to tell a story.

So naturally, it will stray here and there-and perhaps lead you astray a little as well.

In any case, events had to unfold exactly as they did.

And so they did.

All's well that ends well.

My admission to Model High School was finally secured.

Yet there is one thing I cannot refrain from saying.

Before we left home that day, Bai had said:

"Mata Rani and Kanhaiya Ji will set everything right."

She was right.

Her faith never wavered.

As for how it all happened-perhaps only the Divine Mother and her beloved Kanhaiya truly know.

But the lesson I learned from that incident remained with me for the rest of my life.



The First Days at Model High School

It was my first day in Section B of Class Six at Model High School.

The hesitation of that first day, an unnamed fear, the experience of stepping into an entirely new world for the first time-all these must surely have left their mark upon me. There must have been a mingling of curiosity and apprehension, a subtle tremor born less of excitement and more of uncertainty about how I would face this unfamiliar environment.

I am certain those feelings existed, though I can no longer see myself clearly enough to know exactly what form they took. At the same time, I also know that I was not lacking in self-confidence. I could express myself, listen attentively, and respond appropriately for a boy of my age. Perhaps, then, things were not quite as daunting as I now imagine them to have been.

In any case, the first two or three days slipped by before I even noticed. Gradually, I began to blend into this entirely new world.

During those early days, each teacher would enter the classroom, introduce himself or herself, and then ask every student to do the

same. Yet what I remember most vividly is that I was waiting impatiently for the drawing period.

Our class teacher was Mrs. M. Khushal, who taught us English. Among the other teachers were Mr. L. K. Srivastava for General Science, Mr. P. K. Choudhary for Mathematics, Mr. P. L. Tiwari for Social Studies, and Mr. M. N. Tiwari for Sanskrit. I no longer remember with certainty who taught Hindi, though it seems likely that Mrs. Khushal taught that subject as well.

Classes Six, Seven, and Eight formed the Middle School section, while Classes Nine, Ten, and Eleven belonged to the Higher Secondary, or High School, section.

The names of many middle-school teachers remain preserved in my memory even today. Besides those already mentioned, I remember Mr. Mani Ram Vishwakarma, Mr. R. K. Pandey, Mr. N. K. Sharma, Mr. Kamta Sagar, Mr. R. S. Upadhyay, Mr. R. N. Dubey, Mr. Yadav, Mr. L. P. Sondhiya, Mrs. Gayatri Sharma, and Mrs. S. Choudhary.

Similarly, among the high-school teachers, names such as Mr. G. S. Dave, Mr. M. B. Verma, Mr. B. M. Tiwari, Mr. S. V. Kanade, Mr. H. N. Sharma, Mr. V. D. Dubey, Mr. M. M. Bhargava, Mr. P. D. Tiwari, Mr. Chouksey, Mr. R. B. Khare, Mr. V. N. Tiwari, Mr. R. K. Tiwari, Mr. R. S. Gontia, Mr. K. P. Tiwari, Mr. R. D. Dabreya, and Mr. R. S. Nema remain etched in my mind.

If I made a greater effort, perhaps the names of most of my teachers would return to me. But this is my story, not a scholarly treatise on Model High School. So, I shall move forward.

Yet before doing so, I must say this: whether or not their names appear here, I remain equally grateful to every teacher who taught me there. Each one of them deserves my deepest respect.

I have said before that the rough foundations of my life first acquired shape and strength at Model High School. Every teacher, and indeed every member of the school's staff, whether prominent or unnoticed,

contributed in some measure to the process that shaped me into the person I became-a person of whom I still feel quietly proud.

Students at Model High School have always taken particular pride in calling themselves *Modelians*. Wherever they may live today, whatever positions they may hold, Modelians scattered across the world often introduce themselves with unmistakable pride by saying that they studied at Model High School, Jabalpur.

During my years in Classes Six and Seven, I did not own a bicycle. Every journey to and from school was made on foot.

About a furlong from our school flowed the Omti Nala. It ran past the Police Parade Ground, passed beneath the large bridge on the main road at Ghamapur Chowk, and then continued towards Chhoti Omti. The road on either side of the bridge was level with its upper surface, just as it remains today.

The nala itself, however, no longer flows in the open. It now runs through an underground conduit constructed as part of Jabalpur's sewage-management project. I no longer remember the project's exact name, though that hardly matters here. On land where the stream once flowed stand institutions such as the Madhya Pradesh State Judicial Academy and the Madhya Pradesh Rural Development Academy.

During the monsoon, when rain poured from the sky, my classmates and I would return home thoroughly drenched after school. During those months, my books and notebooks were kept inside a plastic bag within my satchel. The khaki cloth bag would become soaked, but the books remained safe.

And I loved getting wet.

There was a peculiar joy in walking through the rain-a joy difficult to imprison within words, something that can only be experienced.

From Class Six through Class Eight, I usually returned home alone. It was only after Class Nine that a group of classmates who lived in Bai Ke Bagiya would walk back together in cheerful clusters.

There was something else.

On the very bridge I have just mentioned, I would often stop. If friends happened to be with me, they would stop as well.

Leaning against the parapet wall, we would stand there for long stretches, watching the water rushing beneath us.

I should mention that the water in those days was nothing like the foul, malodorous drains of today. The monsoon rains kept it relatively clean. Granite blocks had been laid beneath and alongside the bridge to ensure the smooth flow of water.

As the torrent struck the uneven granite stones, it created endlessly fascinating patterns. Sheets of water leapt into the air, broke into countless droplets, and then hurried onward, forgetting themselves entirely.

I would gaze at the spectacle, utterly absorbed.

But the beauty of the water was not the only reason I lingered there.

There was also curiosity.

During the rainy season, some men would descend onto the rocks below. They carried the large umbrellas common in those days. Opening them, they would brace them firmly against the current, holding them upstream.

Fish swimming down with the swift flow would become trapped inside the open umbrellas.

Whenever a fish was caught, the umbrella would be closed and handed to a companion, who in turn would pass another open umbrella into position.

They worked in teams of two or three, and several such groups could often be seen at the same time.

Using this ingenious method, they caught astonishing numbers of fish.

Occasionally a fish would leap free and disappear back into the rushing water. Sometimes, in the excitement of trying to seize a catch, someone would slip and tumble into the stream.

To me, it all seemed like a delightful combination of puzzle and game.

Nor was I the only spectator.

Many people, children and adults alike, gathered on the bridge above. Some would shout encouragement to the fishermen below.

It reminded me of spectators surrounding a chessboard-often more excited than the players themselves.

The bridge would vibrate with that same contagious excitement.

Even the chaotic noise of it possessed its own peculiar charm.

Sometimes I think that if the same scene were unfolding today, the bridge would be crowded with people filming videos on their phones.

This ingenious umbrella-fishing technique would surely appear every monsoon season on social media, circulating endlessly through reels and short videos.

And then, suddenly, I would realize how late it was becoming.

Quietly, I would leave the bridge behind and continue my walk home.



Discipline, Mischief, and the Making of a Mind

At Model High School, discipline was accorded the highest priority. Great care was taken to ensure that every aspect of a student's conduct-his actions, reactions, speech, manners, and behaviour-remained within the bounds of discipline. Teachers were perpetually vigilant, and students correspondingly alert and cautious.

This expectation did not end at the classroom door. From the moment we entered the school premises until we stepped out through the main

gate after dismissal, we were expected to remain disciplined. The first few days were undoubtedly difficult, but before long the habit became second nature.

Our teachers expected us to remain just as disciplined even outside school hours.

And, in truth, we generally were.

A student at Model High School could be identified almost anywhere by his conduct and manner of speaking. Students from other schools were often envious of this reputation and rarely missed an opportunity to make sarcastic remarks. Whenever we travelled to other schools for competitions, such things happened regularly. Their students would look at us curiously and throw casual jibes our way.

During examinations-especially the Board examinations-it was commonly said that Model students succeeded because "there is a lot of copying in Model School."

They made sure we heard such comments.

But we knew the truth.

We knew how strict our school was and how rigorously examinations were conducted.

Yet I seem to have wandered away from the subject of discipline. Let me return to it.

From Class Six to Class Eleven, the watchful eyes of our teachers followed us everywhere. If a student made a mistake, there was a ninety-percent chance that some teacher would notice it. I often felt that our teachers were constantly on the lookout for opportunities to demonstrate the importance of discipline to erring students.

Quite often, even innocent classmates sitting nearby received an equally thorough lesson in its importance.

Very few teachers relied solely on the power of words. Most preferred to supplement verbal instruction with other persuasive methods.

There was even some whose faith in words was negligible; they believed exclusively in physical punishment.

They carried out their duties with remarkable calmness and composure. Once they felt that the lesson had been adequately conveyed, they quietly moved on.

I should add that every teacher at Model High School possessed the authority to "educate" any student anywhere within the campus.

It made no difference whether a class was in progress or another teacher was teaching. If a passing teacher happened to catch even the slightest glimpse of indiscipline through the large classroom doors or the enormous windows between them, then heaven help the unfortunate student involved.

The teacher would enter the classroom directly and proceed to the culprit's desk.

The teacher conducting the lesson would immediately suspend his teaching.

The process of demonstrating "the importance of discipline" would then begin.

Once completed, the visiting teacher would quietly depart, and the class would resume as though nothing unusual had happened.

The entire procedure was carried out with remarkable solemnity.

Only occasionally would the disciplinary teacher's aphoristic pronouncements echo through the room like ritual chants.

I, too, once became the subject of such a ceremony.

It happened when I was in Class Ten.

Each classroom contained sturdy wooden desks designed to seat two students. The desks were arranged in three rows, leaving aisles between them and the walls.

I belonged to Section B and shared a desk with my classmate Sukumar Das. Our desk stood directly in front of a large window near the corridor wall.

Some time later, Dilawar Singh began sharing the same desk. Dilawar was Sukumar's old friend from their previous school, Navin Vidya Bhavan.

Thus, three of us occupied a desk meant for two.

Sukumar and Dilawar were both cheerful, irrepressibly good-humoured boys. They were forever laughing and making others laugh.

I remain in touch with Sukumar even today.

Remarkably, despite having crossed seventy years of age, he remains much the same cheerful, light-hearted fellow he always was.

On that particular day, Kanade Sir was probably teaching the class.

Here I should mention that Kanade Sir had suffered a serious accident in the school's chemistry laboratory, which had severely damaged his eyesight. He wore thick black glasses and carried a walking stick.

While he was teaching, Sukumar and Dilawar sat with their heads close together, whispering almost noiselessly and suppressing bursts of laughter.

As I have already said, every teacher in our school remained alert even while walking through the corridors.

Their ears seemed capable of detecting the faintest disturbance.

That day, Gontia Sir happened to be passing by.

Could Sukumar and Dilawar's antics possibly escape his commando-like vigilance?

Not a chance.

In an instant, Gontia Sir entered through the classroom door and initiated the familiar procedure for demonstrating the importance of discipline.

A practical difficulty, however, immediately presented itself.

Sukumar-the principal target of the operation-was seated by the window. Dilawar sat between us, and I occupied the outermost position.

Consequently, Gontia Sir had to make considerable efforts to reach his intended quarry.

Dilawar, meanwhile, sat with his eyes closed, awaiting his turn with an almost saintly composure.

The entire scene unfolded in such an absurd fashion that I found it impossible to suppress my laughter.

Lowering my head, I began to chuckle.

That was my mistake.

Sukumar and Dilawar somehow escaped further attention, while I unexpectedly became the focus of proceedings.

"Why are *you* laughing?"

The question echoed repeatedly like a sacred chant.

And thus, quite unexpectedly, I became an active participant in the lesson on discipline.

At this point, you may well ask:

How can I spend pages praising discipline and then describe scenes like these?

My answer is simple.

Discipline and mischief are entirely different things.

If fourteen- and fifteen-year-old boys never indulged in mischief, one might reasonably conclude that God had manufactured them with some defect.

The students at Model High School were disciplined.

They were mischievous too.

Some more than others, certainly.

But they were never rude, uncouth, vulgar, or unruly.

I find myself repeating this again and again, and perhaps I always shall:

Model High School shaped the way I think.

It influenced the way I see the world.

It gave form to my mind and refinement to my character.

Naturally, this invites a question:

How?

Let me try to explain.

What follows is merely my own understanding, coloured by my own experiences. Others who breathed the same air and walked the same corridors may remember things differently. Their memories may bear different colours and contours.

And they too would be right.

For the flame of a single lamp casts a different radiance into every pair of eyes.

So let us proceed without further preamble.

Model High School was never merely a school.

It was an idea.

A dream translated into brick and stone.

It was multi-faceted, multi-purpose, and carefully organised to reflect that vision.

Even its name proclaimed this aspiration:

Government Model Multipurpose Higher Secondary School, Jabalpur.

I write of it in the past tense because these are memories belonging to the years between 1967 and 1972-years that became woven into my breath and later transformed into memory.

Today the institution bears a different name:

Pandit Lajja Shankar Jha Government Model Excellence School, Jabalpur.

The story of this distinguished institution began in 1904, during the British Raj, at a time when India's soul yearned for freedom.

It was then that Rai Bahadur Pandit Lajja Shankar Jha (1873–1973) laid its foundation-or rather, gave physical form to a dream.

He served as its first Principal.

Today, the school proudly bears his name.

It is also certified under ISO 9001:2015-a reminder that excellence there is not merely a tradition but a formally recognised reality.

Throughout its long and illustrious history, generations of distinguished teachers offered not merely their knowledge but the warmth of their spirit and the wisdom of their experience.

They taught far more than lessons.

They taught values.

They imparted vision.

They shaped character.

Among them were teachers such as S. P. Nigam, V. P. Kanade, Ram Singh Gontia, L. P. Sondhiya, and N. K. Sharma, all of whom were honoured with the President's Award.

The honour belonged not merely to those individuals but to the entire educational tradition whose roots ran deep within the soil of that institution.

I have mentioned only those names that memory readily offers.

If others have been omitted, I seek forgiveness. Memory, too, gathers dust with time, and some of these honours were bestowed after I had already left the school.

Should I make the effort, I could undoubtedly recover many more names.

Yet I bow in gratitude not only to the award-winning teachers but to every teacher who served there.

Receiving a national honour is a great distinction, but the contributions of the others were no less significant.

If I were to begin listing the students who brought distinction to the school through their achievements, the catalogue would become so long that it would alter the very nature of this book.

And besides, leaving out even one deserving name would be unfair.

So let me speak only of my own graduating batch of 1972.

I feel proud of every one of my classmates.

Wherever life took them, each contributed in his own way to the honour of our school.

Yet a few names deserve special mention-Sharat Chandra Jethi, Alok Dave, Jitendra Jamdar, and Rajesh Dhirawani.

Each of them earned distinction not merely in Jabalpur or Madhya Pradesh, but at the national level through talent, dedication, and integrity.

In their achievements one could glimpse the same discipline, the same values, and the same spirit of perseverance that had been handed down to us by our teachers.

When I look back today, I realise that our school was never merely an institution, nor merely a building.

It was a living tradition.

A place where teachers burned like lamps, and in their light the paths of knowledge and the futures of their students were illuminated.

□

If I were not to speak now of those teachers whose voices still echo through the corridors of my memory, this entire account of Model High School would remain somehow incomplete. The school was not built merely of brick, lime, and iron; it was shaped from within by those teachers who, through not only their learning but also their character, discipline, and deep moral commitment, transformed it into a living tradition.

Model High School was always blessed with distinguished teachers-one more accomplished than another. Yet when I look back today, it seems to me that their greatest quality was not their scholarship but their almost ascetic devotion to their vocation. It was as though they had not come merely to teach, but to slowly reveal the hidden form within an unhewn stone. The atmosphere of the school itself was such that any new teacher who arrived there soon became absorbed into its spirit. He ceased to be merely an employee; he became a part of the institution's very soul. Its traditions, its silences, its strictness, and its affection gradually entered his being. With patience and faith, these teachers continued shaping boys like us-crooked, unfinished, and still in the making.

Sometimes I feel that true justice would require me to write about every teacher in that school-every one of them who, in some way or another, added something to my life or altered its course. But memory, too, has its limits. After so many years, it is impossible to recall everyone with equal clarity. Besides, this book might become so burdened with recollections that its inner spirit would be lost beneath their weight. Therefore, I can mention only those whose presence remains luminous within me despite the dust of passing time.

The first name that comes to mind is that of **Shri Shiv Prasad Nigam**. I was unfortunate in one respect: by the time I entered Model High

School, he had already retired-or perhaps it was his final year of service; after fifty-four years, I cannot say with certainty. It was my first timid year at school, and many details have faded. I never had the opportunity to know him personally. Yet it is strange how some people whom we have never met remain as alive in our memories as those with whom we have spent years. Nigam Sir was such a person for us. By then, he had become a legend. Any old story connected with the school-whether about sports, examination results, or some memorable celebration-eventually led back to him. Every narrative seemed to find one of its ends in his name.

We heard that he was far more than a principal. He was a teacher for whom knowledge and life were inseparable. On the hockey field, he would join the students and play alongside them. During inspections, he would walk into any classroom and begin teaching without warning. To us, these stories sounded almost mythical. Education, it seemed, was for him not a matter of regulations but of living dialogue. Today I feel that a school derives its true identity not from its buildings but from those individuals whose presence lingers in its air long after they are gone. Nigam Sir was surely one of them.

When I began studying at the school, **Shri B. M. Dubey** was the principal. Later, **Shri J. P. Bajpai** succeeded him. Faces changed as time moved on, yet the essential spirit of the school remained remarkably unchanged. And now, when I hear that **Mrs. Beena Bajpai** serves as the head of the same institution, it feels as though time has completed a perfect circle.

Another figure who emerges vividly from memory is **Shri S. V. Kanade**. The first thing I remember about him is his eyes-or rather, his fading eyesight. An accident in the chemistry laboratory had severely damaged his vision. Yet astonishingly, this loss never diminished the teacher within him. Even when his sight had nearly vanished, he continued to teach with such regularity and confidence that his very presence became a silent lesson for us all.

He taught Mathematics and Science. The textbooks he had authored on these subjects were used not only in our school but in many others as well. His command of the subjects was so complete that he could draw diagrams on the blackboard without seeing them. To us students, this seemed nothing short of miraculous. Looking back now, however, I realize that the miracle lay not in his knowledge but in his courage and perseverance. Carrying only a walking stick and depending on no one, he would arrive punctually, teach his classes, and then quietly return to the Science Room. There was never the slightest trace of complaint in him. It was as though he had accepted life's irony with perfect grace. At least, that is how it appeared to me. Watching him move forward steadily along the path of duty, one deliberate step at a time, was itself a profound education.

He taught us throughout Classes Nine, Ten, and Eleven-Physics, Chemistry, and Mathematics, one subject each year. At that age, we understood only the lessons, not the man. Today I feel that from him we learned something far greater than academic knowledge: the dignity of work. He taught us that a person's limitations can sometimes become his greatest strength.

Then there was **Shri B. M. Tiwari**, a man who seemed to belong to another age altogether-tall, grave, and composed. I can scarcely remember ever seeing him laugh. His mere presence brought discipline into the classroom. He taught English, knew music, played the harmonium during school prayers, yet what defined him most was his determination to shape his students from within.

His temper was almost legendary among students. He could read not only behaviour but even subtle expressions and body language. If he sensed the slightest indiscipline in a student's demeanour, he would become instantly stern. At the time, we found this intimidating. Today I understand that he was trying to awaken a deeper awareness within us.

In Class Eleven, he voluntarily became our class teacher. By then, our Section B had acquired something of a reputation. Alongside

exceptionally studious boys, it also housed some remarkably gifted troublemakers. Sharat Jethi, who later secured the first rank in the entire state of Madhya Pradesh in both the Class Ten and Class Eleven Board Examinations, belonged to our class. On the first day of Class Eleven, Tiwari Sir entered the classroom and announced, "This year, I shall be your class teacher." Then, after a pause, he added, "And I shall teach you Hindi, not English."

The announcement left us astonished-and secretly apprehensive. Everyone knew him as a distinguished scholar of English. He had always taught English, had never taught Hindi, and had never before taken charge of a class as its class teacher. Yet that was exactly what happened. Looking back, I feel there must have been some hidden wisdom in the arrangement. Perhaps we needed a class teacher like him, and life itself had made the necessary provision. As for Hindi, he taught it with the same passion and authority with which he taught English. We had already studied English under him in Class Ten.

In Class Eleven he taught us Hindi-not merely the language, but the soul hidden within it. One day he came to class and wrote a couplet on the blackboard in large letters:

"मिटा दे अपनी हस्ती को अगर जो मर्तबा चाहे
कि दाना ख़ाक में मिलकर गुल-ए-गुलज़ार होता है।"

"Efface your very self if you desire true eminence;
For the seed becomes the flower of the garden only after mingling with the dust."

(रेख़्ता के अनुसार इस शे'र के रचनाकार का नाम अज्ञात है। कुछ विद्वानों का मानना है कि यह प्रसिध्द शे'र महान शायर अल्लामा इक़बाल का है। हालाँकि , कई साहित्यिक स्रोतों और मंचों पर इसे सय्यद मोहम्मद मस्त कलकत्तवी जैसे अन्य शायरों की रचना भी माना गया है।)

He spent the entire period explaining its meaning. That day, for the first time, we encountered the philosopher within him. The lesson was probably not part of the prescribed syllabus, yet it remained with us

more deeply than anything else. I remember that couplet even today. Perhaps because, for the first time, I sensed that education was not merely a means of passing examinations; it was a process of gradually dissolving the ego and becoming part of something larger than oneself.

And then, in another corner of memory, there stands with great affection **Shri L. P. Sondhiya**. He was our class teacher in Class Seven, Section B. He taught English, played hockey, and related to students more through warmth than severity. I was one of his favourite students-perhaps because I was interested in studies, painting, and hockey alike.

I still remember a spelling test he conducted. He would pronounce words and we would write them down in our notebooks. When he reached my desk, he repeated a particular word two or three times. I failed to understand the hint. Later, when he marked my notebook with a red circle and smiled, I realized I had misspelled the word *could*. He said nothing; he merely nodded in a particular way, as if to say, "Pay attention."

It was a very small incident. Yet memories are not always made of grand events. Sometimes a teacher's gentle gesture, a red circle drawn around a word, or a lesson conveyed without speech remains with us for life. Perhaps because in such moment's education ceases to be merely the transfer of knowledge; it becomes a sacred bond between teacher and student-a fleeting yet profound touch of life's deeper meaning.

L. P. Sondhiya Sir, too, was later honoured with the President's Award, though this happened after 1972, by which time we had already completed our education at Model High School.

There was another teacher whom I admired deeply and who, I believe, was equally fond of me-**Shri M. B. Verma**. In Class Ten, he was our class teacher. Chemistry was his principal subject, but his personality could never be confined to a single discipline. Whenever the school organized a cultural, literary, or art-related activity involving our class, he would come directly to me. In a sense, he entrusted me with

exclusive responsibility in such matters, though I never misused that trust. Together with our class captain, Sharat Chandra Jethi, and other students concerned, I always carried out those assignments collectively.

Sharat was, and remains, one of my closest friends. He deserves a chapter of his own; a line or two could never do justice to him. For now, however, I must return to Verma Sir.

His full name was **Mukut Bihari Verma**. Ever since I first knew him, he had been bald. He would grow the hair above one temple long and sweep it across his head, creating a narrow band of hair. He generally wore loose bush shirts and, in winter, a full-sleeved sweater or occasionally a suit.

To the best of my knowledge, I never once saw him angry. Even when circumstances called for anger, he merely appeared troubled-that was all. One remark of his has stayed with me throughout my life, and I quote it often even today. Once he said in class:

"Every student in this classroom wants to study and wants to secure good marks. No student's intention should ever be doubted. It is true that all cannot stand first at the same time, but their effort is no less sincere. Many other factors intervene in a person's path."

That was the perspective of a truly honest teacher-one who did not hesitate to regard a student's failure as, in some measure, his own. Even after all these years, I remember him with gratitude. There are many memories associated with him, but I shall leave them here for now. When the narrative brings him back again, I shall return to those recollections.

No account of the teachers of Model High School would be complete without mentioning **Ram Singh Gontia**. His contribution to the school's cultural, literary, and social life was too significant to overlook. He was an excellent history teacher, but he was also a writer and a poet. He wrote and directed several plays, many of which were performed not only in our school but in others as well. His productions frequently won prizes in inter-school drama competitions. The skill and charm

with which he conducted cultural programmes was itself an art. He was also an accomplished photographer and trained students in photography. Like several of his distinguished colleagues, he too received the President's Award. As a writer and poet, he adopted the pen name **"Shrimrit."**

Our school regularly observed the birth anniversaries and death anniversaries of great personalities. These occasions provided students with opportunities to speak, while Gontia Sir was often the principal speaker. He invariably wore a white khadi kurta-pyjama, and I never saw him dressed in anything else.

There is one more detail I should not forget.

After the lunch break, before afternoon classes resumed, all the students would assemble in the school ground. Standing in orderly rows according to their classes, we would participate in the afternoon prayer. On the platform, accompanied by three or four students, Gontia Sir would be present unfailingly every single day, leading the singing of the prayer.

That prayer-which still survives somewhere deep within me-I shall write down here.

मनसा, वाचा, कर्मणा, सब को सुख पहुँचाय।
अपने मतलब कारने, दुःख न दे तू काय।।

यदि सुख तू नहिं दे सके, तो दुःख काहू न देय।
ऐसी रहनी जो रहे, सोई आत्म रस लेय।।

This prayer reminded us, day after day, of the kind of conduct and character we ought to cultivate. Its words seeped so deeply into us that they seemed to inhabit every fibre of our being. How far they have found expression in my actual life is something those who have lived around me can judge better than I can. As for myself, I know only this-that I have always tried to walk along that path.

I do not know what impulse moves me to record here the essence of that prayer. Perhaps it is merely a way of renewing an old resolve. Its message was simple: we should strive, through our thoughts, our words, and our actions, to bring happiness and comfort to all. For the sake of personal gain, advantage, or self-interest, we should never cause pain to any living being-whether human or animal. It is one of life's simplest and most practical principles: if you are unable to help someone or bring joy into another's life, then at least do not become the cause of suffering. The person whose conduct is guided by such values-whose thoughts, speech, and deeds are pure, who is selfless and harms none-alone attains true spiritual fulfilment. In essence, the prayer was a hymn to compassion, non-violence, and humanity. It taught us that becoming a good human being begins with ensuring that our presence does not become a burden to others. When we bring happiness and refrain from causing sorrow, divine grace and inner peace follow of their own accord.

With that prayer, I shall leave the recollection of Gontia Sir for the moment. Whenever memory calls for his return, I shall gladly revisit it. I should also mention that I shall speak later about both this afternoon prayer and the morning prayer that preceded the beginning of classes each day.

Shri M. M. Bhargava taught us Physics in Class Nine. I studied under him again in Classes Ten and Eleven, though memory has now blurred exactly which portions of Mathematics and Physics he taught during those years. He was a man of science-both by profession and by temperament.

My maternal grandparents lived in Jabalpur, near Kamania Gate-a house that still stands there today. Bhargava Sir's home was in the old fruit market, so close by that whenever I visited my grandparents, I would think of calling on him. Yet I never did. Hesitation and diffidence always stood in the way. It is not an important fact in itself, but somehow it surfaced from the depths of memory as I began recalling him.

"Along with this came the memory of his strict adherence to discipline; he simply could not bear to see any student break the rules under any circumstances. Such lapses would provoke his wrath almost instantaneously."

He belonged to that category of teachers before whom students remained perpetually cautious. He taught with dedication and sincerity, and he taught exceedingly well. But when anger overtook him...

One afternoon during a Physics lesson, my eyes were fixed upon the blackboard. Yet there is a difference between looking at a blackboard and truly attending to it. That day, my mind had wandered elsewhere-to some quiet and secluded corner of my imagination. Suddenly, Bhargava Sir's voice shattered that private world. He had asked a question. I had not even heard it, let alone thought of an answer. Startled, I rose to my feet. He simply said, "I was under the impression that you were the one understanding the lesson best. Sit down."

That was all.

For the rest of the period, I sat inwardly shrunk with embarrassment. I felt I deserved some punishment. Given his reputation, I expected anger. Instead, he appeared merely disappointed-quietly, almost sadly so. After that single remark, he moved on.

That tiny thorn remains lodged somewhere within me even today. Perhaps that is why the memory survives after half a century. The wound had been inflicted neither by anger nor by neglect, but by a quiet disappointment. Such wounds heal very slowly. Perhaps they never heal at all.

Shri L.N.Awasthi had served as the Chief of the NCC in Jabalpur and headed the same department in our school. He was also responsible for sports. Within the school grounds stood a small NCC building with a modest garden in front of it-a place that seemed to possess a quiet personality of its own. Sporting activities, too, were coordinated from there.

Awasthi Sir was in charge of the school's A-Grade Hockey Team. Some of my memories of him belong more appropriately to the chapter devoted to hockey, and I shall return to them there.

Shri N.K.Sharma, another recipient of the President's Award, taught Sanskrit and Mathematics. He taught us Sanskrit in Class Eight. My association with him, however, developed in a rather unusual manner. By then, word had spread throughout the school that I could draw-and draw reasonably well. Nearby stood the Provincial Teachers' Training College. During their training and examinations, student-teachers from that institution would come to our school for teaching practice. We called them "pupil teachers." Why we used that term never occurred to me then, and even today I do not know why.

On many occasions Sharma Sir would hand me the key to his house and send me there during school hours. No one would be at home. My task was to prepare project files for trainee teachers pursuing B.Ed. or M.Ed. courses. These files required illustrations, diagrams, maps, charts, and decorative cover pages. I never met the people for whom I prepared those files. They may have been Sharma Sir's relatives or acquaintances-I remained entirely unaware, nor did I ever ask.

I prepared many such files. I also created charts and drawings on large sheets of paper. A few other teachers entrusted me with similar tasks. Sometimes they would seat me in the last row of the classroom while lessons continued, and I would spend the period drawing charts instead of studying. Occasionally, trainee teachers approached me directly as well.

One thing is worth mentioning: I never accepted payment for any of this work. Offers were made, but something within me refused permission. The gratitude in their smiles felt sufficient. Besides, I was happy simply to feel that I had been of use to someone. Looking back now, however, I sometimes wonder whether my studies suffered because of it. Curiously, they never did. Somehow, I always managed to keep up. Things seemed to work out on their own-as though life quietly endorsed the old saying: *"Do good, and good will come to you."*

But I have wandered from the subject.

Sharma Sir, too, was famous for his temper. Whenever he became angry with a student, he would first remove his wristwatch and then roll up the sleeves of his full-sleeved shirt. It was almost a ritual. We all knew what was likely to follow.

Shri R. P. Yadav was a tall, cheerful teacher. Apart from Sanskrit and Hindi, he taught almost every subject. In Class Seven, he taught us Arithmetic. I belonged to Section B, while he was the class teacher of Section A that year.

The reason I remember him is a very small incident.

One day, after our half-yearly examinations, he peered through the corridor window of our classroom and informed us that the answer scripts had been evaluated and would be distributed the following day. Perhaps only the scripts of his own subject remained, which was why the results had been delayed. Naturally, someone asked who had secured the highest marks. He refused to reveal the name. The students persisted. He merely smiled. A few names were suggested. He shook his head each time and then walked away.

No teacher was present in the classroom at that moment. The boys speculated for a while-Pankaj Dhagat, Ravi Gupta, Manohar Mule, Suresh Chopra-and then returned to their own conversations.

The following day, when the answer books were distributed, I discovered that I had scored forty-nine out of fifty-the highest mark in the class. Pankaj and Ravi Gupta usually occupied the first and second positions, while Suresh Chopra was the class monitor. I myself had stood fourth in the annual examination of Class Six and had not performed particularly well in the quarterly examination of Class Seven. Perhaps that was why no one had guessed my name.

It was a trivial incident. Yet it remained lodged in memory. There was something about it that kept it alive for more than fifty years. And now that it has been written down, perhaps it will survive even longer.

Shri Kamta Sagar was our art teacher. The curriculum was designed to provide students with a basic understanding of drawing and painting. In those days, art-commonly called "Drawing"-was taught only up to middle school. Since I had loved drawing since childhood, my relationship with him gradually became more personal than that of most students. This closeness did not arise overnight. First, he saw my drawings. Then he watched me win prizes in competitions organised by various schools and institutions. Only after that did he begin guiding me individually.

He had studied at the renowned Sir J. J. School of Art. To us students, his skill appeared almost magical. Looking back now, I realize that he was, in fact, an exceptionally gifted artist. At school he prepared students for the Elementary and Intermediate Grade Drawing Examinations conducted by the J. J. School of Art and also supervised those examinations. He was somewhat moody by nature and usually maintained a stern, restrained demeanour in class. I shall speak of him in greater detail on another occasion.

As I have written many times before, our school was blessed with teachers who were learned, competent, honest, and deeply devoted to their work. I have no doubt that the institution-now known as Pandit Lajja Shankar Jha Government Model Higher Secondary Excellence School-continues to be served by teachers of the same calibre. Yet I speak here only of a time when they were our teachers and we were their students.

Some teachers entered one's life in such a way that they ceased to be merely teachers and became part of one's memory. Certain incidents, however small, continue to glow through the mist of time like faint chalk marks still visible on an old slate. Many other names remain inscribed in those recollections-our Physical Training teacher, Gautam Sir; Markandeya Sir; Katare Sir, who taught Basic Education and Craft; and the learned music teacher whose name I can no longer remember, though her face and voice remain vivid. Sometimes I think that if I were to sit today with my surviving classmates and revisit those days, countless forgotten stories would emerge from the bundle of

memories we all carry. Each person possesses his own sky of recollections, and every memory conceals a few precious jewels. But here I follow only those paths that my own memory can still recognize.

There is, however, one more name that must be mentioned: **Mrs. Khushal**. She was our class teacher in Class Six. Most of us had come from small neighbourhood primary schools and were entering, for the first time, such a large and prestigious institution. The unfamiliar environment naturally inspired a quiet sense of hesitation. At least, it certainly did in me.

Khushal Madam was so gentle and approachable that she made our transition effortless. Before long, we felt entirely at home in what had once seemed an unfamiliar world. She belonged to that rare category of teachers who never spoke to students in anger. She could be displeased, certainly, but even her displeasure retained an undercurrent of affection. Even today, I feel that anger and displeasure are not the same thing. Anger creates distance; displeasure preserves the relationship.

She would express disappointment when students erred, yet within moments she would return to explaining things with her usual warmth. There was something distinctly maternal about her. A slightly stout figure, a dusky complexion, and a face that was almost always smiling-that is how she remains preserved in my memory. Her cheerful simplicity set her apart from the other women teachers in the school. She also acted in plays, some of which were staged at the Shaheed Smarak Auditorium.

One incident involving her remains vividly alive within me. Our half-yearly examinations had just concluded. Our progress in English had not met her expectations. The lessons ahead were going to become even more difficult, and each chapter required considerable effort to explain. Her concern was understandable.

That day she did not teach. Instead, she alternated between explaining, expressing mild disappointment, and absent-mindedly turning the pages of our English Reader. Finally, she said, “From now on, I shall

teach the remaining lessons quickly-whether you understand them or not."

We sat in silence. No one knew what to say. The period ended, and she left the classroom with the same troubled expression. It was a perfectly ordinary incident, the sort that must occur in schools every day-even now. Yet for some reason it remained lodged deep within me. Perhaps because it was the first time I heard, beneath a teacher's concern, the unmistakable voice of affection for her students.

In the end, of course, nothing happened as she had feared. The syllabus was completed on time, and we all performed well in the annual examination.

Now, as I stand upon the threshold of my seventieth year, I often remember those teachers who guided me from primary school through high school. Most of them have departed from this world. Those who remain in memory, and those whom memory itself has lost-I am indebted to them all.

A great teacher is not merely a carrier of information stored in books. He is a subtle light that touches the dormant consciousness within a human being and transforms life from a mere act of existence into something meaningful. Knowledge can come from books, from time, or from experience. But who teaches a human being how to become truly human? That is the work of the teacher.

A teacher does not merely provide answers; he awakens within the student the capacity to question. He does not simply explain what the world is; he teaches how it should be seen. Rather than filling the mind with information, he awakens discernment. The distinction between right and wrong is not merely a matter of moral instruction; it is a matter of awakening the soul. A true teacher becomes the medium of that awakening.

There are many moments in life when, despite possessing knowledge, a person finds himself directionless. At such times books fall silent, but the vision imparted by a teacher continues to speak from within.

A teacher does not teach students how to avoid life's difficulties; he teaches them how to accept those difficulties and discover their own path through them. He helps them understand that failure is not an end but another step towards self-discovery; that a human being's deepest struggle is not with the world outside, but with the darkness within.

In the Indian tradition, the guru has never been regarded merely as an instructor. He is seen as a bridge of consciousness. The guru is one who leads us from the darkness of ignorance into the light of knowledge. The syllable *gu* signifies darkness, and *ru* signifies its removal. Thus, a guru is not simply someone who teaches; he is a presence that clears the inner mist and introduces the soul to its true nature.

It was from this spiritual ground that Kabir spoke:

"गुरु गोविंद दोऊ खड़े, काके लागूं पाय।
बलिहारी गुरु आपने, गोविंद दियो बताय॥"

Guru and God both stand before me-which one shall I first bow to?
I bow first to the Guru, for it is he who showed me the way to God.

The purpose of placing the Guru above God here is not comparison, but recognition. It is the Guru who grants the vision through which God may be perceived. If the Ultimate Truth is the sun, then the Guru is the window through which its light first enters the soul.

A truly great teacher lives beyond time. His words may be forgotten, but his touch, his faith, and the vision he bestowed continue to burn within us like a quiet flame. Years later, whenever compassion, truthfulness, courage, or humility arise within a person, there is often somewhere behind them the invisible shadow of a teacher.

A teacher is great not because he imparts knowledge, but because he recognizes within us a possibility that even we ourselves cannot yet see.

With reverence, I bow to the memory of all my teachers and offer them my heartfelt tribute. Wherever they may be, may they dwell in peace and joy. With that prayer, I bring this chapter to a close.

□

I have mentioned before that our school resembled a ***Gurukul*** in many respects.

I have also explained what I mean by the word *resembled*, yet it seems worth repeating. At least while we remained within the boundaries of the school, we genuinely felt as though we were living in a modern-day gurukul. Nothing there existed merely as a formality or ritual. Every arrangement, every programme, every activity was designed with the purpose of educating and cultivating us. The entire atmosphere of the school seemed carefully fashioned to connect us with our culture, our roots, and that dormant Indian consciousness that lay hidden within us.

At our school, not only were national festivals celebrated, but the birth anniversaries and memorial days of great thinkers, saints, scholars, and national figures were also observed with dignity and reverence. These were individuals who had shaped society through their ideas and actions, enriched our culture, and brought honour to the nation. Such occasions were far more than ceremonial observances; they worked upon us in quiet, invisible ways. They acquainted us with our history, refined our outlook, and awakened within us a subtle sense of responsibility.

During our years there, a new tradition was also introduced. At the beginning of each academic session, we were provided with a detailed calendar of activities for the entire year. It contained the names of all programmes, their dates, timings, venues, and even the names of the teachers responsible for them. Students who wished to participate in any event could approach the concerned teacher well in advance and begin preparing accordingly.

Birth anniversaries and memorial observances were often marked by speeches. Both students and teachers shared their thoughts. There were dramatic performances, poetry recitations, readings of aphorisms and Sanskrit verses, extempore speeches, debates, and various literary competitions. On special occasions, distinguished scholars from outside were invited to address us. Many competitions were judged by teachers from other schools or by respected members of the city's intellectual and cultural community.

The revered **Harishankar Parsai** visited our school on several occasions as Chief Guest. Long before I entered Model High School, he himself had once served there as a teacher.

In his book *Known People (Jaane Phchaane Log)*, he wrote:

"I was appointed to the famous Government Model High School of Jabalpur. The school enjoyed such a sacred reputation throughout the province that becoming a teacher there was almost like being transformed from a man into a deity."

It was from his hands that I received the award for the best painting in the *Chandra Mandal* competition when I was in either the sixth or seventh class. Those few moments remain preserved in the drawer of my memory like a pressed flower kept between the pages of an old book-its fragrance may have faded, but its touch endures. I shall speak of *Chandra Mandal* shortly.

On another occasion, **Shri Shivmangal Singh Suman** visited our school. We had the privilege of listening to his stirring poetry and his inspiring address. Those moments belong among the rare experiences of my life that time may cover with dust but can never erase. By then he was already advanced in age. Seated upon a wooden sofa, he addressed us all. The sunlight, the breeze, and the exact words spoken that day in the prayer ground may have faded, but the feeling remains intact somewhere within me.

Now I come to another extraordinary personality-**Osho**.

At that time, of course, he was not known as Osho; he was simply Rajneesh. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to see him in person. Perhaps it was not written in my destiny. Sometimes I wonder whether many of the struggles, confusions, and inner conflicts that arose later in life-and still linger in some measure-might have been lessened had I encountered him directly. The company of a great soul, or even a single glance from such a person, quietly removes much of the debris that clutters one's path. It makes the road easier and reveals the direction of the destination. One must still undertake the journey oneself, but at least one knows where one is headed.

I seem to have wandered from my subject-or perhaps not. How can the remembrance of Osho ever be called a digression? The truth is that he cannot be contained within three or four sentences. Entire libraries could be filled without exhausting what might be said about him. For years I have lived with his books, his voice, and his ideas. If I do not restrain myself here, this memoir may well take an altogether different course.

Yet I must explain why I have mentioned him in this chapter.

My association with our art teacher, **Kamta Sagar Sir**, continued long after I had left Model High School. After retiring from my professional career in 2015, I spent considerable time in his company. During one of our conversations, the subject of Osho arose. It was then that he told me that Rajneesh, who would later become Osho, used to visit him at the school.

As I have already mentioned, our school had a large auditorium, which we also called the *Drawing Hall*. The room to the right of the stage served as Kamta Sagar Sir's studio. Students preparing for the Elementary and Intermediate Grade Drawing Examinations received their training there.

While helping me prepare for my solo exhibition, Kamta Sagar Sir told me that Rajneesh would often come there to meet him. He owned a bicycle and dressed in a simple white dhoti, one end of which he draped across his upper body. He generally arrived after school hours,

when the extra drawing classes were in progress. Holding his bicycle by hand, he would enter the hall quietly, lean it against the wall outside, and walk directly into the studio.

One day, as we were travelling together in a car, Kamta Sagar Sir casually remarked, "You boys must have seen him."

The moment he said those words; something stirred within me. A faint image seemed to flash before my eyes-like a scene illuminated for a split second by a camera flash before disappearing once more into shadow. For an instant, I felt as though I truly had seen him somewhere: distant, indistinct, and veiled in time, yet somehow familiar.

Whether it was merely imagination or a tiny surviving fragment of a nearly extinguished memory, I cannot say. Yet even today I remain convinced that, in some manner or another, I once glimpsed Osho.

And if that is so, how could I leave his name unmentioned in these pages?

□

A little earlier, I promised to explain what *Chandra Mandal* was. Let me now return to that subject.

Keeping in mind the students' ages and intellectual development, the school divided all co-curricular activities into three broad sections. The first consisted of Classes Six and Seven, the second of Classes Eight and Nine, and the third of Classes Ten and Eleven.

These activities themselves fell into three principal categories.

The first comprised literary and cultural activities-drama, music, poetry recitation, and similar pursuits.

The second consisted of scientific activities-competitions, presentations, and events related to science and mathematics.

The third category was sports and athletics, encompassing all games played in the school as well as various physical competitions. Hockey,

cricket, football, kabaddi, kho-kho, and volleyball were all included, along with races, long jump, high jump, shot put, javelin throw, discus throw, and physique competitions.

Now to the central point.

Each category was organised according to these three divisions, and each division was given a distinctive name.

For literary activities, the students of Classes Six and Seven belonged to the *Chandra Mandal*; those of Classes Eight and Nine formed the *Brihaspati Mandal*; and the students of Classes Ten and Eleven constituted the *Aditya Mandal*.

Scientific activities followed a similar pattern, except that the word *mandal* was replaced by *cluster*. Students were grouped into *Neutron*, *Electron*, and *Proton Clusters*.

Sports activities had yet another structure. Here the divisions were known as *C Grade*, *B Grade*, and *A Grade*.

Looking back now, I realise how imaginative and appealing this entire system was. Without our even noticing it, it sowed tiny seeds of curiosity, enthusiasm, and knowledge within us. There was a creative spirit even in the names themselves, as though education was not confined to textbooks but entered students' minds through language, symbols, and atmosphere alike.

There was another form of classification as well. For annual sports meets and inter-school competitions, students were divided into houses. For athletic activities, these were known as *Hanuman House*, *Bhim House*, *Arjun House*, and *Rustam House*. Students represented these houses in various sporting events.

For other school competitions, a different set of houses existed: *Ujjayini*, *Avantika*, *Vaishali*, *Nalanda*, *Takshashila*, and *Ajanta*. These were not merely names. They symbolised the cultural memory of an undivided India that had once illuminated the world through its learning and civilisation. Naturally, students felt connected to these

names. Gradually, curiosity about their history arose, and with it came a quiet pride in our heritage, our roots, and our cultural legacy.

Throughout the academic year, students participated in various activities under these houses, mandals, clusters, and grades while simultaneously completing their studies. The result was a natural process of all-round development. Every student was encouraged to grow intellectually, physically, socially, and creatively.

These arrangements existed at the school level. Within individual classrooms, students were further organised into committees: the Literary Committee, Science Committee, Sports Committee, Social Studies Committee, Gardening Committee, and Art Committee. Each committee usually consisted of seven or eight students, occasionally as many as nine. Thus, every student belonged to at least one committee.

Students generally selected committees according to their interests. Whenever numbers became uneven, discussions among students and class leaders usually resolved the matter. Occasionally, the class teacher intervened, and his decision was considered final.

Committee members then elected their own chairperson, usually through mutual agreement. Sometimes a teacher's recommendation determined the choice. Once formed in Class Six, these committees often remained largely unchanged through Classes Seven and Eight. There was no rigid rule preventing changes, but alterations were relatively uncommon.

Each committee functioned in accordance with its purpose. Looking back now, I feel that their creation was intended not merely to develop students intellectually but also to identify their individual inclinations and provide opportunities for those inclinations to flourish.

A student's complete development cannot be achieved through a conventional academic curriculum alone. His mental framework, his powers of thought, and his outlook on life must also be nurtured. Education should not merely equip a person to earn a livelihood; it

should enable him to live a balanced, orderly, and harmonious life within society.

The secondary-school years are perhaps the most fertile period for planting such seeds. At that age, the mind is at its most receptive. Later, when students enter college, countless new attractions begin to unfold before them. Their reasoning faculties become more developed, and a persistent *why?* emerges within them. That *why?* often sits like a stubborn gatekeeper at the entrance to receptivity, making it difficult to accept things with the same openness as before.

Another change occurs as well. At college, the teacher becomes a lecturer, a reader, or a professor, whose role is often confined to delivering instruction in a particular subject. I do not mean to suggest that there are no guru-like teachers in colleges; there certainly are. But they are rare. And if a student is fortunate enough to find one, it is a blessing indeed.

Much more could be said on this subject, but that would lead us too far afield.

For the moment, I wish only to say that the foundations of a thoughtful, principled, and sensitive citizen can be laid far more naturally at the school level than at the collegiate one. And our Model High School fulfilled that responsibility with remarkable sincerity, devotion, and affection.

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It now becomes necessary to explain what these committees actually did; otherwise, the account would remain incomplete.

Before I do that, however, another memory comes to mind.

In our school classrooms, the rear wall, too, was covered almost entirely by a blackboard stretching across its full width. As far as I can recall, only the classroom of Class VII-B was an exception. In fact, there were nine rooms altogether for the middle-school classes. The

fifth room from either side-the one in the centre-was nearly one and a half times larger than the others, both in length and in breadth.

The right-hand wall of the remaining rooms and the rear wall of this central room lay in a straight line. Behind them was a strip of open earth, eight to ten feet wide, beyond which stood the school's high boundary wall. Past the wall stretched a sloping expanse of vacant land running parallel to the road leading from what is now Ambedkar Chowk towards Chhoti Omti-and perhaps it still does. It was in the space between the middle-school classrooms and the boundary wall that students who came to school by bicycle parked their cycles.

I was speaking about the blackboard on the rear wall.

It was in that large room of Class VII-B that I studied with my classmates. The room was not only larger than the others but was also somewhat different in design. The students there sat facing the prayer ground or the hockey field, whereas in the other classrooms they generally faced east.

Once again, I seem to have wandered from the subject.

And yet, before these memories turn into another corridor altogether, let me return to the main point. The blackboard on the rear wall of our classroom was, in a sense, our Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram all rolled into one.

I am speaking of a time nearly fifty-seven years ago. In those days, no one could even imagine the astonishing advances that communication technology would one day achieve. Yet, from the standpoint of usefulness, that blackboard served us in much the same way.

How?

I shall explain, though this is, of course, only my personal perception. Some may find the comparison amusing, even absurd. But there is little I can do about that. I am merely recording what rises naturally from within. The story is mine, and so are the memories and the meanings I attach to them.

Today, we use these platforms to share our writings, thoughts, and all those things that delight or inspire us. We then spend hours reading, viewing, liking, and commenting on them. Something remarkably similar happened on the blackboard at the back of our classroom. The only difference was that it was a poor, inanimate blackboard rather than a glowing screen. Consequently, coloured chalk had to perform the role that pixels perform today.

That blackboard, nearly five feet wide and stretching from one end of the wall to the other, was divided into seven equal sections-six allotted to six different committees and the seventh reserved as a notice board.

Each committee was responsible for ensuring that educational and informative material related to its field was neatly written in its allotted space in decorative chalk script. The contents were changed every two or three days. The actual writing was usually entrusted to the student with the most elegant and balanced handwriting. The committee president selected the material in consultation with fellow members.

The material did not necessarily have to be written by members of that committee alone. Any student in the class could contribute an original composition or a carefully collected piece of writing to any committee. There was only one condition: it had to be relevant, informative, and within the bounds of propriety. If any lapse occurred, the committee president was held accountable. Any teacher could point out errors or shortcomings. In fact, most teachers read the material on the rear blackboard attentively and had mistakes corrected whenever they noticed them.

The section allotted to the Art Committee usually displayed drawings and illustrations. Other sections carried writings in Hindi or English. The Literary Committee featured poems, short stories, beautiful prose passages, quotations, maxims, and aphoristic verses. The Science Committee presented fascinating scientific facts, while the Social Studies Committee displayed historical anecdotes and observations about society. The remaining committees, too, contributed material relevant to their respective domains.

Most of this work was done before classes began, during the lunch break, or in free periods. Alongside every contribution appeared the name of its author or compiler.

The notice-board section carried information regarding classroom activities, competitions, and other announcements. Whenever there was no special notice to display, an inspiring quotation would take its place. This section was supervised by the class leader or monitor.

I believe I have now succeeded, at least to some extent, in justifying my claim that the rear blackboard of our classroom truly functioned as the social media of that era. To labour the comparison any further would probably be unnecessary.

Let me now speak of the committees' other activities.

All the committees functioned in accordance with their respective names and objectives. The Literary Committee sought to cultivate literary interests among students and acquaint them with eminent figures of the literary world. Its work extended far beyond the blackboard. The committee also organized various competitions in which students from other classes within the same group or division participated. Usually, two students from each class were invited.

Quiz contests, essay-writing competitions, story-writing events, poetry recitations, extempore speeches, and debates were regularly conducted.

These activities generally took place during co-curricular or games periods. To publicize them, two committee members would visit different classrooms and read out announcements. The same notices were later broadcast over the loudspeaker during the afternoon assembly following lunch. Results, too, were announced in the same manner.

Occasionally, winners received prizes-a fountain pen, a notebook, or a good book. The modest prize-distribution ceremony would also be held during the afternoon assembly. All these arrangements were managed by the committee president and fellow members.

The other committees worked in much the same way. The Sports Committee, for instance, occasionally organized competitions with other classes. Yet it was the Gardening Committee whose activities were perhaps the most distinctive and vibrant.

One of its responsibilities was to maintain the flowerbeds in front of the classrooms-planting saplings, watering them, and ensuring their protection. Its second task, and perhaps the more significant one, involved cultivating vegetables in small plots of land allotted behind the high-school classrooms.

Each class received a plot roughly ten or twelve feet square. The students themselves tilled the soil, prepared the beds, sowed seeds, planted saplings, and watered them at regular intervals. Besides committee members, many other interested students willingly joined in the work. The school's agricultural department provided seeds, saplings, and technical guidance. Whenever necessary, departmental staff also extended their assistance.

When the vegetables were finally harvested and brought into the classroom, the students' excitement was a sight to behold-especially among those who had nurtured them with their own hands. Fenugreek, spinach, brinjals, okra, and tomatoes were among the crops commonly grown.

Although each student received only a small share, those vegetables carried the flavour of personal labour. There is something uniquely satisfying about eating what one has grown oneself. Even after all these years, I find it difficult to express that quiet happiness in words.

The class teacher and class leader ensured that every student participated in these activities in one way or another. Sometimes, a particularly mischievous student would be assigned the task of working in the vegetable plots or watering them as a form of punishment.

Yet now, looking back, it seems to me that it was less a punishment and more a lesson in connecting with life itself.

At the school level, too, there existed various committees. Each had its own president, vice-president, and office-bearers. Representatives from different groups functioned under these committees. Separate budgetary provisions were made for cultural, literary, sporting, and academic activities conducted throughout the school.

A central committee, chaired by the principal, oversaw the entire structure. Its members included senior teachers, the School Captain, the Vice-Captain, and other key representatives.

At the beginning of each academic session, the presidents of all committees and their teacher-in-charges participated in an extensive meeting. There they presented detailed outlines of the programmes and activities proposed for the year ahead, along with budget estimates required for their execution.

The work undertaken during previous sessions was reviewed, achievements and shortcomings were discussed, and plans for the future were carefully considered. Finally, after necessary revisions, reductions, and modifications, the Budget Committee approved the proposals.

The process involved far more than merely accounting for money. Quietly and almost imperceptibly, it taught students' responsibility, participation, and the art of collective decision-making.

The School Captain and Vice-Captain were elected through a ballot-paper system. Every student silently wrote the name of a preferred candidate on a slip of paper, folded it, and dropped it into the ballot box. At that moment, a curious seriousness would descend upon their faces-as though they were not merely schoolchildren but conscious citizens participating in a democratic process.

Students came forward in orderly lines, cast their votes, and then returned quietly to their classrooms. Although, on most occasions, the School Captain and Vice-Captain were elected unopposed, the entire process nevertheless possessed an invisible dignity of its own.

Today, when I look back, it seems to me that these activities were far more than ordinary school events. They were like the first lessons of life itself, through which young minds gradually became acquainted with society, institutions, and the responsibilities awaiting them in the future.

Our school did not merely educate us; unknowingly and unobtrusively, it was preparing us for the larger arena of life.

□

There were various committees functioning at the school level as well. Each committee had its own president, vice-president, and other office-bearers. Representatives from different groups or divisions worked under these committees. Separate budgetary provisions were made for the school's cultural, literary, sporting, and academic activities.

A central committee, headed by the principal, oversaw the entire framework. Its members included senior teachers, the School Captain, the Vice-Captain, and other key representatives. At the beginning of every academic session, the presidents of all committees and their supervising teachers attended a comprehensive meeting. There they presented detailed outlines of the programmes and activities proposed for the year, together with estimates of the funds required for their implementation.

The work accomplished during previous sessions was reviewed, achievements and shortcomings were examined, and discussions were held regarding future plans. Ultimately, after making the necessary reductions, modifications, and adjustments, the Budget Committee approved the proposals. Yet that process involved far more than mere financial accounting. Quietly and unobtrusively, it imparted lessons in responsibility, participation, and collective decision-making.

The School Captain and Vice-Captain were elected through a ballot-paper system. Every student would silently write the name of a preferred candidate on a slip of paper, fold it carefully, and place it in

the ballot box. At that moment, a curious seriousness would descend upon young faces-as though each child were not merely a student in a modest school but a conscious participant in the democratic process.

Students approached in orderly lines, cast their votes, and then returned quietly to their classrooms. Although the School Captain and Vice-Captain were, on most occasions, elected unopposed, the entire process nevertheless possessed an invisible dignity and grace.

Today, when I look back, it seems to me that these activities were much more than ordinary school events. They were among life's earliest lessons, through which young minds gradually became acquainted with society, institutions, and the responsibilities that awaited them in the future. Our school did not merely educate us; quietly and unknowingly, it was preparing us for the larger arena of life.

□

Now that I have spoken at such length about Model High School, it feels as though the account would remain incomplete without some mention of its architecture and physical layout. In truth, this subject perhaps ought to have appeared at the very beginning of this chapter. Yet some things seem more natural and harmonious when they arrive in the course of an unfolding narrative.

Stories have a rhythm of their own. They do not move in straight lines. If every detail is forced into strict sequence and order, a story begins to resemble an essay.

And besides, every good tale requires a little rambling. In our local dialect there is a far more expressive word for it, though perhaps it would not be entirely appropriate to use it here. So, for the moment, “rambling” will suffice.

Thus, before arriving at the architecture of Model High School, this brief prelude seemed necessary. On reflection, perhaps “prelude” is indeed a more fitting word than “rambling.” Just as a musician, before commencing a raga, first lingers over the notes and prepares the

melody with a gentle elaboration, so too is this digression merely an opening alap before the principal theme.

I have already mentioned that our Model High School stood upon the right-angled tract of land enclosed between the road leading from today's Dr. Ambedkar Chowk to Babu Rajendra Prasad Chowk and onward towards the Tourism Building, and the road running from the front of the Tehsil Office towards Chhoti Omti. In terms of locality, the entire area fell within South Civil Lines.

The corner opposite the school adjoined the Provincial Teachers' Training College. The campus itself was almost square in shape. The school had been established in 1904, and the building gave every impression of having served as its home from the very beginning. Although I never came across any plaque or inscription confirming this fact, the structure itself seemed to speak of that antiquity.

What was unmistakable, however, was the care and balance with which it had been designed and constructed. Today, several new buildings have been added, including the Dr. Abdul Kalam Science Laboratory and the BrahMos Hostel. The older structures have also undergone repairs and renovation. Yet despite these changes, the school still retains much of its original character. At least from the outside, it appears remarkably similar to the institution we knew in our time.

In those days, Dr. Ambedkar Chowk had not yet acquired its present form. The intersection existed, but Dr. Ambedkar's statue had not yet been installed there. Parallel to the road leading from the chowk towards Babu Rajendra Prasad Chowk stood the high-school classrooms in a long row. In the boundary wall along that side was Gate Number Two, which still exists today, although it has since become the school's principal entrance.

On the other side, running parallel to the road leading towards Chhoti Omti and at right angles to the high-school wing, stood the middle-school classrooms. It was on this side that the school's original main entrance-Gate Number One-was situated. Beyond it stretched the

hostel complex, extending as far as Udiya Mohalla. Adjacent to the hostel were a number of staff quarters occupied by peons and other school employees.

A paved road entered through the main gate and passed alongside the Provincial Teachers' Training College before joining Ghantaghar Road. A short distance from the entrance, along this road, stood the school's large auditorium. The level ground between the auditorium and the staff quarters behind it served as the students' playground.

Beyond this stood the Agriculture Department building, accompanied by a cowshed. Several cows and bullocks were kept there, while bullock carts and agricultural implements were stored nearby. Beyond it stood the Basic Education Building, where spinning and weaving were taught. We had to bring our own spindles and cotton rolls, while spinning wheels were provided by the school. Looms were also installed there. The department was supervised by Mr. Katare.

Further on stood the Basic School, which, however, was not a part of our institution.

Directly opposite the Agriculture Building, across the road, stood a large iron gate. From this gate to the main entrance ran a wooden trellis lined with rows of shrub-like trees. At its centre stood a small temple dedicated to Lord Shiva-neither imposing nor insignificant, but quietly proportioned. Set within the trellis was also a small revolving iron gate.

A dirt road entered through the large gate opposite the Agriculture Building and led directly towards Class XI-A. On its right began the administrative block. First came the classrooms of Sections XI-D and XI-E. Beyond them were one or two rooms used as offices, followed by the principal's chamber.

Beyond the Principal's room stood a lecture hall with a stepped, amphitheatre-like floor. Broad tiers rose one above another, fitted with wooden desks and chairs. At the front stood a long wooden table, while a cement board occupied the wall behind it. This hall was used

for lectures by distinguished scholars and for demonstrations of scientific experiments.

Nearby was also an art gallery where exhibitions of paintings and photography were regularly held. It was there that I viewed exhibitions by numerous painters and photographers from Jabalpur and from other places as well.

Further along were the Staff Room, the Literary Room, the Music Room, and the Science Room. Towards the far end of the verandah, the structure widened slightly, and directly ahead stood the entrance to the Chemistry Laboratory.

□

Beyond the Chemistry Lab was a long but comparatively narrow room occupied by Mr. G. S. Dave. It served as the Geography Room, housing maps, instruments, and teaching materials related to the subject. Its door opened towards the hockey ground.

Dave Sir was a scholar of geography, though he also taught subjects such as English and Hindi with equal ease and authority.

Under his guidance, an enormous three-dimensional relief map of Jabalpur district-approximately fifteen feet by fifteen feet-was created. Hills, undulating terrain, the Narmada River, and its tributaries were represented as accurately as possible in their proper proportions and relative elevations. The entire structure was built of cement and concrete and later painted according to accepted geographical conventions.

Miniature replicas of important landmarks and buildings of the city were also placed upon it. The model was constructed during our own years at the school, and to us it seemed as though the whole of Jabalpur had been transformed into a magical toy and laid out before our eyes.

Beyond the Geography Room lay the Printing Arts Room. Its door opened towards the rear of the building. In front of it ran a long verandah, which ended after a short distance on the left, while on the

right it turned at a right angle at the far end of the room. It was along this verandah that our school library was situated.

There, behind large glass-fronted cabinets, countless books stood arranged in neat rows. One had to pass in front of the library to reach the Printing Arts Room. In the early years, the department was supervised by Mr. A. B. Nigam, who sat there and trained the students. After his retirement, Mr. Kamta Sagar took charge of the room and moved much of the equipment he required from the Drawing Hall into that space.

As I frequently had occasion to visit him, passing before the library became unavoidable. Each time, I would pause and gaze longingly at the books resting behind the glass, trying to read their titles. Students were not permitted to enter the main library without a specific purpose. Thus, standing outside, I would satisfy a small inner hunger merely by looking at those books from a distance.

A smaller library for students had been set up in the verandah of the administrative building. A large cupboard stood upon a long table, containing books intended for student readers. During the lunch break, this library would open. Those who wished to read could have a book issued in their name and spend their free time immersed in it. The library was managed entirely by students themselves.

My relationship with books belongs to another chapter and will be described there in greater detail. For the present, it is enough to say that the books enclosed within those locked glass cabinets seemed to me like windows opening onto distant lands-lands that one could peer into, but to which one had not yet been granted entry.

Beyond the library stood the same iron gate, opposite which, across the road, was the large hall of the Agriculture Department.

□

The vast quadrangular expanse enclosed by the rows of middle-school classrooms, the high-school wing, the administrative block, and the

road leading from the main entrance towards the Provincial Teachers' Training College was occupied by our school's famous hockey ground.

Its length, breadth, playing area, and goalposts all conformed to the prescribed standards of the game.

Many great personalities' birth anniversaries and memorial days were observed in our school. Historical commemorations were held, and all national festivals were celebrated with enthusiasm. Yet among them, two occasions possessed a distinctive atmosphere of their own-Martyrs' Day and Janmashtami.

The manner in which they were observed remains alive in my memory even today as something singular and unforgettable.

Let me begin with Martyrs' Day.

The evening of 30 January 1948, when the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, was shot while walking towards a prayer meeting, remains one of the most tragic moments in our history. Across the country, that day is commemorated as Martyrs' Day.

Our school too paid tribute to Bapu, but in a way entirely its own. Whether that tradition survives today, I do not know. The school functioned normally that day, and the morning prayer assembly was held as usual. Yet the moment the prayer ended, an extraordinary observance began: the entire school entered into silence.

Students, teachers, and staff alike became silent.

Five or six periods followed just as they did on any other day, but without a spoken word. Whenever teachers needed to give instructions, they wrote them on the blackboard with chalk, and the students quietly carried out the work. Some teachers conducted class tests; others simply asked the students to read in silence.

As the hours passed, a remarkable stillness settled over the entire campus.

In that silence, the sounds of birds seemed clearer than usual. The whisper of the wind, the rustle of leaves, the rhythm of footsteps, and

the distant noise of vehicles passing along the road that cut through the school grounds-all these became the language of the day.

The customary fifteen-minute recess also took place. Students wandered out to the chaat vendors or made their way to the canteen, but everything was conducted through gestures. The canteen operators and street vendors were well aware that it was the school's Day of Silence. They too completed every transaction without uttering a word.

At the entrance gate and at several other points around the campus, wooden blackboards were displayed bearing a simple message written in large chalk letters:

"Today is Silence Day in the School."

Passers-by were respectfully requested to move quietly while crossing the school premises.

Every student carried a small diary or a few slips of paper, together with a pencil or pen, so that any necessary communication could be made in writing.

If a student accidentally broke the silence, he was required, as an act of atonement, to hold his ears and perform five sit-ups on the spot. It made no difference whether he was alone or surrounded by friends. His companions ensured that the penalty was properly completed. Such incidents generally occurred during recess; I never witnessed one inside a classroom.

Looking back now, I feel that it was in such moments that the subtle difference between a school and a college became apparent. If a similar Day of Silence were observed in a college, it is difficult to imagine students publicly acknowledging their mistake and accepting such a penalty. The courage to admit one's error and make amends without embarrassment can perhaps be nurtured only in the earliest years of life. A school is one of those places where such seeds quietly take root.

After the final period, all the students assembled once again at the prayer ground. A large carpet was spread at the front. One among B. M. Tiwari Sir, R. K. Tiwari Sir, or Gautam Sir would sit with a harmonium. Near the microphone sat Gontia Sir along with a group of gifted student singers. The other teachers also took their places upon the carpet.

Then Bapu's favourite hymn would begin:

"रघुपति राघव राजा राम,
पतित पावन सीता राम।
सीता राम सीता राम,
भज प्यारे तू सीता राम,
रघुपति राघव राजा राम,
पतित पावन सीता राम।

सबको सम्मति दे भगवान,
रघुपति राघव राजा राम,
पतित पावन सीता राम।

रघुपति राघव राजा राम,
पतित पावन सीता राम।
सीता राम सीता राम,
भज प्यारे तू सीता राम,
रघुपति राघव राजा राम,
पतित पावन सीता राम।"

(Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram,
Patita Pavana Sita Ram.
Sita Ram, Sita Ram,
Bhaja Pyare Tu Sita Ram.
Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram,
Patita Pavana Sita Ram.

Sabko Sammati De Bhagwan.

Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram,

Patita Pavana Sita Ram.)

And with that, the silence of the entire day would gradually dissolve.

For ten or fifteen minutes the hymn flowed through the atmosphere like a tranquil river. The students seemed to lose themselves within it. It felt as though the silence accumulated throughout the day had now transformed itself into music.

Even after the assembly ended, the stillness did not depart immediately. It lingered in the air for some time-a gentle and sacred quietude. One felt as though every student was returning home carrying some small, unspoken resolve within.

The purposeful silence of that day gave something to all of us. What that "something" was must have differed from person to person, yet it was undeniably there. Perhaps that is why students who emerged from Model High School seemed, in some subtle way, different from others.

The tradition of remembering Mahatma Gandhi in this manner was remarkable in itself.

It is impossible to claim that any human being is entirely free of flaws. Gandhi, too, was perhaps no exception. Yet the virtues he cultivated in his life transformed him into a living source of inspiration.

What influenced me most was his unwavering devotion to truth.

It was as though he had discovered that Truth alone is the one reality that ultimately endures.

One of his statements still echoes within me:

"There is no God greater than Truth."

To stand by truth, and not to waver from it regardless of circumstances-that was the central principle of his life. His ideas, his outlook, and his philosophy all seemed illuminated by the light of that conviction.

I am far too insignificant a person to pass any definitive judgement upon Gandhi. I merely speak here of what I received from his life. I never saw him; he had left this world eight years before I was born. Whatever I know of him has come through books and through the recollections of elders I heard during my childhood.

The body of literature written by Gandhi himself is vast beyond measure. Even more has been written about him-perhaps more than about any other individual. Of that immense treasury I have read only a tiny fraction. Yet within Indian social life he remains present even today, like a living legend. Whether one chooses to acknowledge it or not, it is difficult to remain entirely untouched by his influence.

And the Day of Silence observed in our school-coming to us at such a formative age-quietly planted within us a seed: a reverence for truth and the courage to stand steadfast beside it.

□

I have already spoken about the prayer that was recited before classes resumed after the lunch break. Yet I have said nothing about the prayer with which each school day began. Let me now turn back that page of memory and recount it.

"तेरे चरणों प्यारे ऐ पिता मुझे ऐसा दृढ़ विश्वास हो
जीवन में मेरे सदा आसरा तेरी दया व मेहर की आस हो. . .

चढ़ आये कभी जो दुख की घटा या पाप कर्म कि होए तपन
तेरा नाम रहे मेरे चित बसा, तेरा नाम रहे मेरे चित बसा
तेरा नाम रहे मेरे चित बसा तेरी दया व मेहर की आस हो. . .

यह काम जो हमने है सर लिया करें मिलके हम तेरे बाल सब
यह काम जो हमने है सर लिया, करें मिलके हम तेरे बाल सब

तेरा हाथ हम पर रहे बना, तेरा हाथ हम पर रहे बना
तेरा हाथ हम पर रहे बना तेरी दया व मेहर की आस हो. . .

तेरे चरणों प्यारे ऐ पिता मुझे ऐसा दृढ़ विश्वास हो
जीवन में मेरे सदा आसरा तेरी दया व मेहर की आस हो. . .”

“At Thy beloved feet, O Father,
Grant me such steadfast faith,
That throughout my life I may always find refuge
In Thy mercy and Thy grace.

Should clouds of sorrow ever gather,
Or the heat of sinful deeds afflicts the soul,
May Thy name dwell forever in my heart,
May Thy name dwell forever in my heart,
May Thy name dwell forever in my heart,
And may I always hope in Thy mercy and Thy grace.

The task we have undertaken,
May we, Thy children, fulfil together.
The task we have undertaken,
May we, Thy children, fulfil together.
May Thy hand remain upon us,
May Thy hand remain upon us,
May Thy hand remain upon us,

And may we always hope in
Thy mercy and Thy grace.

At Thy beloved feet, O Father,
Grant me such steadfast faith,
That throughout my life I may always find refuge
In Thy mercy and Thy grace.”

The morning hour that unfolded every day over those six long years remains as radiant in memory today as a patch of sunlight in the courtyard of an old house, whose warmth survives long after the years have passed.

The school's vast prayer ground would gradually fill with students. The dampness of the night had not yet completely vanished from the air. Dew still lingered upon the leaves, distant birds called from the trees, and the soft murmur of children's voices mingled to create a peculiar stillness in which every sound seemed to possess its own meaning.

The students stood in orderly rows according to their classes.

Upon the platform stood five or six selected students. At the harmonium one might see B. M. Tiwari Sir or R. K. Tiwari Sir. Occasionally, the fingers of H. N. Sharma Sir too would glide gently across the keys. At such moments music ceased to be merely music; it seemed to bind the breathing of the entire school into a single rhythm.

In the presence of the Principal, the School Captain, and the student singers, the prayer would begin.

Hundreds of voices would rise together:

"At Thy beloved feet, O Father, grant me such steadfast faith..."

At that age we probably did not fully understand the meaning of those words, yet their sound penetrated somewhere deep within. It felt as though an unseen force was quietly calming our unformed and restless minds.

That "steadfast faith" was not merely faith in God; it was also trust in the unknown paths of life through which we would one day have to travel.

When the line came-

"Should clouds of sorrow ever gather..."

-it seemed to contain a faint premonition of the hardships and struggles hidden somewhere in the future. We were children then,

scarcely aware of what sorrow truly meant. Yet the prayer appeared to teach us in advance that even when difficult times arrived, the lamp of hope within should never be allowed to go out.

And when the voices rose in the words-

"May we, thy children, fulfil together..."

-the prayer ceased to be merely personal. It united us all into a single fellowship.

We came from different homes, different circumstances, and different dreams; yet in that moment we were simply students-members of one family learning how to walk together.

The same ritual was repeated after the midday recess. Once again, the students assembled at the prayer ground. With the recitation of *"Manasa, Vacha, Karmana..."* the same atmosphere of concentration descended upon the gathering.

It felt as though, amid the bustle of the day, a tranquil stream had suddenly appeared, allowing the mind to wash itself clean and return refreshed. Only then did the final three periods of the second session begin.

Looking back today, it seems to me that those prayers prepared us for far more than academic lessons. They planted within us the seeds of patience, humility, faith, and fellowship-qualities whose true value became apparent only during the long journey of life.

Those words still echo in memory.

The notes of the harmonium, the freshness of the morning air, the united voices of hundreds of children-all of it lies preserved beneath the dust of time.

Perhaps that was the greatest miracle of prayer: it did not end when the singing ceased. It remained alive within one's life as a gentle and enduring resonance.

Even today, that resonance continues to sound within me.

□

Now let me turn to an event for which, in those days, the entire city waited with eager anticipation:

The tableaux created at Model High School to celebrate the **birth of Lord Krishna** were famous throughout Jabalpur.

They were not merely a cultural programme. They were a festival within the life of the school itself, an occasion where art, labour, devotion, and collective effort seemed to breathe together.

Perhaps the tradition survives even today in some form, though, to the best of my knowledge, its character has changed considerably. I am speaking of those years between 1967 and 1972-a time that now survives in memory like the trembling flame of an old oil lamp.

Students of Classes Ten and Eleven were generally not allowed to participate directly in the preparations. They were also exempted from several other extracurricular competitions so that their studies would not suffer. Nevertheless, they were never deprived of the opportunity to view the exhibition.

On Janmashtami itself, and often on the following day as well, the tableaux remained open to visitors. Viewing hours usually extended from about six or half-past six in the evening for two hours, though the timing was occasionally adjusted according to the size of the crowds.

The entire event was supervised by Mr. Kamta Sagar.

From Class Six to Class Nine, fourteen tableaux were prepared each year. Had the tenth standard also been included, the number would have risen to nineteen.

Preparations began almost a week before Janmashtami.

First, the class leaders, the presidents of the Art Committees, and a few selected students from each class would meet Kamta Sagar Sir to receive the subject assigned to their class.

The themes included episodes such as:

-"The Birth of Krishna in Prison,"
-"Yashoda Rocking the Infant Krishna,"
-"The Butter Theft,"
-"Krishna Tending the Cattle,"
-"The Subjugation of the Serpent Kaliya,"
-"The Slaying of Kansa,"
-"The Ras Leela,"
-"Krishna Delivering the Gita to Arjuna,"

and finally, toward the end of the sequence,

-"The Hunter's Arrow Striking Krishna's Foot."

These represented some of the most significant episodes in Krishna's life.

Care was also taken to ensure that the scenes could be realistically created with the limited resources available to students. Consequently, many important events were omitted simply because they were too difficult to portray visually.

Yet somehow the entire story of Krishna's life-from birth to departure from the world-seemed invisibly woven through the sequence of tableaux.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature was that each tableau was created entirely by the students of the assigned class. There was no outside assistance, no elaborate external arrangements. Every class built its own world from within itself.

Except for the wall behind the stage, thick iron wires were stretched around the auditorium at intervals of roughly ten feet. Using these wires and nails already fixed into the walls, students tied ropes of jute or coconut fibre to mark the boundaries of their tableau.

All tableaux were approximately equal in size.

Students brought bedsheets and saris from their homes, hanging them with pins to serve as partitions and curtains. The rear walls were

covered in the same way. The entire tableau was constructed directly upon the floor of the auditorium.

Since the order of the tableaux followed the sequence of Krishna's life rather than the order of the classes, the usual class arrangement was abandoned.

Above each tableau hung a large card displaying, in bold letters, the title of the scene and the name of the class. These signboards were designed by Kamta Sagar Sir himself.

His handwriting possessed extraordinary beauty. The letters of the Devanagari script seemed not merely written but sculpted.

Two or three students from the respective class stood beside each tableau to explain the story to visitors. Sometimes members of the audience asked questions, and the students answered them politely.

The tableaux were created using bricks, clay, stones, grass, bamboo strips, coloured paper, toys, cut-outs, flowerpots, and even clay sculptures. Most materials were gathered either from the school grounds or from students' homes. Some items were purchased using class funds or money collected through voluntary contributions.

I myself was the president of my class Art Committee, and therefore much of our tableau's design and execution took place under my direction.

In some years clay figures appropriate to the assigned theme were specially commissioned from local artisans. These were carefully preserved and reused for many years. The class that had originally commissioned them assumed responsibility for their upkeep. If, in a subsequent year, the same subject was assigned to another class, the sculptures would be lent to them and then returned after the exhibition.

Our class received the award for the best tableau on several occasions.

Perhaps it was not because we were the most talented, but because we devoted ourselves wholeheartedly to the task.

A special tableau was also arranged in front of the stage. It featured a large image or statue of Lord Krishna surrounded by flowerpots, decorative rangoli designs, and tall ceremonial lamps placed on either side.

This too was created under the guidance of Kamta Sagar Sir.

In those days, not only students but also their families, neighbours, former pupils, townspeople, and invited guests came to view the exhibition. The auditorium and its surroundings remained lively and crowded well into the evening.

The following day, local newspapers often carried detailed reports of the event.

Although the exhibition itself lasted only a day or two, its preparation continued for many days beforehand. Almost every student in a class became involved in some way.

The programme did far more than showcase artistic talent. It taught children how to work together, how to transform imagination into reality, and how to discover joy in labour.

At the time, we probably did not fully understand what we were learning.

But today, when I look back, it seems to me that those tableaux were not merely representations of Krishna's story.

They were also tableaux of the humanity that was quietly taking shape within us.

□

Two other important annual activities remain to be mentioned:

The first was the **Classroom Decoration Competition**, and the second, the creation of the class **Handwritten Magazine**.

Classroom decoration was conducted as a formal competition, the results of which were announced during the Independence Day

celebrations on 15 August. On that occasion, the winning classes from the various divisions were awarded shields or cups. It was the first major competition of the academic year.

The announcement was usually made during the second or third week of July, after which preparations commenced alongside regular studies. The date of inspection was declared one or two days before Independence Day so that all decorative work could be completed in time. The panel of judges consisted of at least three members, among whom Kamta Sagar Sir and Gontia Sir were almost invariably included.

It may be useful to explain how classroom decoration was carried out.

Our school had been established in 1904, and its main building reflected the architectural style of the British era. High walls, large and sturdy wooden doors and windows, ventilators near the roof, long verandahs supported by wooden pillars resting on stone bases and sloping overhanging eaves gave the structure a distinctive character. The walls rose even higher above the eaves, where the ventilators were set. The roofs sloped gently on both sides and were covered with traditional English tiles.

The classrooms were spacious, and the walls lofty. There was, therefore, ample scope for decoration.

However, clear guidelines governed what could be displayed. Only pictures and charts depicting great personalities, natural scenery, flowers and plants, birds and animals, historical monuments, or educational subjects were permitted. The pictures could either be printed or hand-drawn by students, though original artwork received special preference. Framed pictures were not allowed.

Images were mounted on carefully cut black card sheets, leaving neat margins around them. In those days, paper was usually pasted with homemade flour glue or ordinary gum, though commercial adhesives were also available. The displays were arranged with attention to balance and proportion, ensuring harmony between horizontal and

vertical lines. Neither excessive clutter nor empty sparseness was encouraged. Small nails were used to hang the exhibits, and the overall effect was one of restrained elegance.

These were precisely the qualities that the judges evaluated during their inspections.

Our class won awards at the divisional level several times in this competition as well.

I shall speak about drawing and painting in greater detail in another chapter. For now, let us leave this subject and move on to the second major activity-the handwritten magazine.

For students with literary and artistic inclinations, this was among the most stimulating and inspiring activities of the year. It usually continued for several months.

As far as I can recall, the formal announcement was made shortly after the Diwali holidays. The completed magazine had to be submitted to the teacher in charge by a fixed date, probably sometime in January. The winners were announced on 26 January, Republic Day.

As the name suggests, a handwritten magazine was a magazine written entirely by hand.

It contained stories, poems, short narratives, memoirs, travel accounts, essays, humorous pieces, and inspirational quotations. Alongside these literary contributions appeared illustrations created by students themselves.

Those with particularly fine handwriting were entrusted with copying the selected material. Since a magazine often ran to eighty or ninety pages, several students had to share the task. They completed the work during free periods or at home.

The paper was supplied by the school so that all magazines would have a uniform size, although the number of pages varied from class to class.

Preparing the magazine was an additional responsibility apart from regular studies, and therefore each class produced only one magazine.

The purpose of the competition was to nurture literary and artistic sensibilities among students.

To discuss fully how literature and art shape human thought, perception, and social life would take us far beyond the present narrative. So, I shall confine myself to the essentials.

The sheets supplied by the school already carried an attractive red border around the edges, while the school's emblem was printed at the top centre.

And now that the emblem has been mentioned, perhaps I should explain that as well. If I do not do so here, I may forget later and leave out something important.

At the centre of the circular emblem was a leaping deer racing above a series of waves. Around the outer ring appeared the school's name. At the top were the words *Satya-Sandh*, and below, among the waves, the year *1904*-the year of the school's establishment.

The emblem remains largely unchanged even today. Only the school's name has been altered and the word "Jabalpur" added. Earlier it was printed in a single colour; now it is multicoloured. Yet the leaping deer, the waves, and the words *Satya-Sandh* remain exactly as before.

At some point we must surely have discussed the emblem among ourselves. Perhaps a teacher even explained its significance. But those conversations have faded into the haze of memory. What follows is simply the meaning that arises within me now as I write these lines.

Whether one agrees with it or not is entirely a matter for the reader.

To me, the leaping deer symbolizes the aspiration to move constantly forward in life. The waves represent life's inevitable ups and downs.

And the words *Satya-Sandh* reveal their meaning almost of their own accord.

What need is there to define Truth? Truth is simply Truth-that which is. Its opposite is falsehood, that which has no real existence. Truth is complete in itself, neither broken nor partial. So vast that even to call

it vast may be to impose a limit upon it. Every meaning our minds can conceive is already contained within it.

And *Sandh* implies union, alignment, connection, or steadfast adherence.

For me, this is enough to understand the motto.

The school seemed like an institution moving forward beneath the banner of Truth, and every Modelian a student committed to carrying that Truth within himself. The mists of material existence may sometimes obscure it, but they can never destroy it.

The discussion has become somewhat serious. Yet some things cannot be spoken of lightly.

In any case, we were speaking about the handwritten magazine.

In those days, stationery shops sold fullscap sheets with dark blue ruling printed upon thick cardboard-like backing sheets. Placing these beneath the writing paper allowed the lines to show faintly through, making it easier to write in straight, evenly spaced rows.

That was how the pages of the magazine were prepared.

Speaking of our own class, space for titles was left blank in advance. Later I would paint the headings with a brush. The amount of space required for illustrations accompanying poems was also determined beforehand.

What we now call "formatting" was achieved in much the same way.

I was generally responsible for the magazine's design and layout and sometimes contributed written pieces as well. Drawings made by me and a few other students were inserted throughout its pages. Every class chose an attractive title for its magazine.

The overall responsibility for the project-the selection of material, necessary editing, organization, and even naming the magazine-was entrusted to a student editor. Usually, the class teacher nominated the most suitable student for the role.

Once the writing and decoration had been completed, the magazine was sent to a bindery. A black cardboard or card-sheet cover was attached in accordance with the practice of the time. Upon the cover, the title of the magazine, the editor's name, the class, section, and year of publication were painted artistically with brushes and coloured inks.

For our class magazine, this work usually fell to me. Some classes preferred to have Kamta Sagar Sir create the cover.

Finally, a transparent yellow or orange gelatin sheet was placed over the cover for protection. At first, I opposed this practice because it dulled the colours, but the majority prevailed, and eventually I abandoned my objections.

After the magazine had been completed, the class teacher reviewed it before it was submitted to the Literary Room for competition.

Our class won awards in this competition several times as well.

The magazines were never returned. They were preserved in the Literary Room, and particularly distinguished editions were displayed in large glass-fronted cabinets.

Within those cabinets they appeared like silent memories from another age-motionless and tranquil, yet somehow still alive.

I sometimes wonder:

Do the magazines of our time still survive?

And then another question follows:

Should one even think in such terms?

Is not the desire to endure forever our greatest illusion?

Let us leave that thought at its philosophical turning and take another path.

□

The activities described above began almost at the start of the academic year and continued, one after another, until approximately January.

Thereafter, as the annual examinations drew near, the atmosphere of the school gradually changed.

Attention shifted almost entirely towards studies.

The students immersed themselves in preparation according to their individual capacities, while the teachers, too, taught with a new seriousness and discipline. It was as though a quiet but unmistakable gravity had descended upon the entire school.

By this time, sports competitions had usually concluded by December. School-level and inter-school contests were completed by the end of January.

In those days, a social and cultural organization called *Milan* was highly active in Jabalpur. It may still exist today, but then its presence was deeply felt in the city's cultural life.

The organization arranged numerous competitions among the city's schools.

Since Model High School possessed a large and well-equipped auditorium, most of Milan's programmes and competitions were held there.

These included dramatic performances, science plays, speeches, poetry recitations, debates, singing competitions, extempore speaking, and impromptu essay writing.

Among sports events, the hockey, football, and athletics competitions organized by J.E.E.A. were especially important. These too concluded before the end of December.

My own interests leaned more towards painting and art, followed by literary pursuits. Consequently, I may not be able to describe sports activities in great detail.

I did, however, begin playing hockey during my primary-school years and continued without interruption throughout high school. I was a regular member of both the Grade B and Grade A school hockey teams.

But those stories belong to another chapter one devoted entirely to hockey.

Just now, another memory has unexpectedly surfaced.

It too concerns a competition, though one that was held only once-in 1969, when I was in Class Nine.

That year has already secured a unique place in human history.

It was the year when Neil Armstrong first set foot upon the Moon.

On 20 July 1969, at 02:56 UTC, a human being walked upon the lunar surface for the first time.

The achievement was more than a scientific triumph; it seemed as though humanity had crossed one of the oldest frontiers of its imagination.

Armstrong's famous words echoed around the world:

"That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

Our school organized an album-making competition based upon this historic event.

Students were required to collect pictures and photographs from newspapers, magazines, and other sources, and arrange them artistically in an album that narrated the entire story of humanity's conquest of the Moon.

At our home, the magazine *Soviet Russia* arrived regularly. *Span* was also publishing excellent illustrated articles on the subject. Magazines such as *Dharmyug* and *Saptahik Hindustan* carried a steady stream of reports and photographs related to the lunar mission.

I too participated in the competition.

I collected pictures, created an album from black card sheets, and arranged the images in chronological order. Beside each picture I attached small notes containing essential information.

I tried to capture the entire journey-from the earliest Apollo missions to Apollo 11; the voyage of Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins, in which two men landed upon the Moon while the third orbited above in the command module.

At the time, we were not merely reading about these events; we were experiencing them as a kind of wonder.

I was awarded second prize.

The first prize went to my classmate, Sunil Sachdev.

It seems that memories of Model High School refuse to come to an end.

And the curious thing is that I repeatedly feel there is still so much left unsaid.

Perhaps this is because the very foundation of my life was formed there. Naturally, the memories associated with it are countless.

Science tells us that a structure becomes more stable when its foundation is broader and deeper than the elements built upon it.

Sometimes I feel that whatever stability exists in my life was formed somewhere during those years.

Perhaps I shall reveal that foundation more clearly in the third volume of my story. That, however, lies far in the future.

For now, there are still the classmates who shared that journey with me.

Some of them were so talented that even remembering them today awakens a sense of inspiration.

Many senior students before my time brought honour to the school not merely within the city or the state, but even at the international level.

Without speaking of them, this story would remain incomplete.

I shall tell their stories gradually.

Memories, after all, seldom arrive all at once. They unfold slowly, like the courtyard of an old house opening itself to sunlight.

As we continue along this path of words, those faces, voices, and days will appear one by one.

Indeed, throughout this book they are scattered everywhere, yet invisibly connected.

Whenever I have written "we" or "all of us," I was never speaking of myself alone. I was speaking of all Modelians-my classmates, those who came before us, and those who followed after us.

At the moment, however, another small and amusing memory comes to mind.

After I entered government service, several of my colleagues turned out to be former students at Model High School as well-some seniors, some juniors.

Whenever we gathered at a party or a social function, it never took long for memories of Model High School to surface among us.

Soon we would forget the rest of the world and lose ourselves entirely in those recollections.

Our other colleagues sometimes grew exasperated.

Laughing sarcastically, they would say:

"Come on, let's get out of here. Their *Model Purana* has begun again!"

The memories of Model High School returned to us as vividly as if they belonged to yesterday.

"Perhaps some places are never left behind in time".

They continue to walk quietly within us-becoming part of our voice, our vision, and our memory.

"Becoming a living part of our memory - woven into our voice, our vision, and our very way of thinking". Model High School is one such place, still breathing quietly within me.

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2

Sanskaar Aur Sanskruti
(Home, Festivals, and the Rhythm of Family Life)

The paths of our lives are rough and uneven-steep and winding, strewn with gravel and stone, crowded with obstacles, hindrances, and unforeseen difficulties. There may be a few people-very few, perhaps-who manage to travel these roads with effortless ease. But I do not know any such person. One way or another, sooner or later, trouble finds us all.

None of us wishes for such things to happen. Who would willingly choose failure, anxiety, or heartache as their share of life? Yet there seems to be someone beyond us all, silently watching this endless commotion. At times it even feels as though that unseen presence has devised the whole game, as if some profound and mysterious amusement lies hidden within our struggles. But enough of this forced philosophizing. Let us turn instead to the memories that belong in this chapter.

Let us talk about festivals.

As I write this, a scene unfolds before my eyes. People stumble, slip, and struggle onward along just such a road as I have described above. Exhausted beneath the fierce, blazing sun, drenched in sweat, they trudge ahead. Then, suddenly, a great, shady tree appears by the roadside. Like cool water offered to a thirsty traveller, its shelter beckons. The weary wayfarers pause for a few precious moments beneath its vast and generous canopy. Their troubles, their fatigue-everything seems to vanish as if by magic.

Festivals come into our lives in much the same way.

Or perhaps one could say that humanity, in its own fashion, threw down a challenge to God: *You may move one way, and we shall find another.*

And so, we created celebrations and festivals-like shady trees planted along the roadside of life's ceaseless journey. Beneath their cool shelter we are granted a little time to live on our own terms. From the branches of that tree hang bundles of happiness, one for each of us. We take down our own little bundle and untie it. Inside are preserved fragments of joy from days gone by, memories of happiness once lived.

Upon the instrument of the passing moment, we play the melody of those remembered joys. We sing, we dance, and for a brief while we forget all our worries. Yet this little play, enacted within the larger drama of life, eventually reaches its end. The moments of peace and delight slip away, and once again the journey resumes-with all its turbulence, its uncertainties, and its endless ups and downs.

□

Those days now seem as though they belonged to someone else's life. There was a haze over them-gentle, reassuring, untouched by danger. The steps of the school, the long corridors of the college, and the years that passed between them all appeared immersed in a strange stillness.

There were complications, certainly; there were confusions. Yet they were not truly ours. We stood beneath the sheltering shadow of our parents, and in those years that is how it is for almost everyone. The real twists and turns of life had not yet appeared before us. Whenever adversity arrived, there were elders standing beside us, ready to bear its weight.

And yet there was one thing we did possess: the invisible fear of the future-that peculiar fear which visits before sleep at night and dissolves into the steam of morning tea. Illnesses came too, minor ones, like notices announcing a change of season. There were quarrels as well-

though with whom, and over what, I can no longer remember. Perhaps they were never worth remembering. Indeed, can they even be called quarrels? They merely resembled them, as though they were imitations of real battles.

And love? That too existed.

Small as a short story, and equally incomplete-like a sentence abandoned midway, while we turn to the next page instead of finishing it. A conversation left half-spoken, where many words are heard, even more remain unheard, and far more are never spoken at all...

Yet that first experience of love, brief as a drop of water and no larger in shape-does it not remain with us for a lifetime? It does. It always does. Sometimes you recognize it; sometimes you do not. At times, even after recognizing it, you continue to behave like a stranger before it.

Between memory and the present hangs a very delicate curtain. Behind that curtain lie certain albums that we simply leave untouched, never opening them. Yet the photographs pasted inside those albums continue to return to us with startling intensity. If I can gather the courage, perhaps one day I shall open that album and tell the stories attached to those photographs-the fragments of that miniature tale of love, and the unfinished poems of half-ripened moments from an unripe age that peer out from them.



Festivals are not merely celebrations; they are answers to some of the deepest questions of human existence.

Ordinarily, we think of time as a continuous flow-work, fatigue, repetition. A festival is a conscious pause within that flow. It is our declaration that we do not live merely to grow weary, and that we are not machines.

Every festival arrests time for a while. During that suspension, a truer part of ourselves emerges and lives, however briefly, in the manner we have always wished to live.

There is also a remarkable paradox at the heart of every festival. It offers an opportunity to remember what was beautiful, and at the same time to forget what was painful. Lighting lamps at Diwali is not merely a remembrance of Lord Rama's return; it is a philosophy of acknowledging darkness and yet choosing light. Festivals teach us that some things in life deserve to be remembered, while others deserve to be left behind.

In solitude we are "I." In a festival we become "we." It is a profound transformation. When thousands of people sing, dance, or pray together in a single rhythm, the individual ego melts away for a time. It is an experience of collective consciousness-the very thing philosophy seeks, and festivals effortlessly bestow.

A festival is the threshold where the sacred and the ordinary meet. Eating sweets becomes an act of worship; playing with colours becomes a spiritual experience. It reminds us that life itself is sacred-all that is required is the vision to perceive it. Festivals grant us that vision.

Behind every festival, somewhere in the background, stands the shadow of mortality and destruction-Pitru Paksha, Holika Dahan, the burning of Ravana. Human beings know they are mortal, and yet they celebrate. That is perhaps their greatest act of courage. Festivals seem to say:

"Everything is fleeting-therefore live this moment completely."

Who knows whether tomorrow will come at all?

A festival is not a school of philosophy; it is philosophy experienced in living form. Truths that are difficult to explain in words reveal themselves naturally in the flame of a lamp, in songs sung together, in food shared from the same platter, and in the sacred offering resting upon an open palm.

In the earliest years of our lives, festivals provide us with a complete training in how to face life's struggles-to endure, to persevere, and even to learn from defeat.

It is therefore understandable that one should wish to revisit those memories from time to time- like attending a refresher course.

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Let us begin, then, with the first festival of my life-the one of which I have no memory at all.

Yet for Bai and Babuji it was a great festival, perhaps the greatest of all.

At the time I knew nothing of it, nor do I possess any memory of it today. I am speaking of my birthday.

For Bai and Babuji, that day was indeed a festival, as it is for every parent. Even in later years it continued to be remembered each year in the spirit of a celebration. There may be exceptions, of course, but exceptions exist everywhere.

The details of my birth I have already recounted in *Beginning*. Here I shall only mention that I was born on 21 April 1956, a Saturday. According to the Hindu calendar, it was the Ekadashi of the bright fortnight of Chaitra in Vikram Samvat 2013.

It was also *Kamada Ekadashi*.

Since the occasion has arisen, let us speak a little about Kamada Ekadashi as well.

The literal meaning of *Kamada Ekadashi* is "the eleventh day that grants desires." It is observed on the Ekadashi of the bright fortnight of the month of Chaitra and is the first Ekadashi following Chaitra Navaratri. On this day devotees worship Lord Vasudeva and Goddess Lakshmi. It is believed that the observance of this fast fulfils one's wishes, destroys sins, and bestows prosperity, fortune, and abundance. Tradition goes so far as to say that it grants liberation even from the gravest sins and from malevolent afflictions. Merely hearing or reciting

its sacred narrative is said to confer the merit of performing a Vajapeya sacrifice.

The story of this Ekadashi appears in the *Varaha Purana* and was narrated by Lord Krishna to Yudhishthira. In the prosperous city of Ratnapura, ruled by King Pundarika, lived a Gandharva couple named Lalita and Lalit. Lalit was a celebrated singer at the royal court, while Lalita was a dancer. One day, while performing before the king, Lalit's thoughts wandered to his wife, causing him to miss a note. The serpent Karkotaka informed the king, who, enraged by the lapse, cursed Lalit to become a hideous man-eating demon.

Heartbroken, Lalita accompanied her transformed husband as he wandered through forests and wilderness. Eventually, in the Vindhya mountains, she encountered the sage Shringi and sought his counsel. The sage instructed her to observe the fast of Kamada Ekadashi. Lalita performed the vow with complete devotion and dedicated the spiritual merit of her observance to the redemption of her husband. Through the grace of Lord Krishna, Lalit was restored to his celestial Gandharva form, and the couple ascended to heaven together in a divine chariot.

By coincidence, my own birth date also falls on Kamada Ekadashi. I do not know whether any particular significance should be attached to that fact, nor did my parents ever concern themselves with it. At most, one might whimsically imagine that some unfulfilled desire from a previous birth found fulfilment on that day. But it is perhaps best to leave such speculation where it belongs-in the realm of imagination.

Now, let us return to festivals.

It may be easiest to begin with our New Year-the New Year of India.

When the Indian New Year begins, the first fifteen days of the month of Chaitra have already passed. According to the Gregorian calendar, the year commences on the first of January. In the traditional Hindu calendar, however, the New Year begins on the first day of the bright fortnight (*Shukla Pratipada*) of Chaitra.

The month of Chaitra itself begins immediately after Holi. Holika Dahan is observed on the full moon day of Phalguna, which marks the final day of the Hindu year. The following day ushers in the month of Chaitra. Yet the New Year is reckoned not from that point, but from fifteen days later, on Chaitra Shukla Pratipada.

The reason is deeply symbolic. The first fifteen days of Chaitra belong to the dark fortnight, moving toward the new moon, toward darkness. The New Year begins with the waxing moon, with the movement from darkness toward light. Sanatana tradition chooses to commence the year not with diminishing light, but with its return.

How meaningful it is that our ancestors envisioned the beginning of every journey as a movement from shadow into illumination. The same aspiration is expressed in the ancient Vedic prayer:

"Lead me from darkness unto light."

ॐ (ओम) असतो मा सद्गमय।
तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय।
मृत्योर्मामृतं गमय ॥
ॐ (ओम) शान्ति शान्ति शान्तिः ॥

(Which means:)

"Lead me from untruth to truth.
Lead me from darkness to light.
Lead me from mortality to immortality."

(This celebrated prayer is taken from the "Brihadaranyaka Upanishad".)

The literal meaning of *"Tamaso Ma Jyotir Gamaya"* is: *Lead me from darkness to light.* At a deeper level, however, it expresses the aspiration to free oneself from ignorance, vice, and harmful tendencies, and to turn instead toward the path of truth and wisdom. This, perhaps, is the essence of all genuine spiritual striving.

Our ancestors offered yet another reason for regarding this day as sacred:

चैत्र मासि जगत ब्रह्मा संसर्ज प्रथमेऽहनि,
शुक्ल पक्षे समग्रेतु तदा सूर्योदय सति।।

According to the *Brahma Purana*, it was on the first day of the bright fortnight of the month of Chaitra that Lord Brahma commenced the creation of the universe. For this reason, the day is considered especially auspicious, and it is from this date that the Hindu New Year is traditionally reckoned.

The same day also marks the beginning of *Chaitra Navaratri*. The ceremonial installation of the sacred vessel (*ghata-sthapana*) takes place on this occasion, and the first form of the Divine Mother, Goddess Shailaputri, is worshipped. There is something profoundly moving about this. In India, we begin our New Year with the adoration of the Primordial Feminine Power.

What modern science has discovered only in the last few centuries, our ancestors intuited thousands of years ago in symbolic form. It is Shakti-the primal energy-that manifests itself as matter and, in union with it, brings creation into being. Matter without energy is lifeless, like a corpse. When Shakti and matter unite, Shiva is born. Then truth is born. Then awareness comes into existence. Only then does existence itself acquire meaning.

The celebrated phrase *"Satyam Shivam Sundaram"*-Truth, Auspiciousness, Beauty-is not merely a poetic arrangement of words. It is a simple yet profound expression of our civilizational understanding of creation itself.

But if we allow ourselves to wander too deeply into such interpretations, we may stray far from our present path. After all, countless scriptures-the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, and many others-have devoted themselves to explaining these mysteries. What could a humble mind such as mine possibly add to them?

So let us return to Navaratri.

On the first day, Goddess Shailaputri is worshipped; on the second, Brahmacharini; on the third, Chandraghanta; on the fourth, Kushmanda; on the fifth, Skandamata; on the sixth, Katyayani; on the seventh, Kalaratri; on the eighth, Mahagauri; and on the ninth, Siddhidatri.

It may also be mentioned that Navaratri is observed in two forms. One is the publicly celebrated Navaratri familiar to ordinary devotees. The other is *Gupta Navaratri*-the "Hidden Navaratri"-observed by spiritual practitioners seeking esoteric or tantric attainments. Both forms occur twice each year, resulting in four Navaratris annually.

Most of us concern ourselves only with the public observances, which occur during the months of Chaitra and Ashwin. The Ashwin observance is commonly known as *Sharadiya Navaratri* because it falls during the autumn season. Thus, the yearly cycle includes two public Navaratris-Chaitra and Ashwin-and two Gupta Navaratris in the months of Ashadha and Magha.

Just as the nine forms of the Divine Mother are worshipped during the public Navaratris, the ten Mahavidyas-the Ten Great Wisdom Goddesses-are revered during Gupta Navaratri. These too are manifestations of the same Primordial Shakti: Kali, Tara, Tripura Sundari, Bhuvaneshwari, Chhinnamasta, Bhairavi (or Tripura Bhairavi), Dhumavati, Bagalamukhi, Matangi, and Kamala.

The worship and spiritual disciplines associated with these Mahavidyas are traditionally conducted in great secrecy. As far as I have been able to learn, these ten goddesses are broadly classified into three categories according to their nature: fierce, benign, and mixed.

Kali, Chhinnamasta, Dhumavati, and Bagalamukhi belong to the fierce category. Tripura Sundari, Bhuvaneshwari, Matangi, and Kamala are considered benign manifestations. Tara and Tripura Bhairavi are generally regarded as combining both fierce and gentle aspects.

Each Mahavidya is believed to bestow different spiritual fruits, and a practitioner selects the deity most suited to the goal he or she seeks to attain. The discipline is then pursued with devotion and according to the prescribed tantric traditions throughout the Navaratri period.

This, then, is the basic information I have gathered regarding Navaratri-from elders, from books, and from various other sources. If there are any errors in my understanding, they are entirely my own, and I ask the reader's indulgence.

Chaitra Navaratri begins on the very first day of the Hindu New Year, known as *Nava Samvatsara*. The same day is also referred to as *Baithaki* or *Ghatasthapana Day*, as mentioned earlier.

Across India, this day is celebrated under different names and according to different customs. Among Telugu and Kannada communities it is known as *Ugadi*; among Maharashtrians as *Gudi Padwa*; in Bengal as *Pohela Boishakh*; among Malayalis as *Vishu*; among Tamils as *Puthandu*; and in Assam as *Rongali Bihu*. In Kashmir it is celebrated as *Navreh* (or *Navroz*), while among Sindhis it is known as *Cheti Chand*. In Gujarat it is generally called *Nav Varsh* or *Nav Samvatsar*, where traditional worship is often accompanied by the joyous performance of Garba. In Odisha it is celebrated as *Pana Sankranti* or the Odia New Year.

Though these festivals differ in name, rituals, offerings, and local customs, they are all observed on the same sacred day: *Chaitra Shukla Pratipada*.

If I continue in this manner, this book may transform into something entirely different from what I intended. So let me stop here.

□

Now, let me speak a little about myself.

For many years, Bai-my mother-taught at the Government Girls' School in Bhan Talaiya, Jabalpur. During those years, while I was still in primary school, I often accompanied her. She taught in the morning

shift, whereas my own school began in the afternoon. After returning home with her, I would set off for my classes. I have described those days in greater detail in *Beginning*.

The school where Bai taught stood very close to Jabalpur's famous *Badi Khermai Temple*. Indeed, it might be more accurate to say that the school existed in the shadow of the temple rather than the other way around. The school's main gate stood less than a quarter of a furlong from the temple's principal entrance on the Hanuman Tal side.

During Navaratri, we would often visit the temple early in the morning before Bai's school began. If we happened to be delayed and missed the morning darshan, we would stop at the temple on our way home after school.

Throughout the nine days of Navaratri, a great fair filled the temple grounds. Anyone familiar with Jabalpur knows how vast the precincts of Badi Khermai Temple are. In those days the temple had two principal gateways-one near Bai's school and another opening onto the road leading toward Ghamapur Chowk. There was also a third approach on the opposite side, though I have no idea what its condition may be today.

Yet my desire to wander through the fair with Bai was rarely fulfilled.

The reason was simple enough: lack of time.

Her school occupied the mornings; mine claimed the afternoons.

Occasionally, when we visited the temple after school, Bai would buy me some small treat to eat. The fair itself I usually explored with my aunt, most often on Maha Ashtami or Navami, when schools were closed. During Sharadiya Navaratri, the long Diwali holidays had already begun in primary and secondary schools.

Those Diwali holidays lasted twenty-four glorious days.

The weather was neither hot nor cold-perfect for children whose chief occupation was playing, roaming, and delighting in their freedom.

When we were in primary school, our days were spent staging improvised Ramlilas, playing games, and narrating film stories to one another. By "film stories" I mean something quite specific. We were seldom allowed to visit the cinema on our own. Either the entire family would go to watch a good film, or a visiting relative might occasionally take us along.

Many relatives from nearby towns and villages would come to Jabalpur solely to see films, and sometimes we benefited from their excursions. Whenever one of us had seen a movie, the others would relentlessly demand a retelling of its story. Narrating a film became an event in itself.

To avoid repeating the tale endlessly, a time and place would be fixed in advance. Everyone would gather, and the fortunate viewer would begin recounting the story with immense pride and theatrical flourish. Particularly memorable dialogues would be delivered in imitation of the actors' voices and mannerisms. The listeners sat wide-eyed and open-mouthed, completely absorbed.

I have both narrated such stories and listened to them, and so I know that magical world very well-a world into which we disappeared as completely as if we had entered the film itself.

Sometimes the enchantment would be broken abruptly when an elder called someone away. It might be the storyteller or one of the listeners; it made little difference. The result was always the same: the programme was postponed until some indefinite "later."

Our adolescence unfolded during a period when cinema and film stars occupied an almost mythical place in public imagination. Perhaps that is why people of my generation-and those slightly older or younger-still find comfort in the misty memories of that enchanted world whenever reality becomes difficult to bear.

At least, I can say so with complete certainty about myself.

Indeed, I have often thought that the subject deserves a chapter of its own, and perhaps one day I shall write it.

When we reached the sixth and seventh standards, the Diwali holidays were spent mostly within the neighbourhood-playing, wandering, running about, and seldom venturing beyond its boundaries. According to the house-group system of Model High School, we belonged to the "Chandra Mandal," and just as the moon circles the earth ceaselessly, our little band of friends seemed forever to orbit the lanes and houses of our locality.

There was, however, one unpleasant aspect to those holidays.

The school assigned an enormous amount of homework.

By the time the holidays arrived, nearly half the academic year had passed, and we were expected to complete almost every exercise from every chapter studied thus far, along with countless additional assignments devised by our teachers.

More than half the holidays would vanish before we even remembered the existence of that work. Then, suddenly, someone would remind us-or memory itself would awaken. At once it felt as though sharp chillies had been dissolved into the waters of the pool of happiness in which I had been swimming for over a week.

I would scramble out at once.

A day or two would pass in mild shock. Then the inevitable truth would dawn there was no escape.

The schoolbag would be opened. The notebooks and textbooks would emerge. And I would reluctantly begin the very work I least wished to do.

What choice was there?

And then Bai's vigilant eyes would turn toward me.

The season of evening study sessions beside her would begin once more. The brief springtime of the first seven or eight holiday days would come to an end.

Every evening, the season of studying beside Bai would begin once more. The brief springtime of the first seven or eight days of the holidays would come to an end. This pattern continued unchanged throughout my middle-school years.

When I was in the eighth standard, electricity finally arrived in our home. Until then, we had all been obliged to sit together around a kerosene lamp while studying. After the electric connection was installed, my brothers, sisters, and I could at last spread out and study separately.

From the ninth standard onward, I began studying at a table and chair. We had a large wooden table and a wooden chair in the house, both of which became mine by default. By then we possessed three chairs in all: one very old iron folding chair that had long ago forgotten how to fold, and two comparatively newer wooden chairs. These were the chairs on which visiting guests were seated.

Our wooden sofa set, woven with cane, was purchased a little later. The cushions were made at home. The cushion covers, as well as the covers for the backs of the sofa and its chairs, were all sewn by Bai herself. We had a foot-operated sewing machine, and such domestic projects invariably occupied Sunday afternoons, after lunch. Babuji participated wholeheartedly in all these activities. In fact, it was usually he who conceived the original design, discussed it with Bai, and then finalized it.

□

As the Diwali holidays drew nearer to their end, my anxiety steadily increased.

In this respect, I was the complete opposite of my son Ankit and my granddaughter Kittu. Both of them seemed eager to rush back to school-Kittu still does, and Ankit certainly did until the twelfth standard. After that he attended college in Bhopal, so I cannot speak for that period. But I never felt anything of the sort.

There was discipline, of course. Moreover, I had been firmly taught that education was the key to success in life. In our neighbourhood there were plenty of older boys and adolescent young men who had either abandoned their studies midway or never pursued them seriously at all. Their habits and circumstances were often enough to convince me of the truth of that maxim.

So, I somehow managed to complete my homework every time.

I lacked entirely the ability to endure public embarrassment and then shrug it off as though nothing had happened. Somehow my teachers discovered this weakness of mine. I have often felt that a true teacher is, after all, a true teacher-he somehow knows what lies both inside and outside his student.

I experienced much the same thing later during my college years. Despite being an extremely introverted student, nearly all my lecturers and professors seemed instinctively aware of this aspect of my nature. Consequently, very few occasions arose when I had to endure harsh criticism.

That said, it is equally true that whatever a teacher says or does is ultimately intended to help a student improve.

A small incident comes to mind.

In the eighth standard, Mrs. Sharma was our class teacher. When the Diwali holidays ended and I submitted my homework notebook for inspection, a portrait of the film actor Manoj Kumar slipped out from between its pages. I had painted it in watercolours during the holidays.

Mrs. Sharma glanced first at the portrait and then at me. Without saying a word, she handed it back.

She was known to be a strict teacher, and students were genuinely afraid of her. I too was certain that some punishment-or at least a cutting remark-was about to follow. In those days, students were not encouraged to discuss films at all. And here I was, not only having

painted a film hero but also foolishly keeping the portrait inside the very notebook my class teacher was about to examine.

Yet nothing happened.

The students seated in the front rows, who had witnessed the entire episode, waited expectantly for the inevitable drama. But there was none. Mrs. Sharma quietly checked my homework and called the next student forward.

As I took back my notebook, I noticed the faintest hint of a smile upon her lips.

I still remember it.

□

I have now brought the Diwali holidays to an end without actually saying much about Diwali itself.

So let me gather a few scattered memories from the corridors of the past and share those that seem worth telling.

Diwali, celebrated each year on the new moon night of Kartik, was the greatest festival observed in our household. Preparations began long before its arrival. The house would be thoroughly cleaned and whitewashed. Framed glass-covered pictures were polished. Babuji would cut stencils and use them to print floral and vine-like patterns on the walls. I have described much of this in greater detail in *Beginning*.

We, too, had firecrackers at Diwali.

Every year Babuji would purchase seven or eight rupees' worth of them. I am speaking of the decade between 1960 and 1970. At that time, seven or eight rupees' worth of firecrackers was more than enough for us children. In fact, some always remained for Dev-Uthani Ekadashi.

Today, as I write these lines in 2024, ten rupees at a fireworks stall would probably buy almost nothing. At best, perhaps a small packet of the tiny crackling pellets we called *chit-piti*.

Most of our neighbours purchased roughly the same quantity-or even less. The only exception was the household of Kandhilal Vishwakarma of *Ram Kutir*. His second son, Kedarnath, was my contemporary. Once he proudly informed me that his family had bought forty-two rupees' worth of firecrackers.

Whether that claim was entirely true, I cannot say. At the time, however, I believed him.

Our fireworks could be contained within a single grain-winnowing basket. Theirs, by contrast, filled a large bamboo hamper.

Oddly enough, I never felt jealous.

Perhaps because Kakka-that is, Kandhilal Ji-would often invite me to join them when they lit their crackers. Though, if memory serves, I accepted the invitation only once or twice.

□

Let me now speak a little about the Diwali worship itself.

As far as I can remember, except for the *Satyanarayan Katha* and the *Hartalika Vrat*, priests were never invited to conduct rituals in our home. The Diwali worship, too, was organized entirely by Bai.

Babuji performed the rituals.

All of us children sat around him in a circle. The aarti was performed by everyone.

During the ceremony, however, Bua would sit quietly in the outer room. At first, I paid no attention to this. Later, when I noticed it, I asked Bai about it. She simply replied, "She will perform it later."

I accepted the explanation.

As I grew older, I came to understand certain things that I would rather not discuss. They belong to customs with which I never truly agreed-even then, though I was too young to express it.

The worship took place in the kitchen.

A low wooden stool was placed upon a *chowk*-a simple ritual design drawn with wheat flour upon a floor freshly coated with cow-dung wash. The image of Goddess Lakshmi and the household deities, seated upon their little throne, were arranged on it.

Around them were gathered fruits, flowers, sweets, sugar confections, colourful clay utensils, a few firecrackers, ritual items, and garlands woven at home from moonlight-white flowers.

All preparations were completed during the day.

The evening meal was cooked in advance: lentils, rice, vegetables, chapatis, papad, puris, semolina halwa, fritters, and other festive dishes.

By seven-thirty or eight o'clock, the worship would begin.

First came the daily household worship-what Bai called "the home puja." Once the familiar *Om Jai Jagdish Hare* aarti had been sung, the Diwali ceremony commenced.

Now it was Goddess Lakshmi's turn.

Water, rice grains, turmeric, vermilion, and flowers were offered once again. This time the offerings included puffed rice, sugar drops, water chestnuts, and homemade delicacies such as *gujiyas*, *besan barfi*, and *andarase*.

Ancient silver coins, Bai's modest collection of jewellery, clay toy utensils, and even a few firecrackers were placed before the goddess and ceremonially worshipped.

Then came another aarti and a fire ritual.

After this followed what Bai called the *Badi Puja*-the "Great Worship."

A fresh ritual design was drawn beside the original one, and a newly purchased earthen storage pot was placed upon it. A bowl of pure melted ghee was prepared.

After coating his palms with ghee, Babuji pressed them upon the wall above the image of Lakshmi-one print above and two below, making three in all. These handprints were known as *hathe*.

They were then worshipped just as the deities had been.

Water, rice grains, turmeric, vermilion, and flowers were offered. Then Babuji would hold the bowl of ghee slightly above the handprints and tilt it against the wall, moving it from left to right. The remaining ghee would trickle down in shining streams until it reached the handprints below.

Every year I watched this process with fascination.

Yet I never asked why there were exactly three handprints.

I vaguely recall Bai mentioning once that they represented the ancestors.

Whenever I think about it now, I wonder whether they symbolized my grandfather and two grandmothers.

Whatever the truth may be, it remains one more unanswered question among the many that life leaves behind.

Which is perhaps why it is said:

Only the Divine is complete;
the rest of us are all unfinished.

The worship of the handprints was followed by the worship of the new earthen pot. Into its Babuji placed cooked food, sweets, puffed rice, sugar confections, and water chestnuts, offering them seven times with cupped hands. The pot was then covered with a clean plate, upon which a large oil lamp was lit.

Finally came another fire ritual and another aarti.

Each member of the family offered oblations into the sacred fire and took turns holding the aarti tray.

At the conclusion, Babuji prostrated himself before Goddess Lakshmi, touching his forehead to the floor. Then came our turn, followed by Bai.

Today I realize that this ceremony was, in essence, a worship of Lakshmi in her form as Annapurna-the Divine Mother who nourishes all beings.

Only after this was Bua called in. She would then perform her own prayers in her own way.

Thus, the Diwali worship came to an end.

The lamps that remained around the altar stayed where they were, while the rest dispersed throughout the house as though light itself were seeking out its own resting places. Seven or eight lamps were arranged along the cement ledge outside; one stood near the sacred basil plant in the courtyard; another in the side passage; one in the wall niche where the household deities resided; and another upon a table in the adjoining room.

Bua and my younger sisters carried out this task quietly, as though repeating an ancient rhythm.

By then Babuji had already partaken of the prasad.

We too were summoned, though our minds were elsewhere. The scent of firecrackers was already drifting through the lane, and to us it was even more irresistible than the offerings of the goddess.

Yet before any fireworks could be lit, prasad had to be distributed among the neighbours.

Covered with spotless cloths or beautiful crocheted covers, the trays were carried carefully from door to door. The lane bustled with festive movement-children in new clothes, bearing plates of sweets and offerings, moving from one household to another.

For a while the exchange continued, and then gradually subsided.

The homes that lay farther away, beyond the neighbourhood, received their share the following day.

After all, Diwali was never merely a single evening. It unfolded across at least five days: Dhanteras, Chhoti Diwali, the main Diwali night, Govardhan Puja, and finally Bhai Dooj-a garland of celebrations around which colourful shadows of joy seemed to dance without end.

□

After this came the part of the evening that truly belonged to us children-the lighting of firecrackers.

Soon the entire lane would erupt into bursts of sound and light. The festivities invariably began with sparklers. From there we progressed to flowerpots, ground-spinners, hand-held spinners, coloured flares, and similar delights. Eventually the evening would advance to rockets and arrows, and then to small crackers, Lakshmi bombs, and the dreaded Atom Bombs. There was also a particularly noisy variety known as the *Patak Bomb*. A few of the older and more mischievous boys in the neighbourhood delighted in hurling these onto the road as they walked, setting off explosions wherever they went.

The youngest children remained securely in their mothers' arms. Their mothers would stand just inside their doorways, infants pressed against their chests, peering out from time to time at the spectacle outside. Slightly older children occupied themselves with sparklers and tiny crackling pellets. Older still were entrusted with strings of small crackers. Beyond them came those who lit flowerpots, spinning wheels, and larger firecrackers. The oldest boys launched rockets from empty glass bottles and experimented with the biggest and loudest explosives they could find.

The girls generally remained a little behind the boys in these pursuits. Some families discouraged them from participating, while others held back of their own accord, intimidated by the noise and danger.

For three or four hours the neighbourhood echoed with thunderous celebration. Even after midnight, distant explosions continued to punctuate the silence, and the sounds of fireworks drifted across the city until one or two in the morning.

The next day invariably brought news of which child or adolescent had been injured while bursting crackers.

One such incident involved my childhood friend Anil Dubey.

On one occasion he decided to launch a rocket directly from his hand. Unfortunately, the rocket did not leave his grip at the right moment. Or perhaps it never left his hand at all-someone else may ultimately have released it. By then, however, the fire had already done its work. For the next twenty-five days he wandered about with blisters extending from his palm almost to his elbow, proudly declaring, "I always launch rockets from my hand. I don't know why this one refused to leave me."

At the time we were in the sixth or seventh standard.

Another story involving Anil belongs to our ninth- or tenth-standard years.

By then we had largely outgrown the excitement of bursting firecrackers ourselves. What we enjoyed more was strolling through the neighbourhood, admiring the decorations people had created and watching others celebrate. Sometimes we would ride our bicycles far from home. During college days it almost became compulsory to venture into the city centre after the evening worship.

The incident I am about to recount occurred during one such Diwali.

Anil arrived at our house while making his rounds. He was wearing a fine *kosa* silk kurta belonging to his father, along with white pyjamas. My younger brothers and sisters were busy lighting fireworks, while I was pacing up and down the lane, waiting for him so that we could set out together.

My younger sister Amita was trying, rather nervously, to light a coloured flare from a lamp.

Anil took it from her hand.

"You'll never light it if you're so scared," he said. "Give it here and let me show you."

He stepped forward toward the lamp.

Unfortunately, he stepped a little too close.

The loose front of his silk kurta brushed against the flame and instantly caught fire.

For a few terrifying seconds a sheet of fire flared up before everyone's eyes. Before anyone could react, it had already burnt itself out.

Only after those few bewildering moments passed did we fully comprehend what had happened.

The entire front portion of the kurta had vanished.

The vest underneath was plainly visible.

Miraculously, Anil himself had not suffered a single burn.

For a while we simply stood there, trying to absorb the absurdity of the situation. Once the shock subsided, we found ourselves uncertain whether to mourn the destruction of the kurta or celebrate the fact that Anil had escaped unharmed.

In the end, gratitude prevailed.

The kurta had been sacrificed; Anil had not.

□

The day after Diwali-that is, the first day of the bright fortnight of Kartik-comes *Govardhan Puja*, also known as *Annakut*.

The central purpose of this festival is to express gratitude toward nature, the environment, and the animals that sustain human life.

The festival is associated with one of the most beloved episodes from the life of Lord Krishna.

According to tradition, the people of Braj once worshipped Indra, the king of heaven. Krishna persuaded them that their reverence should instead be directed toward Govardhan Hill, which nourished their cattle, sustained their livelihood, and protected the natural environment upon which they depended.

When the people ceased worshipping Indra, the offended god unleashed torrential rains upon Braj. To protect the villagers and their animals, Krishna lifted the entire Govardhan Hill upon the little finger of his hand and held it aloft as a shelter.

Legend says that Indra's pride was humbled by this act, and he eventually sought forgiveness. From that time onward arose the tradition of honouring mountains, nature, and cattle through this festival.

In our own home, figures representing Govardhan Hill, the sun, the moon, stars, clouds, and trees were fashioned from cow dung in the backyard. Several women from the neighbourhood would gather together to perform the worship. The ceremony generally took place during the first half of the day.

The following day was *Bhai Dooj*.

And with that, let us bring the Diwali chapter to a close.

No doubt the subject will return again somewhere further along these pages.

□

Eleven days after Diwali, on the Ekadashi of the bright fortnight of Kartik, comes the festival known as *Dev Uthani Gyaras*-the day when the gods are believed to awaken.

The four months preceding this day-from the Ekadashi of the bright fortnight of Ashadha until Dev Uthani Gyaras-are known as *Chaturmas*.

According to tradition, Lord Vishnu remains in yogic slumber during these four months. Consequently, no major auspicious undertakings are initiated during this period. Weddings, for instance, generally resume only after Dev Uthani Gyaras.

This arrangement, I suspect, was rooted in practical wisdom.

The four months in question coincide with the rainy season. When this custom first evolved, heavy rains, floods, and damaged roads must have severely disrupted daily life. Organising celebrations and ceremonies under such conditions would have been extremely difficult. Perhaps our ancestors devised this religious framework as a way of postponing major social events until the weather became favourable once again.

Even today, many monks, ascetics, and spiritual teachers spend these four months in a temple, monastery, or the home of a devotee, avoiding travel altogether.

Whatever its origins, the end of the rainy season is marked by the joyful festival of Dev Uthani Gyaras.

The worship performed on this day centres upon the sacred feet of Lord Vishnu.

In our home, Babuji would prepare a thick paste of sandalwood and carefully paint Vishnu's footprints upon a thoroughly washed metal plate. Around them he would add auspicious symbols and decorative floral designs.

These sandalwood footprints themselves became the object of worship.

Sugarcane was an essential offering and was revered almost as much as the deity. In many households, the ceremonial marriage of Lord

Vishnu in his Shaligram form to the sacred Tulsi plant is also performed on this day.

Anil Dubey's mother conducted this symbolic wedding every year.

She would plaster the entire house with a fresh coating of cow dung and decorate it with beautiful designs made from *chhui* clay, a naturally white earth used for ritual decoration. From the courtyard tulsi plant to the indoor shrine where the Shaligram rested, she would create a ceremonial pathway using the same white clay.

Two parallel lines, six or eight inches apart, stretched from the tulsi altar across the courtyard, through the veranda, and into the inner room. Between them ran short crosslines at regular intervals, making the path resemble a bamboo ladder.

In our house, however, only Vishnu's footprints were worshipped.

As with most Hindu rituals, sandalwood, turmeric, rice grains, flowers, and sacred leaves formed the essential offerings. Seasonal fruits such as guavas, water chestnuts, custard apples, jujubes, and sweet potatoes were also presented, along with betel leaves and areca nuts. Puffed rice, sugar confections, and sweets completed the offerings.

Oil lamps were lit on this day as well, and firecrackers once again made their appearance.

The next morning the sugarcane was cut into pieces and distributed among us children. We would either peel it directly with our teeth and chew the sweet fibres, or Bai and Bua would prepare neat little sticks for us with the help of a traditional cutter.

In essence, Dev Uthani Gyaras marked the awakening not only of Lord Vishnu but of all the gods. With their awakening, social life too seemed to awaken. Weddings, ceremonies, and communal celebrations once again filled the calendar.

And so, even today, this ancient tradition continues to live on among followers of Sanatana Dharma, linking the rhythms of human society to the rhythms of the sacred universe.



After Kartik comes the month of *Margashirsha*, also known as *Aghan*. In Hindu tradition, this month is regarded as a manifestation of Lord Krishna Himself. It was on the Ekadashi of the bright fortnight of this month that Lord Krishna delivered the immortal teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

In the thirty-fifth verse of the tenth chapter of the *Gita*, Krishna declares:

"बृहत्साम तथा साम्नां गायत्री छन्दसामहम्।
मासानां मार्गशीर्षोऽहम् ऋतुनां कुसुमाकरः।।"

Which means:

"Among hymns I am the Brihatsama; among metres I am the Gayatri.
Among months I am Margashirsha, and among seasons I am the spring."

The fifth day of the bright fortnight of this month is celebrated as the anniversary of the divine wedding of Lord Rama and Mother Sita. The occasion is known as *Vivaha Panchami*. The Ekadashi of the same fortnight is observed as *Gita Jayanti*. According to tradition-as mentioned earlier-it was on this day that Lord Krishna imparted the teachings of the Gita to Arjuna. This Ekadashi is also known as *Mokshada Ekadashi*.

According to the *Rudra Samhita* of the *Shiva Purana*, the marriage of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati also took place on the second day of the dark fortnight of Margashirsha.

None of these occasions, however, were marked by any special ceremonies or observances in our home. Yet since the *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the most important scriptures of our civilization, and since both Lord Rama and Lord Shiva are among our most revered deities, it seemed appropriate to include these references here.

After Aghan comes the month of *Pausha*, the tenth month of the Hindu calendar. It is the first month of winter, a season marked by

deepening cold and the stillness of Hemanta. The word *Pausha* is associated both with festivity and with struggle. In the Gregorian calendar, it generally falls across December and January.

Many festivals and sacred observances occur during this month, but the most important among them is undoubtedly *Makar Sankranti*, which usually falls on the 14th or 15th of January.

This festival is celebrated on the day the Sun enters the zodiac sign of Capricorn (*Makara*). According to ancient belief:

"On this day, Lord Bhaskara-the Sun God-visits the house of his son, Shani. Since Saturn is the presiding deity of Capricorn, the occasion is known as Makar Sankranti. Tradition also holds that it was on this day that the sacred river Ganga followed King Bhagiratha and finally reached the ocean after passing through the hermitage of Sage Kapila."

Whenever the Sun moves from one zodiac sign into another, the transition is called a *Sankranti*. According to the Hindu calendar, there are twelve such transitions every year. Among them, the Sankrantis associated with Aries, Cancer, Libra, and Capricorn are considered especially significant.

At its core, Sankranti is an astronomical phenomenon.

The Earth revolves around the Sun with an axial tilt of approximately twenty-three and a half degrees. Because of this inclination, the Sun's rays strike different regions of the Earth at varying angles throughout the year. Four times annually, however, certain important alignments occur. One of these takes place when the Sun's rays fall directly upon the Tropic of Capricorn. This event is known as *Makar Sankranti*.

In two of the other alignments, the Sun's rays fall directly upon the Equator, while in another they fall directly upon the Tropic of Cancer.

Within the Sanatana tradition, Makar Sankranti is accorded special importance because it marks the Sun's northward journey-its transition from *Dakshinayana* to *Uttarayana*. Symbolically and

seasonally, it signals the gradual retreat of winter and the approach of warmer days.

Makar Sankranti is also celebrated as the *Festival of Kites*. Across western and northern India, skies fill with brightly coloured kites dancing in the winter sunlight. In many regions, sweets made from sesame seeds and jaggery are prepared and shared. For this reason, the festival is sometimes called *Til Sankranti*.

In our own home, Bai would lovingly prepare sesame-seed laddoos for the occasion.

In southern India, especially in Tamil Nadu, Makar Sankranti is celebrated as *Pongal*. The festival is observed over four days with great enthusiasm: *Bhogi Pongal*, *Surya Pongal*, *Mattu Pongal*, and *Kanya Pongal*.

In Kerala it is known as *Makara Vilakku*, when devotees gather near the Sabarimala temple to witness the sacred *Makara Jyoti*. In Karnataka it is called *Ellu-Birodhu*.

In Bihar and much of northern India it is popularly known as *Khichdi*, after the traditional dish of rice and black lentils eaten on the day. In Gujarat and Rajasthan, it is celebrated as *Uttarayan*, and nowhere is it observed with greater splendour than in Gujarat, where magnificent kite festivals transform the sky into a moving tapestry of colour. In Punjab and Haryana, the occasion is associated with *Lohri* and *Maghi*, with Lohri being celebrated on the eve of Makar Sankranti.

The essential spirit of the festival remains the same everywhere: worship of the Sun and gratitude for the arrival of a new harvest. It is, above all, a festival of winter and renewal.

After Pausha comes the month of *Magha*, corresponding roughly to January and February, and forming the eleventh month of the Vedic calendar.

No particular festival from this month connects directly with my personal memories. Certainly, the calendar offers many observances and sacred dates, but in my recollection, Magha is associated chiefly

with biting cold and the steadily approaching terror of annual examinations.

A couple of old sayings do, however, come to mind:

"माघ पूस की बादरी और कुवार का घाम,
इन सब को झेल कर करे पराया काम।"

(In other words, employment is no easy matter. One must endure winter rain, scorching heat, and every hardship that the seasons bring while carrying out
another person's work.

Another saying goes:

"माघ का जाड़ा जेठ की धूप, बड़े कष्ट से उपजे ऊख।"

(The meaning is simple enough: a good crop of sugarcane demands patience

and endurance through winter's chill as well as summer's fierce heat.)

Perhaps these proverbs have no particularly logical place here. But then, how much in life is truly logical?

The mention of Magha simply summoned them from memory. Between the blazing sun of Jeth and the freezing wind of Magha lies the whole spectrum of existence. One extreme stands opposite the other, and somehow, we are expected to create harmony between them. Such, after all, is life-stretched untidily from one shore to another.

Perhaps neither Magha nor Jeth understands this balance.

Perhaps not even the One who created them.

But enough of these forced philosophical wanderings. Pay them no attention.

Now we arrive at the final month of the year-*Phalguna*, or *Phagun*.

An entire book could be written about Phagun.

Indeed, many books already have been.

Whether in Hindi, Urdu, Persian, English, or countless other languages, poets have sung its praises for centuries. It would be difficult to name a language in which the glory of Phagun has not found expression.

Its significance is beautifully captured in a famous bhajan of Meerabai:

"फागुन के दिन चार रे, होली खेल मना।"

(The days of Phagun are but four-come, celebrate the Holi of life.)

The verses that follow are even more evocative:

बिन करताल पखावज बाजै, अणहद की झनकार रे।
बिन सुर राग छतीसूं गावै, रोम-रोम रणकार रे ।।
सील संतोख की केसर घोली, प्रेम-प्रीत पिचकार रे ।
उड़त गुलाल लाल भयो अंबर, बरसत रंग अपार रे ।।
घट के पट सब खोल दिए हैं, लोकलाज सब डार रे।
'मीरा' के प्रभु गिरिधर नागर, चरण कँवल बलिहार रे ।।

(Without cymbals or drums, the unstruck music resounds.
Without melody or scale, every pore of the body sings.
Saffron is mixed from virtue and contentment,
and the water-syringe is filled with love.
Crimson gulal fills the sky,
colours rain down without measure.
Every curtain within the heart is thrown open,
and all concern for worldly opinion is cast aside.
Meera offers herself completely
at the lotus feet of Giridhar.)

Though Meera addresses these words to her own innermost self, the message belongs to all of us.

As for me, I have gradually come to feel that it is not merely Phagun that should be celebrated as a season of joy; life itself is Phagun.

A celebrated couplet comes to mind:

"उम्र-ए-दराज़ माँग के लाए थे चार दिन,
दो आरज़ू में कट गए दो इंतिज़ार में।"

"Umr-e-daraz maang ke laaye the chaar din,
Do arzoo mein kat gaye, do intezaar mein."

(I had begged for a long life and received but four brief days;
two were spent in desire, and two in waiting).

The couplet is commonly attributed to the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, though according to *Rekhta* it was actually composed by Seemab Akbarabadi and recited by him at a mushaira in Aligarh. It also appeared in his 1947 collection *Kaleem-e-Ajam*. Yet whatever its true authorship, its beauty remains unquestionable.

The meaning of the verse is widely understood, but certain truths grow more beautiful each time they are heard.

When the poet says, *"I asked for a long life and received four days,"* he reminds us that even the longest human life is, in the eyes of eternity, scarcely more than a fleeting moment. Measured against the vastness of creation, our existence is no more than four brief days-fragile, passing, and precious beyond measure.

"Two of those days were spent nurturing desires, and the other two passed in waiting for those desires to be fulfilled."

In these few words lies an entire philosophy of life.

Of the four brief days that constitute a human lifetime, two are consumed by the birth of new wishes, fresh hopes, and endless longings. The remaining two vanish in waiting for those wishes to come true.

The couplet speaks of life's impermanence and its fleeting nature. It reminds us that human beings spend their entire lives chasing desires and expectations, only to discover, often too late, that the journey itself has already come to an end.

The pain of unfulfilled longings and the relentless passage of time are woven into these lines with such simplicity and depth that they remain timeless.

"Life lasts but four days."

How ancient this thought is. How many times it has been spoken and heard. Yet every time it returns, it seems to arrive through a new window.

Indeed, before the vastness of this boundless universe, how small a human life really is.

So small that some have compared it to a dewdrop, others to a bubble upon water. Perhaps both metaphors are equally apt, for each contains the same truth-the truth of transience. The beauty of things that do not last and are perhaps precious precisely because they do not.

While we dream of our ambitions and imagine their fulfilment, life itself slips away through our fingers like sand.

This couplet was written much later. Long before it, however, Meera had already sung:

"फागुन के दिन चार रे, होली खेल मना।"

(The days of Phagun are but four-come, celebrate the Holi of life.)

It is Meera's vision that feels closer to my heart.

If life is truly so brief, why should it not be lived according to one's deepest longing? Why should one not desire-with complete sincerity, complete abandon, and complete surrender?

Without worrying whether the object of that desire will ever be attained.

For longing itself is an experience.

Its joy is not necessarily less than the joy of attainment.

Indeed, there are times when the intoxication of desire, the sweetness of anticipation, the act of waiting, the immersion in dreams and

imaginings, becomes deeper and more meaningful than fulfilment itself.

Look at Meera.

She speaks not the language of results, but the language of surrender.

She speaks of immersion-of sinking so completely into love that, little by little, one forgets the world and all its rules, conventions, and boundaries. One even begins to forget oneself. Social expectations, pride, honour, gain, loss-everything falls away.

Only a single longing remains.

A longing so profound that the person immersed within it gradually forgets his own existence.

And perhaps this is the ultimate meaning of love, devotion, or any profound attachment-to arrive at that point where the distinction between the lover and the beloved slowly begins to dissolve.

As Amir Khusro wrote:

खुसरो दरिया प्रेम का, उल्टी वा की धार।
जो उतरा सो डूब गया, जो डूबा सो पार।।

- अमीर खुसरो

(Khusro says: Love is a river whose current flows upstream.
Whoever merely enters it is drowned; whoever truly drowns crosses over.)

But let us move on.

Philosophy and poetry have once again appeared unexpectedly in the middle of the road.

Then again, if there is no poetry in life, life becomes barren.

So, poetry will continue to come and go.

Sometimes we understand it; sometimes we do not. It arrives quietly, loosens the knots of our confusions just enough to make them

bearable, and then slips away. More often than not, we scarcely notice either its arrival or its departure.

□

The month of *Phagun* is the final month of the Vedic year.

According to the Gregorian calendar, it falls roughly during February and March.

The month contains numerous festivals, fasts, observances, and sacred occasions according to Vedic tradition. Many such observances recur every month, and countless people who believe in ritual and religious practice continue to observe them faithfully.

I shall speak only of two major festivals:

Maha Shivaratri and *Holi*.

Maha Shivaratri might once have been regarded primarily as a festival of the Shaivites, and in one sense it still is. Yet today the ordinary followers of Sanatana Dharma no longer appear sharply divided into Shaivas, Vaishnavas, and Shaktas. Most devotees worship Vishnu, Rama, Krishna, Shiva, and the Divine Mother with equal reverence.

In Jabalpur, Maha Shivaratri has always been celebrated with great enthusiasm.

One tradition holds that this was the day on which Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati were married. Other associates it with the *Samudra Manthana*-the Churning of the Ocean-when Shiva drank the deadly poison that emerged from the cosmic waters and became *Neelkantha*, the Blue-Throated One.

It is in remembrance of these sacred events that Maha Shivaratri is observed.

In our home, both Bai and Bua observed the fast and would visit the Shiva shrine situated near the old stepwell in Krishna Colony, Ghamapur.

From the early hours of the morning, devotional songs would begin playing over loudspeakers. The day's musical proceedings almost invariably opened with a familiar song:

"आ गयी महा शिव रात्रि पधारो शंकर जी. . . ."

(Maha Shivaratri has arrived-come, O Lord Shankar, come...)

The song continued:

''आ गई महाशिवरात्रि पधारो शंकर जी,हो
पधारो शंकर जी. . . .
आ गई महाशिवरात्रि पधारो शंकर जी. . . .
आरती उतारें पार उतारो शंकर जी हो पधारो शंकर जी।
तुम नैन नैन में हो मन मन में धाम तेरा,
हे नीलकंठ है कंठ कंठ में नाम तेरा
ओ देवों के देव जगत के प्यारो शंकर जी. . . .
आ गई महा शिवरात्रि हो पधारो शंकर जी।
तुम राजमहल में तुम्हीं भिखारी के घर में,
धरती पर तेरे चरण, मुकुट है अंबर में,
ओ संसार तुम्हारो एक हमारो शंकर जी, हो पधारो शंकर जी. . . .
आ गई महाशिवरात्रि पधारो शंकर जी।
तुम दुनिया बसा कर भस्म रमाने वाले हो
पापी के भी रखवाले भोले भाले हो
ओ दुखियों में भी दो दिन तो गुज़ारो शंकर जी,
हो पधारो शंकर जी. . . .
आ गई महाशिवरात्रि पधारो शंकर जी. . . .''

Maha Shivaratri has arrived, come, O Lord Shankar.
Accept our worship and carry us across life's ocean...

You dwell in every eye and every heart.
O Neelkantha, your name lives in every throat.
Beloved Lord of gods and men, come, O Shankar...

You are present in royal palaces and in the huts of beggars.
The earth lies beneath Your feet, the heavens form Your crown.
The entire universe is Yours, and so are we...

You create the world and yet adorn Yourself with sacred ash.
Protector even of sinners, innocent and compassionate Lord-
spend a few days among the sorrowful too...

(The song was written by Gopal Singh Nepali for the film Shivaratri, composed by Chitragupta, and sung by Asha Bhosle along with accompanying vocalists.)

The Shiva shrine I mentioned earlier stood upon a large stone platform. At its centre was the Shiva Lingam, surrounded by stone images of Goddess Parvati, Lord Ganesha, Lord Kartikeya, Nandi, and other attendant figures.

I have described the shrine in greater detail in *Beginning*.

Today a proper temple may have been built over it.

In those days, a grand procession known as *Shiva Ji ki Baraat*-the Wedding Procession of Lord Shiva-was taken through the Belbagh area of Jabalpur. Nowadays similar processions are perhaps organised in several places across the city. The one passing through Khatik Mohalla is said to be particularly magnificent.

Let us assume, then, that the celestial wedding of Shiva and Parvati has been solemnized.

Who does not know that extraordinary tale?

And who am I to attempt a worthy retelling of it?

Lord Shiva departs with Goddess Parvati to His abode on Mount Kailash.

And so, I return to my own story.

□

Now we come to *Holi*.

Whatever else may be said, our ancestors possessed remarkable wisdom.

They arranged the entire year with such thoughtful care that the festivals seem not merely human inventions but natural outgrowths of the seasons themselves.

The arrival of crops, the availability of fruits and flowers, the condition of our homes and surroundings, the effects of changing weather upon body and mind-all these factors appear to have been carefully considered while determining the timing and manner of each festival.

Take Diwali, for example.

After the monsoon, houses needed repairs. Walls were damaged, roofs leaked, courtyards accumulated moss and mud, weeds sprang up everywhere, and months of rain left behind disorder and decay. Diwali became the season for cleaning, repairing, repainting, and renewing.

Similarly, Holi arrives just as winter loosens its grip and the air begins to soften with warmth. The festival of colours belongs naturally to that moment of transition.

The timing of both Chaitra and Sharadiya Navaratri likewise coincides with seasonal change.

All these customs seem to reflect a deeply organized vision of social life-one carefully structured by our ancestors and preserved almost unchanged for thousands of years.

And now, finally, let us return to Holi.

The word *Holi* is believed to have evolved from *Holaka*.

Holaka refers to partially ripened grain.

The lexicon *Shabdakalpadruma* records:

"तृणाग्निभृष्ट: अर्धपक्वशमीधान्यं होलक:"

Which means:

> "Grain-bearing pods, half-ripened and roasted
> in a fire of dry straw, are called *hola* or *holaka*."

Even today, we roast fresh green chickpeas in their pods over an open fire and eat them in much the same way.

Perhaps that simple act still preserves a memory of the festival's oldest origins-a celebration of the earth's first harvest, of grain not yet fully mature, and of humanity's ancient gratitude toward the cycles of nature.

The roasted green grain thus prepared is known as *hora* or *hola*.

This, in fact, was how Holi was celebrated in the Vedic age.

The festival originally marked the joy of roasting and eating the season's half-ripened grain on the full moon day of Phalguna, while rejoicing at the sight of fields heavy with crops almost ready for harvest. Beginning on *Vasant Panchami*, people would gather wood and other combustible materials in an open ground. These were eventually set ablaze on the full moon night of Phalguna-the final day of the year. This ritual was known as *Holi Jalana* or *Samvat Jalana*, the burning of the old year.

The partially ripened grain was roasted in this sacred fire. Men and women welcomed the approaching harvest season with song, dance, and celebration, anticipating the days of abundance that lay ahead.

Scholars believe that the story of the devotee Prahlad was attached to this festival at a later stage. The tale is familiar to almost all of us, yet there is no harm in revisiting it once more.

According to the legend, there lived a demon king named Hiranyakashipu, ruler of a place known as Hiranyakaran Forest. His younger brother was Hiranyaksha, who had been slain by Lord Vishnu in His Varaha incarnation. Hiranyakashipu's elder brothers were Vajranga, Aruna, and Hayagriva. Hayagriva had been killed by Vishnu in His Matsya incarnation, while Aruna met his end at the hands of Goddess Parvati in her Bhramari form.

Hiranyakashipu's wife was Kayadhu, and his younger sister was Holika. He had four sons-Prahlad, Anuhlad, Sahlad, and Hlad-the eldest being Prahlad and the youngest Hlad.

Prahlad was an ardent devotee of Lord Vishnu.

This devotion, however, was intolerable to Hiranyakashipu. Again and again he forbade Prahlad from worshipping Vishnu, but the boy remained steadfast. Enraged, the king made repeated attempts to kill him, yet every effort failed.

Finally, he sought the assistance of his sister Holika.

Holika, who was married to the demon Viprachitti, possessed a magical garment granted by Lord Brahma-a garment said to be immune to fire.

The plan seemed foolproof.

Holika wrapped herself in the enchanted cloth, took Prahlad onto her lap, and entered a blazing fire. Yet, through the grace of Lord Vishnu, events unfolded in exactly the opposite manner. Holika was consumed by the flames, while Prahlad emerged unharmed.

Later, Hiranyakashipu himself was slain by Lord Vishnu in His Narasimha incarnation.

If I were to begin recounting the story of Narasimha as well, this narrative would become far longer than intended. So let us leave it there.

In essence, Holi has become one of the greatest festivals of those who are today known as Hindus. It is celebrated at the end of the month

of Phalguna, at the threshold of spring, on the first day of the dark fortnight of Chaitra.

The festival is, in reality, a two-day celebration.

The first day is *Holika Dahan*, observed on the full moon day of Phalguna-the final day of the Vedic year.

Beneath the gentle, cool, and sacred light of the full moon, the burning of Holika symbolically represents the destruction of everything impure accumulated over the course of the year: harmful thoughts, bitterness of heart, malice in behaviour, and the stains that gather upon the soul.

It is true that the new Vedic year does not begin immediately on the following day, and I have already explained the reasons for that elsewhere.

The first formal step toward Holi, however, is the planting of the ceremonial pole or banner. This is traditionally done on Vasant Panchami, either in a public space or in the courtyard of a home. Around this pole, wood is gradually collected for the future Holika fire.

From that very day, people begin gathering in the evenings to sing the traditional songs of Holi-*Phag*, *Phagua*, and *Hori*. Though this custom has nearly vanished from cities, it continues to survive in many rural regions.

On the day of Holika Dahan, bonfires are prepared at crossroads and public spaces wherever the wood has been collected. The pyres are made primarily of logs and dried cow-dung cakes.

In several regions, especially in Rajasthan, there is an additional custom involving *bharbholiyas*. These are circular cow-dung cakes with a hole in the centre. A string made of *munj* grass is passed through them to form a garland. Each garland contains seven such cakes.

Before the garland is consigned to the flames, sisters circle it seven times over the heads of their brothers and then cast it into the fire.

According to popular belief, this ritual burns away any evil influences or ill fortune that may have attached themselves to the brothers.

From midday onward, formal worship of the Holika pyre begins. Offerings of homemade sweets and festive foods are made. At sunset, the bonfire is lit at an astrologically determined auspicious moment.

Into these flames are placed fresh ears of wheat and green chickpeas from the new harvest, which are roasted and shared.

With the burning of Holika, the festival itself truly begins.

Songs continue late into the night, and people dance and celebrate around the fire.

The following day-*Chaitra Krishna Pratipada*-is celebrated as *Holi*, *Hori*, or *Dhuledi*.

On this day, distinctions disappear.

Old grudges are forgotten. Quarrels are set aside. Even enemies become friends.

It is, in its own way, another festival celebrating the victory of truth over falsehood.

For what greater falsehood can there be than hostility, and what greater truth than love?

People shower one another with colours and scented powders. They laugh, joke, and indulge in playful mischief. Relationships such as those between a younger brother-in-law and his sister-in-law, or a brother-in-law and his wife's younger sister, acquire an added sparkle in the atmosphere of Holi.

Conversations that had long remained incomplete, spoken only through glances and half-smiles, often seem to find their conclusion beneath clouds of colour and abir.

How many tentative romances, concealed behind the thin veil of custom and hesitation, find a fleeting fulfilment beneath the drifting gulal, transforming ordinary young men and women into Radha and Krishna for a day.

The symbolic meaning of Holi is joy itself-happiness, celebration, and release.

The ancient *Madanotsava* or *Vasantotsava*-the Festival of Love and Spring-survives today in this very form.

At this point, a delightful ghazal by Bharatendu Harishchandra comes to mind.

Before it slips away from memory, let me set it down here.

गले मुझ को लगा लो ऐ मिरे दिलदार होली में
बुझे दिल की लगी भी तो ऐ मेरे यार होली में |

नहीं ये है गुलाल-ए-सुर्ख़ उड़ता हर जगह प्यारे
ये आशिक़ की है उमड़ी आह-ए-आतिश-बार होली में |

गुलाबी गाल पर कुछ रंग मुझ को भी जमाने दो
मनाने दो मुझे भी जान-ए-मन त्योहार होली |

'रसा' गर जाम-ए-मय ग़ैरों को देते हो तो मुझ को भी
नशीली आँख दिखला कर करो सरशार होली में |

- भारतेंदु हरिश्चंद्र।

(Embrace me, O my beloved, in this Holi -
that the fire in my heart be quenched, O friend, in this Holi.

That red mist swirling everywhere, my love, is not mere powder -
it is the lover's sigh, surging and ablaze, in this Holi.

Let me, too, set a little color upon those rose-pink cheeks -
let me, too, O beloved of my soul, partake of this Holi.

Rasa says: if you pour the cup of wine for others,
then drown me too - with one intoxicating glance, in this Holi.)

-Bhartendu harishchandra

The discussion of Holi has perhaps already gone a little beyond what was necessary. Even so, what I have written so far is more in the nature of an essay-like account of the festival. But where am I in all of this Holi?

Let me step into the picture as well.

In my earliest childhood, on the morning of Holi, Father would take my younger sister and me to the Holika pyre erected in front of Kamla Bua's house. In those days there used to be three or four Holika bonfires in the vicinity of our home. One stood near the end of our lane, in front of Kamla Bua's house, which I have just mentioned. Another was set up in the open space beside Anil's house. This one was known as "Sohan's Holi," because Sohan himself managed almost all its arrangements. Though much older than us, he happened to be our classmate. I have already spoken about him in *Aarambh*. Later, he abandoned his studies. A third Holika was erected across the drain, in front of Daniel Masih's house. There may have been a fourth one in the open ground near Ravi Nikhare's home, though my memory of that is uncertain.

Father would take us very early in the morning to the smouldering remains of the Holika in front of Kamla Bua's house, where half-burnt logs still glowed beneath the ashes. My younger sister and I would carry garlands made of cow-dung cakes called *bharbholiyas*. Father would hold a bamboo stick, to the tip of which three or four ears of wheat had been tied. Where he procured these ears of wheat at that season, I do not know; perhaps they were sold in the market.

After a brief worship of the Holika, the garland of *bharbholiyas* would be offered to the fire. Father would then roast the wheat ears in the lingering heat of the embers. Offering a silent prayer to Lord Vishnu,

we would return home. The roasted grains of wheat were distributed among all members of the family as sacred prasad.

After breakfast-usually tea and parathas-a metal bucket would be filled with coloured water for us. A day or two earlier Father would have bought new plastic water-guns. Armed with these, we would stand on the strip of land in front of our house and spray coloured water on passers-by. Most of them were familiar faces from the neighbourhood, people we saw every day. They would smile indulgently at us. Some would make a playful attempt to dodge the spray and run away, which amused us greatly. Occasionally someone would cast an annoyed glance from a distance and hurry past; we would then aim at them from behind, though the colour seldom reached its target and merely splashed onto the road.

Gradually other neighbourhood children would join us, and a lively game of colouring one another would begin. The older and stronger children often overwhelmed the younger ones with colour. Sometimes there would be quarrels, snatching, shouting, tears, and complaints. Then an elder would intervene, restore peace, and the revelry would resume.

This continued until we were no longer counted simply among "children" but had begun to be classified as "boys" and "girls." Such distinctions generally emerged after the fifth standard. Thereafter, boys and girls celebrated Holi in separate groups. This arrangement was carefully enforced by the stern elders of the neighbourhood, who kept a vigilant eye on matters.

By then Anil and I had largely stopped playing Holi in the old way. We would simply wander about the locality, watching people of all ages celebrate and enjoying the spectacle. We usually carried a small packet of gulal with us. Whenever we met an elderly person, we would apply a little colour to them, touch their feet, and receive their blessings. By this time, we had acquired the reputation of being the neighbourhood's "ideal boys," and we tried our best to preserve that image. Of course, our conversations were not always as innocent and

virtuous as our reputation suggested. After all, we too were ordinary boys stepping into adolescence.

Some of our friends, however, particularly the rough-and-ready ones, continued to celebrate Holi with great enthusiasm. By then they had abandoned colours and water-guns in favour of mud, paint, and other more unruly materials. As for the older boys and the manner in which they celebrated Holi, I have already described that in detail in the chapter "Neighbours" in *Aarambh*.

I shall refrain from saying more about Holi here; otherwise, this chapter may wander beyond all bounds.

Let me now turn to some other festivals which still return to my memory in precisely the same colours and forms in which they were celebrated in our home during those years.

One such festival was Raksha Bandhan.

Ever since I can remember, I have been tied rakhi threads. First, it was Anita and Amita (Guddo), both younger than me. A few years later came Ashima (Namita), and two or three years after her, Anima (Pappi). The ceremony always took place at home. Mother would first perform worship and offer a rakhi to the household deity. Then, one by one, my four sisters would place a tilak on my forehead, tie a rakhi on my wrist, and feed me sweets.

When my younger brother Atul was born, he too became part of the celebration. He was younger than Anita and Amita but older than Ashima and Anima.

Until I obtained employment, the festival continued in this manner without interruption. Afterwards, however, there were many occasions when I could not obtain leave from work. Then rakhis, delicately decorated with touches of turmeric and rice grains, would arrive by post. Along with them would come a letter written in Mother's beautiful handwriting, filled with affection, blessings, and good wishes.

A few girls from the neighbourhood also used to tie rakhi to me. One of them was Ramsakhi. Bua would take me to her house, where she would tie a rakhi on my wrist. She was about a year or a year and a half younger than I was, and her family lived in the enclosure behind our house. Her parents, whose names I have now forgotten, were among the oldest residents of Ghamapur. Father and Bua had known them for many years, long before either of them was married.

Like Ramsakhi, the two daughters of Randhir Singh Thakur also tied rakhi to me. They would come to our house after dusk. The elder daughter, Pushpa, was perhaps two years younger than I was, while the younger one-whose name I no longer remember-was at least another year and a half or two years younger than her sister. Their mother and my mother had undergone B.Ed. training together, and the family lived near our house, close to the inner end of our lane.

The entire family would visit us in the evening. Even after the rakhi ceremony they would remain with us for a long time, talking and sharing company. Quite often they would return home only after dinner.

Before adolescence, Raksha Bandhan meant little more to us children than new clothes, sweets, puris at lunch, and the delight of receiving a few rupees as gifts. But as we grew older, the festival acquired deeper meanings. We began to understand what relationships truly are-relationships into which one is born, relationships that gradually evolve, and relationships that are consciously created. Through these bonds, our own identities are shaped and defined.

At this point I must mention Pratima and Sandhya.

My story would remain incomplete without speaking of them.

According to my original plan, I had intended to include a chapter in this book titled *Another Me*. For reasons I can no longer clearly recall, I eventually set that desire aside. Yet everything that was meant to find a place in that chapter forms such an important part of my life that it must still be told. Only now, instead of appearing together in one

place, those memories will be scattered throughout these pages-appearing here and there like a quiet corner where one feels safe, like a roof beneath which one finds peace, or like a pathway that leads one gently toward a cherished destination.

Before I begin speaking about Pratima and Sandhya, however, I must open the old chest marked *Another Me* and take out its very first keepsake. It is nothing extraordinary-merely another introduction to me.

This second introduction is connected to a house that I have always regarded as my second home. Even today I think of it that way, for the past, no matter how distant, remains exactly what it was. Indeed, like well-aged preserves, its sweetness only deepens with time. I do carry a sense of regret that the future we once imagined never unfolded as we had hoped. Yet that regret cannot diminish the sweetness of those memories, memories sweeter than jaggery itself. For now, let me dwell upon those sweet days.

While studying in Class Nine at Model High School, I became acquainted with a fellow student named Akhilesh Kumar Tiwari. In the beginning it was merely an acquaintance. Then it grew a little deeper, and then deeper still, until it transformed into the kind of friendship one reads about in stories or sees portrayed in films. We came to believe that perhaps we had entered this world for the sole purpose of nurturing that friendship. In time, our families also came to accept something very similar, if not exactly the same.

I have already described in considerable detail the members of my own family who witnessed and shared this friendship. I have mentioned members of Akhilesh's family at various points, but perhaps this is the right moment to introduce them more fully.

First, the address of that second home.

Its postal address was remarkably simple:

"660, Madhatal, Jabalpur."

That was all. If one wrote either *Shri Hari Prasad Tiwari* or *Shri H. P. Tiwari* on an envelope, followed simply by *660, Madhatal, Jabalpur (M.P.) 482002*, the letter unfailingly reached its destination.

The house stood in Hari Singh Colony, near Plaza Talkies, roughly midway along the road leading from Jyoti Talkies to Karamchand Chowk. At the time I became friends with Akhilesh, Jyoti Talkies was regarded as Jabalpur's finest cinema hall; today a large multiplex and shopping mall occupy that site. Likewise, Plaza Talkies has since given way to Jayanti Complex, now known primarily for its mobile phone shops and related businesses.

Hari Singh Colony still exists. The house stands there even today, about half a furlong from the main road on the right-hand side. Though its appearance has changed completely over the years, its place in my memory remains untouched.

Originally, all the houses on that side of the colony had been railway quarters. How ownership eventually passed into private hands is a question I never thought to ask anyone. Curiously, it is a question that has occurred to me only now; until this moment I had never reflected upon it.

Let me briefly introduce Akhilesh's family.

There was Hari Prasad Tiwari, Akhilesh's father and the head of the household; his wife, Shrimati Triveni Tiwari; Akhilesh's two elder brothers, Ashok Kumar Tiwari and Anand Kumar Tiwari; and his younger sister, Pratima Tiwari. Thus, six members lived in that house.

Countless stories and memories connected with them lie scattered throughout the storehouse of my mind. As occasions arise, I shall bring them forth one by one. For the present, this much will suffice.

Since this chapter falls under the theme of festivals, and because I am presently speaking of Raksha Bandhan, it is worth mentioning that by then I was no longer merely Akhilesh's friend. I had become, in every meaningful sense, a member of the family. Consequently, Pratima became my younger sister as well. Alongside her three brothers, she

regarded me as her fourth brother and tied a rakhi on my wrist every year.

Now, about Sandhya.

Sandhya was the eldest of the five children of Akhilesh's elder maternal uncle, Shankar Dayal Dubey. After her came Pradeep, then Seema-whom everyone called Meenu-then Praveen, known at home as Munna, and finally the youngest, Pawan.

Sandhya arrived in Jabalpur for her college education at almost the same time that my friendship with Akhilesh began. Just as Pratima became my sister, so did Sandhya.

I should clarify something here. My relationship with either Pratima or Sandhya was never based on a formula of "because this relation exists, therefore it must be acknowledged." Nor is it so today. Whenever the occasion arises, whenever such matters are discussed, I simply say what is true: "*I have six sisters.*"

Let us leave this subject here for the moment. There will be many more opportunities to speak about these two sisters bestowed upon me by God's grace, as well as the others.

Another major celebration observed in our home was the installation of Lord Ganesha's idol. This took place on Ganesh Chaturthi-the fourth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Bhadrapada. The Lord would reside in our home for ten days before returning to His celestial abode on Anant Chaturdashi.

On that day, Lord Gajanan was ceremonially bid farewell according to sacred rites. His idol was immersed in water, carrying with Him the promise of returning the following year.

The night preceding Ganesh Chaturthi was celebrated in our neighbourhood as *Teeja*. Women and young girls gathered for an all-night vigil filled with songs, music, and joyful festivity. The observance is also known as *Hartalika Vrat*, a fast undertaken by women and

unmarried girls, who remain without food or water for a full twenty-four hours.

I have already described these celebrations in detail in *Aarambh*, particularly in the chapters titled *Bua* and *The Tableau of Lord Ganesha*.

Likewise, I have portrayed Sharadiya Navaratri, Ramlila, Dussehra, Mahalakshmi Puja, and related festivities in various chapters of *Aarambh*. Repeating those descriptions here would serve little purpose.

Apart from these major and minor festivals, many other sacred observances and fasting days arrived throughout the year, on which Mother, Bua, or both would observe fasts and perform rituals. Among them were *Vat Savitri Vrat*, during which women worship the banyan tree while winding cotton thread around it and circumambulating it one hundred and eight times; *Har Chhath* or *Hal Shashthi*; *Rishi Panchami*; *Santan Saptami*; and several similar observances.

One more important festival deserves mention here-*Kajaliya*, celebrated on the day following Raksha Bandhan. I consider it especially significant because it too is a festival of meeting, mingling, and renewing bonds.

Indeed, if there is one thing most essential to social life, it is human fellowship. Everything else follows afterward. Only when people meet one another can they share their joys and sorrows. Only then can they become active participants in a strong and healthy social order.

To tell the truth, festivals teach us how to embrace life fully in every circumstance and how to overcome mutual differences. Their deepest philosophy lies in accepting every colour of life-its joys and sorrows, its rises and falls-and in replacing bitterness with the colours of affection and goodwill.

"I'm placing a ghazal here that I feel belongs in this space; perhaps you, too, may find it speaks to you.

-ये रिश्ते, ये मुहब्बत, ये सहारे सब हमारे हैं,
ये आँसू, और ख़ुशी के हँसते इशारे सब हमारे हैं।

-कहीं मिट्टी की ख़ुशबू है, कहीं बारिश की बूँदें हैं,
कहीं बचपन के आँगन के नज़ारे सब हमारे हैं।

-किसी के दर्द में रोना, किसी की जीत में हँसना,
मुहब्बत के यही कानून सारे सब हमारे हैं।

-किसी की आँख के सपने, किसी के हाथ की मेहनत,
जो कल बेहतर बनाएँगे, वो सपने सब हमारे हैं।

-कभी नाराज़गी, और कभी फिर पास आ जाना ,
ये छोटे-छोटे झगड़े मीठे-खारे सब हमारे हैं।

-तुम्हारे घर की खुशियों में हम भी तो शामिल हैं,
ये त्योहार,ये उत्सव, दिलखुश नज़ारे सब हमारे हैं।

-न जाने कौन-सी मिट्टी ने हमको जोड़ रखा है,
ये धरती, ये हवा, ये चाँद-तारे सब हमारे हैं।

-जो बाँटें दिल को दिल से, वो लकीरें क्यों बनाएँ हम,
जहाँ इंसानियत बसती हो, वो किनारे सब हमारे हैं।

Seek your kind indulgence. . .

These bonds, this love, these hands that hold us-
all these are ours;
these tears, and all the laughing signs of joy-
all these are ours.

Here, the fragrance of earth; there, raindrops falling;
here, the courtyards of childhood,
with all their familiar sights-
all these are ours.

To weep with another's sorrow,
to laugh at another's triumph-
these simple laws of love,
these are all ours.

The dreams within another's eyes,
the labour within another's hands-
all that may make tomorrow kinder and better,
those dreams are ours.

Sometimes resentment,
sometimes finding our way back to one another;
these little quarrels,
sweet at times, bitter at others-
all these are ours.

When your home fills with happiness,
how could we not be part of it?
These festivals, these celebrations,
these radiant moments of delight-
all these are ours.

Who knows what soil it was
that bound us to one another?
This earth, this air,
the moon and all the stars-
all these are ours.

Why should we draw lines
where hearts are meant to meet?
Wherever humanity makes its home,
those shores, those farthest shores-
all these are ours.

Living in groups, building homes close to one another, and sharing life within communities has been the way of humanity for centuries. What else is this, if not a collective search for peace, harmony, and fulfillment-sometimes attained fully, sometimes only in part?

Yet that old arrangement is slowly beginning to fray. The digital age has almost fashioned an entirely new way of living. "Neighbours" and "relatives" are increasingly being replaced by "groups" and "friend circles." The old neighbourhood has transformed into the modern "society."

But this too is a change that must be accepted.

A strange, nameless haze has spread all around us within the span of just a few decades. This new age-with its glittering progressiveness, its openness, and its relentless pace-can suddenly feel deeply unfamiliar. Everything has changed so quickly that the reflections of the old world, still lingering in our eyes, seem momentarily arrested in the brightness of this new light.

Yet time does more than merely change things; it brings with it a quiet wisdom. Our generation has silently learned to wear this discomfort with grace. There exists a kind of unspoken pact, something we perhaps call "adjustment."

And in the end, when we stand upon this bridge between the past and the future and look at both shores, no bitterness remains. With the dignity that often accompanies age, the heart learns only how to empty itself. However they may be, wherever they may be, for those who inhabit this new era, there flows from us nothing but a silent blessing-that they may live their lives fully, joyfully, and to their utmost length.

□

3 June 2026
Eleven o'clock at night...

The room is cool with the faint breeze coming through the window, while the strip of light fitted into the rack above my desk seems to have caught and held a small fragment of time. I am writing on my laptop. This chapter, too, must now come to an end. And yet I find myself pausing, thinking about the world around us-so modern, so open, dazzling in all its technological brilliance-and

wondering how swiftly it has shed its old skin. In the space of just a few decades, an entire age has quietly slipped away.

All of this belongs to the generations that came after mine. So, when I first encountered this new world, there was, somewhere within me, a strange hesitation, an instinctive awkwardness. But with time, we learn to change. Perhaps that, after all, is what living means. Looking back today, I feel a quiet admiration for my generation-for the way we have, almost silently and with a certain dignity, made room for this newness within ourselves. Yes, there is still a touch of uneasiness, but we are learning to find our balance.

The generation immediately before ours might not have yielded so readily to such sweeping change. They may have remained more firmly rooted in their old conventions. But we? We are something of a bridge-a generation of travellers riding between two boats, with one foot resting upon the deep-rooted values of the old order and the other upon the swift, restless current of the digital culture that is carrying us towards tomorrow.

Perhaps this is the timeless destiny of every generation. Every age arrives with a new grammar of its own, and we come to regard our ability to speak that new language as the progress of life. Yesterday, our battles were fought on different fronts; today, the challenges before the young are of another kind. Their struggles may be invisible to us, but they are no less real, and certainly no less demanding.

And in the midst of all this, as a father-or simply as one who has stood in a father's place-there is no complaint left in me. There is only a deep, unblemished tenderness. The world they are creating belongs to them, and rightly so. We can only stand here, at this end of the bridge, and bless them.

Wherever they may be, however they may choose to live, may they always have a reason to smile. From the purest corner of my heart, this is the only prayer that rises:

"Turn your life into a celebration; live it like a festival. May you be happy, joyful, healthy, and blessed with a long and fulfilling life."

□□□

3

Hockey

(Fields, Friendships, and the Chase of Dreams)

The fundamental elements of life, we are told, are water, air, earth, fire, and space. Since childhood, we have heard of these five as though the entire fabric of existence were woven from their threads alone. Yet sometimes a doubt arises in the mind-is that enough? Can the moving mystery call a human being, this intricate enchantment of flesh and consciousness, emerge merely from the union of these elements?

Let us assume that the cloth of life is indeed woven on the loom of these five elements. But then, where do its colours come from? Those countless patterns, those delicate motifs, those shades of darkness and light that make every human being distinct from every other-upon what loom are they woven?

When I look at nature, I notice something curious. There are innumerable species of trees, birds, and animals. They may vary in size, and their colours may differ somewhat, yet there is a remarkable uniformity in their essential nature. One sparrow is not fundamentally different from another sparrow; one peepal tree does not alter its character from the next.

But man...

Man seems to be nature's greatest enigma.

No two human beings are ever alike. Not only their faces but also the worlds they carry within them are different. Even two brothers born in the same house, nourished by the same food, breathing the same

air, and educated in the same school often grow into remarkably different individuals. One may carry within him an inexhaustible spring of compassion; another, the fierce fire of ambition. One lives among memories, another among dreams. One wishes to conquer the world; another seeks only to understand himself.

At such moments it feels as though the fabric of life is woven from more than the five elements alone. Something else seems to be mixed into it-perhaps memories, perhaps experiences, perhaps sorrow, perhaps love, perhaps those invisible touches that we call destiny, conditioning, or soul. These are the colours that transform the same cloth into something new every time.

And perhaps that is why understanding a human being is so difficult. Though he is made of earth, he is not merely earth. Though composed of water, air, and fire, he is something more than all of them combined. There is within him something that remains beyond every definition-an unspoken mystery that accompanies him from birth until death.

Perhaps that is the miracle-that makes man both the most familiar and the most unfamiliar creature in all creation.



Science might attempt to explain this mystery by saying that the endless differences among human beings originate in the brain. That immensely complex structure of billions of neurons preserves memories, shapes experiences, and gradually constructs an individual's personality.

Spirituality, however, seeks the answer elsewhere. It would argue that the source of this diversity lies not in the brain but in consciousness itself-that silent witness which exists somewhere behind the body and the mind.

Yet this is where a curious dilemma begins.

If the brain is indeed responsible for everything, then its fundamental components are largely the same in all human beings. The principles governing its operation are also broadly similar. Then where does this immense diversity come from? And if, as many spiritual thinkers maintain, the underlying consciousness is one, indivisible, and universal, then how do such vastly different personalities, experiences, and lives emerge from it?

The deeper one travels along this path, the fewer answers one finds and the more questions arise.

One question takes us by the hand only to leave us standing before another, even deeper one. It is like walking through a dark corridor where every door that opens reveals yet another door beyond it.

Perhaps that is why even those who may have glimpsed this mystery could never fully express it in words. They offered hints, created metaphors, and fashioned symbols, but eventually they, too, fell silent. As though they had been compelled to admit:

"What is truly known cannot be spoken, and what can be spoken is never fully known."

At times I feel the same limitation of language surrounding me.

It is not that I have found an answer to this question. The truth is quite the opposite. The more I try to understand it, the more layers it reveals. It is not like a mathematical equation that ultimately resolves itself into a definite answer. It is more like a tangled thread that, when one begins to untangle it, produces still more threads from within.

Perhaps, then, it is best to pause here for a while.

Some things, at least for now, must be accepted-not as matters of belief, but as working assumptions. For unless we do so, we shall never enter the world whose threshold we are presently standing upon-

and about which I wish to speak to you further.

□

So, shall we begin?

But before we come to the real story, a few more words...

It seems to me that there is something within us that creates what we call passion.

A deep attachment to something. An intense enthusiasm. A kind of beautiful obsession.

It is more than a hobby.

It is an inner calling, a profound urge that compels us toward a particular activity. We do not pursue it merely to pass the time; we pursue it because our heart wishes to. Passion often carries with it dedication, commitment, and purpose. Sometimes it even evolves into a career or a life's mission.

From a very early age, I too developed such a passion-for playing hockey.

It is another matter that this passion could not survive in the form in which it might have endured. There were several reasons for this, reasons I understand quite well. But instead of discussing them at length, let me mention perhaps the most important one: my studies in the eleventh standard and later in college.

You may well ask: if hockey was truly a passion, how could it yield before academics?

The truth is that life constantly places choices before us. At the same time, it quietly nudges our understanding in directions of its own choosing-so subtly that we rarely notice it happening. It does this with such elegance that we end up believing those choices were entirely our own.

In this guerrilla war that life wages against us, one of its most powerful and accurate weapons is our parents' expectations. Another is the army of agents it releases within us-doubt, hesitation, confusion, uncertainty, inner conflict, and indecision.

Only a few rare souls emerge victorious from this invisible battle with life.

I was not one of them.

As a result, instead of becoming a hockey player, I became a mechanical engineer.

But let us return to those years when, alongside painting and reading, playing hockey was my greatest passion.

How the Passion for Hockey Began

I must have been in the third grade when I began to understand the world around me reasonably well-at least as well as a child of that age can. In my neighbourhood, Ghamapur, I noticed that almost all the young men, and even some middle-aged ones, played hockey. Hockey was an inseparable part of the locality's daily rhythm. They played regularly, almost religiously.

Ghamapur was fortunate in one respect: it had no shortage of open grounds. To play hockey, one may not always require a regulation-sized field, but one certainly needs enough space for fifteen or twenty people to divide themselves into two teams and play properly. Ideally, of course, there should be twenty-two players-eleven on each side. Players should be able to dribble the ball while sprinting, strike long hits, loft powerful scoops, exchange short and long passes, build attacking moves through strategy, launch coordinated assaults on the opposition, and defend against attacks with equal planning and discipline.

Without all this, where is the real joy of hockey?

Fortunately, the extensive area of our neighbourhood-especially western Ghamapur-contained several large and small grounds where this wonderful game could be played in all its spirit. And naturally, it was played.

I have already written quite extensively about these places in the chapter *Neighbours* in *The Beginning*. But since we are speaking

specifically about hockey here, there is every reason to revisit those details.

Let us begin.

The first and the largest ground stood opposite Smyth School. This was where the most senior team of our locality practised. The group consisted of young men and a few who had already entered early middle age, most of them around twenty-two or twenty-three years old or somewhat older.

Their team was called St. Paul Club.

Since this part of western Ghamapur was predominantly Christian, and the ground itself was situated in that locality...

It was the sprawling campus of "St. Paul Church, Church of North India, Ghamapur, Jabalpur." In those days, besides the church itself, the compound housed the parish priest's large bungalow, Smyth School and its hostel, and, in one corner, a cluster of sizeable tiled-roof houses occupied by a few Chinese Christian families.

What remained beyond these buildings was divided into three level stretches of open ground. The first was the largest-a broad, flat, grassless field in front of the school. During the day, the children of Smyth School used it as their playground. In the mornings and evenings, however, it belonged to the members of St. Paul Club, who gathered there to play hockey.

The second was the school's expansive kho-kho ground on the right-hand side. At either end of its centre line stood two sturdy wooden posts, about one and a half metres high, erected at regulation distances for the game of kho-kho. The field was marked with lime lines as well. Yet, paying little heed to either the posts or the markings, the younger boys of what was, in effect, St. Paul Club's "B" team played hockey there. Most of them were between fifteen and eighteen years of age.

Of the players in St. Paul Club's senior team, a few names still linger in my memory. Sunny Masih was the captain, and his elder brother

Victor was also a prominent member of the side. Both brothers were fine hockey players and enjoyed considerable influence in our neighbourhood. Sunny played at centre-forward, while Victor occupied the full-back position.

Among the others I remember were Newton Daniel, who played at inside-left; Amar Singh, the centre-half; Pammi Bhaiya at full-back; Chhote Bhaiya in goal; Makhan Rajak, who played either left-half or right-half; Kishan Rajak at right-out; and Jema, who was usually seen at left-out.

Another name has just surfaced in memory, though it was not the man's real name. In fact, I never knew his real name even then. I only knew him by the name everyone called him, and that is the name that has survived in my memory-"Zalim." He was a goalkeeper and was widely regarded as one of the finest in Jabalpur. Some even believed he was the best goalkeeper among all the city's hockey teams. In his absence, Chhote Bhaiya would take over between the posts.

There was another goalkeeper known as "Gama." That is the only name by which I remember him. He too was an accomplished player. Then there was Peter, an excellent full back who could also play in the half line. More often than not, Peter and Pammi Bhaiya occupied the right and left full-back positions.

Both Amar Singh and Sunny Bhaiya worked at the "*Gun Carriage Factory*" in Jabalpur, which had an outstanding hockey team of its own. They played for that side as well, with Amar Singh serving as its captain. Whenever St. Paul Club faced a particularly strong opponent, a few players from the Gun Carriage Factory team would occasionally turn out for St. Paul Club if needed. Difficulties arose, however, during tournaments in which both teams participated. On such occasions, Sunny Bhaiya and Amar Singh had to represent their factory team, and other players stepped into their places for St. Paul Club. Inevitably, the club became somewhat weaker without them.

All these recollections belong to a very early period of my life, when I was still in primary school. By the time I reached middle school, we

too had assembled a remarkably good team of our own, about which I shall speak a little later.

My hockey-playing days effectively came to an end after Class Ten. The names and incidents I recount here are only those that have somehow survived the erosion of time. It was my studies in Class Eleven that finally drew me away from the game. In those days, students of Class Eleven were quietly separated from almost every co-curricular activity. Their sole responsibility became study-and study alone.

There was no Class Twelve in our school system then. The experiment had been tried briefly, but by the time we completed our Class Ten board examinations and entered Class Eleven, it had once again become the final year of school. As a result, we ended up taking board examinations in two consecutive years.

Since admission to college followed directly after Class Eleven, and since, apart from medicine, there were virtually no entrance examinations for higher studies, admission to good colleges depended almost entirely on one's Class Eleven marks. Under such circumstances, there was room for little else.

Class Eleven meant one thing, and one thing only:

study.

But I have not yet told you the real story-how the passion for hockey first took root within me.

In the neighbourhood where I grew up, hockey was not merely a game; it was a kind of shared breath. It flowed alike through boys of eight or nine and through men in their twenties, thirties, and beyond. In those years, hockey enjoyed a stature in India that bordered on legend. The brilliance of Indian players echoed across international arenas, and those echoes reached even the narrow lanes of Jabalpur.

The city itself seemed steeped in hockey. Some things become so deeply woven into the fabric of a place that it becomes impossible to imagine one without the other. The Ordnance Factory at Khamaria,

the Gun Carriage Factory, Army Workshop 506, the Signals Training Corps-each had its own team. There were teams from the Railways, the Police, and the Madhya Pradesh Electricity Board. Then there were the teams of Jabalpur University, Roberts Club of Sadar, A.P. Narmada Club, Independent Club of Chhoti Omti, and St. Paul Club of Ghamapur.

These names carried a certain magic in those days. Merely hearing them stirred a special excitement in the heart. Among them, the Railway team, G.C.F., Independent Club, and St. Paul Club enjoyed particular distinction, earning laurels not only within Jabalpur but also in tournaments beyond the city.

In such an atmosphere, my longing for hockey was perhaps inevitable.

Even today, when I look back, one thing surprises me. Kabaddi, gilli-danda, wrestling, marbles, kites-none of these ever truly attracted me. It was as though hockey had chosen me long before I chose it.

I played the game for nearly nine years-with affection, dedication, and no small measure of devotion. I represented Model High School in both its 'B' Grade and later its 'A' Grade teams, always in the position I loved most. I even skipped the 'C' Grade level and moved directly into the 'B' Grade team. It was a small achievement, perhaps, but at that age it carried its own quiet pride.

And since I have mentioned my favourite position, I should perhaps say a few words about it as well.

In the era when I played hockey-the 1960s and 1970s-the traditional structure of the game still prevailed in India. A team consisted of five forwards, three half-line players, two full-backs, and a goalkeeper. This classic 5-3-2 formation was used throughout the hockey-playing world.

I occupied one of the most important places in that five-man forward line. The position was known as **Left-In**, or **Inside Left**. It was a role I chose for myself and one I continued to play throughout my hockey career. Neither my coaches nor anyone else ever suggested that I should move elsewhere on the field.

Modern hockey, of course, is a very different game. The pace has increased dramatically. Traditional hockey has undergone a complete transformation. In those days, matches were played on ordinary level dirt grounds; from the 1970s and 1980s onward, the game gradually shifted to synthetic AstroTurf surfaces.

I shall speak about those changes as well.

But first, let me tell you about the position of the 'Left-In or the Inside Left".

In traditional field hockey, particularly in the old 5-3-2 formation, the Inside Left was regarded as one of the most important players in the forward line. Positioned between the Left Out and the Centre Forward, his role extended far beyond merely scoring goals. He was expected to connect the entire attack, give it direction, and lend it speed and fluency.

The Inside Left served as the vital link between the attacks launched from the left wing and the Centre Forward waiting ahead. Through quick short passes, one-twos, through balls, and triangular combinations, he sought to penetrate and dismantle the opposition's defence. At times he scored himself; at others, he created opportunities for the Centre Forward or the Left Out.

His responsibilities included controlling the ball both inside and outside the striking circle, delivering passes at precisely the right moment, and arriving in the right place at the right time. When possession was lost, he was also expected to track back and assist the Left Half in defence, which meant that stamina was as essential as skill.

A good Inside Left required an exceptional blend of qualities: refined stick-work, swift and accurate passing, an instinctive understanding of the field, the ability to anticipate space and timing, a natural sense for goal-scoring opportunities, and a willingness to contribute equally to attack and defence.

The importance of this position stemmed from the fact that it acted as a bridge between the left wing and the central attack. It brought both

pace and creativity to a team's offensive play. When the Inside Left performed well, the entire left flank seemed to come alive. He was not merely a forward; he was, in many ways, an architect of attack.

To put it simply:

"If the Centre Forward is the spear that strikes the goal, then the Inside Left is the player who gives that spear its direction and timing. The position is concerned not merely with scoring, but with the intelligence and rhythm of the entire attack."

In modern hockey, the old designation of *Left-In* is rarely used, yet the role itself has not disappeared. Today its responsibilities are often shared by attacking midfielders, left inner-channel players, or left-sided attackers.

But the position of Left-In was more than merely a spot on the field. It was that subtle, yet decisive touch hidden within the fabric of an attack-the touch that gave the game not only speed, but meaning.

Carrying with him the breeze from the left flank, he drifted inward as though a melody were slowly taking shape across a stretch of green. The pass that left his stick was not simply a movement of the ball; it was the transmission of a silent trust between teammates. Creating openings for the Centre Forward, giving direction to the runs of the Left Out, discovering fleeting shafts of light in the cracks of a defensive line-this was his craft, and this was his beauty.

He was seldom the most visible player on the field, yet the soul of the attack often beat within him. He was like those words in a poem that are never spoken aloud, and yet somehow carry the meaning of the entire poem within themselves.

At times I feel that the Left-In did not play on a hockey field at all, but in the lines of some invisible poem.

He did not run; rather, a rhythm seemed to flow across the grass. He did not merely pass the ball; it was as though meaning itself emerged from the folds of time and arrived precisely where it was meant to be.

Whenever he curved inward from the left flank, one felt that the game was leaving behind its outward form and entering its inner music.

The soil beneath the field moved with his feet, the ball moved with his stick, and the aspirations of his teammates travelled with his vision. He was not the hero of noise and spectacle; he was the devotee of that stillness from which the most precise attacks are born.

If a goal was a celebration, then the Left-In was the silent invitation that preceded it-a moment in which the confidence, skill, and dreams of an entire team gathered themselves into a single direction.

Perhaps there is also an Inside Left hidden somewhere in life itself.

It is that nearly invisible place where a person, before claiming the fruit of achievement for himself, prepares the path for another's possibility. Some people stand upon the bright summits of destiny, visible to all. Yet there are others who remain at the edges of the scene, quietly shaping its rhythm, its balance, and its meaning.

They understand that every accomplishment rests upon a silent foundation, and that behind every light there lies the labour of some unnamed shadow.

The Inside Left seems to embody that subtle law of life which teaches us that existence is not merely about proving oneself. Sometimes it is equally meaningful-perhaps even more profoundly human-to step slightly aside and create space for something larger than oneself.

Seen in the light of the Upanishads, the Inside Left becomes a reminder of that silent *karma-yoga* in which the doer does not place himself at the centre but dissolves into a greater rhythm.

He understands that behind every successful strike lies an invisible convergence, a quiet coordination, an unnamed discipline. Just as every spoken word is preceded by an unspoken meaning, every achievement is preceded by someone's sacrifice, restraint, and attentive presence.

The Inside Left seems to whisper that the truth of life resides not only in the visible reward, but also in the unseen dedication that, without seeking recognition, offers its place to the greater whole.

□

The difference between traditional and modern hockey is immense. Once, the game was played on natural grass fields; today it is played on synthetic AstroTurf. That single change transformed the entire character of the sport.

In earlier times, players wielded heavy wooden sticks and played with leather balls. Today, lightweight carbon-fibre sticks and synthetic balls have dramatically increased the pace of the game. What was once a slower, more strategic contest has evolved into a sport demanding explosive speed and instant decision-making.

The celebrated Indian dribbling style, perfected by India and Pakistan and characterized by intricate control and movement on both sides of the ball, was extraordinarily effective on grass. With the arrival of AstroTurf, however, the faster and more direct passing game favoured by European teams proved increasingly successful.

Penalty corners, too, underwent a revolution. The modern drag-flick, capable of propelling the ball at speeds approaching 150 kilometres per hour, introduced a level of power previously unimaginable.

The rules have changed significantly as well. The abolition of the offside rule opened up the game, requiring every player to contribute to both attack and defence. Goalkeepers, heavily protected by modern equipment, have become far more dynamic participants. Perhaps the most remarkable transformation, however, has come through technology. GPS tracking, video analysis, and data analytics now monitor virtually every movement a player makes-developments that would have seemed inconceivable in the hockey of earlier generations.

Because modern field hockey is played at such tremendous speed, positions and responsibilities have assumed even greater importance.

A team still consists of eleven players-one goalkeeper and ten outfield players-but roles have become far more fluid.

A midfielder may instantly become a forward or a defender depending on the situation. The goalkeeper remains the sole exception, though even he may be withdrawn and replaced by an additional field player when tactical circumstances demand it.

Modern hockey also permits rolling substitutions, allowing players to enter and leave the game repeatedly. As a result, the notion of one player remaining fixed in a single role throughout a match has largely disappeared. Every player is expected to be versatile, fit, and capable of adapting to different positions, though specialists still exist for particular roles and situations.

Even so, it is worth briefly describing the principal positions in modern hockey.

We begin with the *Goalkeeper*.

He is the final line of defence. His primary responsibility is to prevent the opposition from scoring. Throughout the match he wears extensive protective equipment-pads, helmet, chest guard, and other gear. Within the shooting circle, he is permitted to stop or deflect the ball using any part of his body.

Next come the *Defenders*, or *Full Backs*, who play directly in front of the goalkeeper. Their task is to stop opposing forwards and clear the ball away from dangerous areas. Full backs are primarily defensive players who tackle attacking strikers. At the centre of the defensive line stands the *Centre Back*, who organizes and directs the entire defence.

On either side are the *Wing Backs* or *Sweeper Backs*, responsible for countering attacks down the flanks. Some teams also employ a dedicated Sweeper, positioned just behind the defensive line to clear loose balls and provide additional cover.

Then come the *Midfielders*-often described as the team's engine room. They form the crucial link between defence and attack and generally

cover the greatest distance during a match. Their duties include winning possession from opponents and distributing the ball to the forwards. They operate across the centre of the field as Right Midfielders, Left Midfielders, or Centre Midfielders.

Finally come the *Forwards,* the attacking players whose primary purpose is to score goals and maintain relentless pressure on the opposition's defence.

The *Centre Forward,* or Striker, is usually the team's principal goalscorer, constantly searching for opportunities around the opposition's circle.

The *Wings* and *Inner Forwards* advance rapidly along the flanks, delivering passes and crosses into dangerous areas for the Centre Forward.

It was on the left side, among these attacking positions, that I played.

Modern hockey has largely abandoned the old 5-3-2 structure in favour of formations such as 4-3-3 and 3-4-3, reflecting the game's increasing speed, flexibility, and tactical sophistication.



Whenever memories of my hockey days lead me to thoughts of the great players of the game, one name rises unbidden in my mind-**"Roop Singh"**. It is difficult to speak of the world's finest Inside Lefts without mentioning him. In the earlier era of hockey, players' positions were not documented with the precision they are today. Many were remembered variously as forwards, inners, or simply as members of the attacking line. Yet Roop Singh remains one of those rare players about whom most hockey historians and connoisseurs are in remarkable agreement: he was not only one of the finest Inside Lefts of his own time, but one of the greatest the game has ever produced.

When I first began reading about the history of hockey in my childhood, I was astonished to discover that despite being the younger brother of the legendary Dhyan Chand, Roop Singh had forged an

identity entirely his own. He was not merely the brother of a great player; he was a great player himself. He was one of the principal pillars of India's golden triumphs at the Los Angeles Olympics of 1932 and the Berlin Olympics of 1936. His thirteen goals in just two matches during the 1932 Games-including ten against the United States-still stand as testimony to his extraordinary attacking brilliance.

The partnership of Dhyan Chand and Roop Singh is regarded as one of the most dazzling combinations in the history of Indian hockey. On one side was Dhyan Chand's magical stick-work, his uncanny ability to read the game, and his gift for creating opportunities. On the other was Roop Singh's pace, precision, and astonishing eye for goal. When the two took the field together, it seemed as though artistry and power had found a perfect union.

Roop Singh's greatest distinction was that he was never merely a goalscorer. He was the fulcrum of the entire left-wing attack. The moment the ball reached his stick, the attack seemed to acquire fresh life. His hits were both powerful and accurate. His mastery of penalty corners and his ability to convert opportunities into goals set him apart from his contemporaries.

Even today, whenever I turn the pages of Indian hockey's golden history, I remember Roop Singh with deep admiration. He was not simply a great player; he was a symbol of that beautiful, artistic style of hockey that once made the entire world fall in love with the Indian game.

□

I have already spoken about the senior hockey team of our neighbourhood, at least to the extent that memory allows. I have said very little, however, about the team immediately below them. The simple reason is that I did not know those boys very well. Even today, the page of memory devoted to them contains only a few clear impressions.

Of that group, I distinctly remember only two or three boys. One was probably Robert, the younger brother of Newton, who played either Inside Left or Right-In for the senior team. The other two were brothers-Anil Wang and Sunil Wang.

They lived in the first house among a cluster of residences situated in one corner of the Christian compound. Anil, the elder brother, was naturally left-handed and held his hockey stick differently from everyone else. When gripping the stick, his left hand remained lower and his right hand higher.

At the time, all I understood was that Anil handled the stick in a manner unlike the other players. Only later did I learn that while a hockey player may naturally be left-handed, field hockey itself is played with a standard stick. Since the stick has a flat playing surface on only one side, officially sanctioned hockey does not permit specially designed left-handed sticks.

A naturally left-handed player may nevertheless display a distinctive grip, balance, rhythm of dribbling, and style of ball control. But the rules remain the same for everyone. Even in modern hockey, left-handed players compete successfully, provided they use the same standard stick and techniques upon which the game is based.

Perhaps that was why Anil's game seemed memorable even then. There was something different about it, as though the familiar game acquired a slightly different rhythm in his hands.

Sunil Wang differed from his elder brother in both temperament and style of play. If Anil's hockey possessed a distinctive rhythm, Sunil's carried the electricity of quickness. His dribbling was so controlled and so rapid that opposing players often appeared momentarily bewildered when confronting him. The ease and speed with which he advanced while retaining possession suggested not merely practice, but an innate gift.

He usually played at Centre Forward, and to be honest, there was probably no one more suited to that position in our small group. A

Centre Forward must do more than simply appear in front of goal; he must understand the pulse of the attack itself-when to move in, when to receive a pass, when to split a defensive line and surge through. Sunil seemed to possess this understanding instinctively. Watching him weave through defenders with the ball at his feet, one often felt that the ball was responding not to his stick, but to the commands of his mind.

Many of us younger boys secretly wished we could learn to dribble as he did. His game possessed a rare attraction-not merely because he was skilled, but because his hockey combined artistry and joy in equal measure. Whenever he stepped onto the field, the game became more than a game; it became a lesson. We watched his movements, his grip, the turns of his body, and the tricks by which he protected and carried the ball, as though somewhere within those gestures lay a secret grammar of hockey waiting to be discovered.

Looking back now, the images of Anil and Sunil glow in my memory like two different lights. Anil's game possessed a distinctiveness that arrested attention at first sight; Sunil's possessed a vibrant quickness that flashed across the field like a bright streak of light. Perhaps this is how childhood memories are made: some faces remain because of who they were, others because of the rhythm, movement, and unforgettable impression of their play.

In those days, we younger boys inhabited a world of our own-a world slowly taking shape as we watched these older and more accomplished players. We were not merely spectators standing at the edge of the field. Quietly, within ourselves, we were building our own team, imagining our own positions, nurturing our own modest dreams of the game.

Some wished to become Centre Forwards, others Full Backs. As for me, I had already begun to discover that place on the field from where the game was not merely played but created. Perhaps that is why I felt repeatedly drawn toward the position of Inside Left. Our team had not

yet fully come into being, but even before it existed, an aspiration for my own place within it had already taken root.

Gradually, the moment arrived when merely watching the older players was no longer enough. The desire within us demanded expression. And so, a team of our own began to emerge-rough and unformed at first, then gradually taking shape, until before long it had become a genuine team in its own right.

There was never a particular day when we formally declared ourselves a team. It happened naturally, through evenings spent together, through games played side by side, through small arguments, through finding our positions, and through learning each other's strengths. At first, we were simply boys. Then, one day, we realized that we had become a team.

Among us were boys of my own age and a few slightly older: Daniel Masih, Ravi Nikhare, Asharfi Lal Nikhare, Munna Gupta, Anil Dubey, Richard, Sampatlal Rajak, Imalbin, Chhota Daniel, Suresh Kharate, Paul Masih, Kushal Rajak, Shyamlal Chandel, Kishan Chandel, Ravi Srivastava, Anil Papa, and myself.

There were others too, though time has preserved their faces more clearly than their names. Even today, I remember my teammates less by their names than by their styles of play. One could run exceptionally fast; another could strike the ball enormous distances. Some possessed excellent defensive instincts, while others had a gift for sensing opportunities in front of goal.

Each of us brought something different to the team, and perhaps it was precisely this diversity that created its balance. On the field we were more than friends. We became companions who compensated for one another's weaknesses. In time, that companionship taught us the deeper meaning of sport-that a team is built not merely from players, but from trust.

Daniel Masih was our captain and played at Centre Forward. He was as capable on the field as he was warm and approachable off it-a true

captain who held the team together. I played at Inside Left, while Anil Dubey occupied the Left-Out position. The understanding between the three of us was so deep that we often sensed one another's intentions without speaking. Many of the attacking moves we created together ended in goals.

Munna Gupta played at Right-In, while Richard-Newton's youngest brother-held the Right-Out position. Richard's presence on the field seemed to inject fresh energy into the entire team. At Centre Half, Asharfi Lal and Sampat Lal provided stability, while Imalbel played at Full Back. All were dependable players and close friends besides.

In goal stood either Paul Masih or Chhota Daniel, both of whom guarded the net like a wall.

Our team needed a name, an identity of its own. At my suggestion, we chose the name **"Friends Club"**.

The name represented more than a hockey club. It symbolized a friendship that had existed long before any of us had picked up a hockey stick. We came from different families, different backgrounds, and different faiths, yet the moment we stepped onto the field, we became one.

That was our team.

We played local tournaments and challenged teams from neighbouring localities. Whenever a match was arranged, players from both sides would often contribute a few coins each and purchase a small trophy to compete for. We regularly played against teams from Tulsi Mohalla, Bai Ka Baghicha, Sheetla Mai, Kariya Pathar, and Eastern Ghamapur.

Most of these matches were held at the Police Ground in the Police Lines, a properly laid-out hockey stadium. Occasionally we also played at Model High School or the Railway Ground.

Win or lose, after every match we sat together, laughed, and teased one another about mistakes and missed chances. For we were not merely teammates-we were genuine friends.

As memory serves me, we won most of our matches.

And even the matches we lost have remained sweet in remembrance.

□

As for my own game, the position of Inside Left felt like home from the very beginning.

Playing there, I often felt that I was not merely chasing a ball but weaving a small thread of my own into the fabric of the attack. Moving inward from the left flank, linking the Left Out and the Centre Forward, delivering passes at the right moment, and, when the opportunity arose, advancing myself to sharpen the attack-all this gave me immense satisfaction.

I was never a player who relied solely on physical strength. What attracted me was the architecture of the game-its rhythm, its design, and the intelligence hidden within it. Perhaps that is why the role of Inside Left suited my temperament so perfectly.

Our practices and matches possessed a character all their own. As evening descended and the sound of running feet echoed across the dusty ground, that little world of hockey would spring to life. Sometimes we played full matches with great enthusiasm; at other times we practised passing, dribbling, and hitting. Occasionally we repeated a single move again and again until it felt exactly right.

There were no crowds, no grand prizes, no applause. Yet the intensity with which we played was no less than that of a major contest.

Amid sweat, shouted instructions, laughter, fleeting irritations, and sudden bursts of joy, our team was doing more than playing hockey.

It was quietly creating within us a discipline, a fellowship, and a shared dream.

□

We have spoken at length about hockey, yet the real beginning-the story of those days when we built a field of our own to play upon-remains untold.

Let us begin at the very beginning.

Long before we held real hockey sticks in our hands, we played hockey with the dried branches of date palms.

Date palms were plentiful in our neighbourhood. A few stood alone beside compound walls, but most grew in open grounds, gathered in clusters of three or four or even more, as though engaged in some ancient conversation among themselves. Their large branches, often a metre to a metre and a half in length, curved naturally at the end where they joined the tall trunk of the tree. They resembled hockey sticks so closely that it seemed nature had fashioned them especially for us.

Whenever a strong storm swept through the area, these branches-known in the local dialect of Ghamapur as *kharentas*-would come crashing down. Dry and light, yet surprisingly sturdy.

For the children of Ghamapur, a *kharenta* was often the first companion in learning hockey. We would strip off the rough bark, smooth it down a little, and promptly elevate it to the status of a hockey stick.

I was six or seven years old when I began playing hockey. Real sticks arrived much later. Until then, the *kharenta* was our hockey stick. We dragged the ball across the ground with it, our hands often blistering and sometimes even bleeding. But the game never stopped. Our love for hockey was greater than the pain.

As I have already mentioned, boys of every age in Ghamapur played hockey-children as well as young men. Each age group had its own team, its own circle of friends. Morning and evening alike, all three grounds inside the Christian Compound were crowded. The Ramlila

Ground was equally alive with activity. Wherever hockey could possibly be played, sticks flashed and balls rolled.

But we were the youngest of all.

There was no place for us.

For a while, we contented ourselves with playing in narrow lanes and small vacant patches scattered around the neighbourhood, running about with our *kharenta* sticks. But it was not enough. Ours was a group of boys between eight and eleven years old. Playing in lanes and among houses brought constant interruptions. We were frequently scolded by elders and often forced to abandon our games halfway through.

Before long, we arrived at a collective decision.

And once the decision was made, we set about carrying it out.

There was only one place in the neighbourhood that nobody else used. We resolved to make it our own.

It was known as *"Kalu Ram Oil Mill Ground"*.

A little distant, somewhat isolated-but it was our necessity, and perhaps our destiny as well.

It lay across the neighbourhood drain, roughly a quarter of a kilometre beyond it.

The field was about three-quarters the size of a proper hockey ground. A narrow footpath ran through its centre, serving as a shortcut to Kanchghar Road, and people passed along it throughout the day.

The ground itself was far from level. It rose slightly toward the Jailer's Bungalow and sloped away toward the pond. Pits and hollows dotted the surface. Wild growth covered much of it-dense clusters of *chakoda* plants, standing one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half feet high, with fenugreek-like leaves and bitter pods hanging from their stems. Among them grew thorny datura bushes, armed with spikes on leaves and fruit

alike, as though determined to defend themselves from every direction.

Perhaps it was because of these thorns and the roughness of the terrain that nobody else had ever cast a second glance at the place.

But we did.

A dozen boys chose that field.

And then we built it.

For days on end, we arrived there carrying not hockey sticks but tools and stones. We uprooted the *chakoda* and datura plants from the roots. We hammered the ground flat with stones. Bundles of uprooted *chakoda* became makeshift brooms with which we swept the field clean. We removed large stones and pebbles, dug away elevated patches, and used the earth to fill the pits.

Every one of us worked with all the strength we possessed.

Within a week, we had transformed it into a playable ground.

In the beginning, the *chakoda* plants returned stubbornly. We would play for two or three days and then spend another two or three days clearing them away. Gradually, however, even this nuisance diminished.

We had no lime with which to mark the field.

Fortunately, Ram Narayan Dubey owned a marble-grinding workshop in the neighbourhood. From there we obtained white stone powder. With it we drew the centre line, the halfway line, the D, and the boundaries.

The satisfaction we felt on seeing those white lines-drawn by our own hands upon our own field-was unlike anything else.

Slowly, even our *kharenta* sticks gave way to real hockey sticks.

They were old, second-hand sticks bought from Gurandi Bazaar. We repaired them together, strengthened them, painted them, and cared

for them like prized possessions. I owned two or three sticks acquired from Gurandi Bazaar and from auctions held at my father's factory. Those I treasured most of all.

For four or five years we played regularly on that field.

Whenever repairs became necessary, everyone joined in. Together we maintained it and kept it alive.

We played until the ball could no longer be seen.

Darkness arrived gradually. First the white markings faded, then the ball, and finally one another's faces. Only when nothing remained visible did the game come to an end.

Never.

Afterward came at least half an hour of rest.

We sat in a circle on the same field. During winter we gathered dry *chakoda* bushes and lit a small fire. One or two boys usually carried matches; if not, a hidden matchbox could often be found tucked away near the *Tighra* under a stone.

Around that fire, conversations began with hockey and wandered who knows where.

□

I remember with great affection those companions who transformed that rough, thorn-filled, stony patch of land with their own hands.

Today, when the layers of memory unfold, it seems they were not merely building a hockey field. They were creating a world for themselves-a world where dreams could find room to run.

We possessed very few resources in those days, but there was no shortage of enthusiasm.

At an age when most children think only of play, these boys also carried shovels, baskets, and hoes. Morning or evening, whenever time

permitted, they gathered on that barren ground. One collected stone, another filled pits, a third uprooted thorny shrubs.

Dust rose into the air. Palms blistered. Clothes became caked with earth.

Yet not a single complaint could be seen on any face.

Looking back now, I suspect they did not even realize they were doing anything extraordinary.

For them it was as natural as running across a field or holding a hockey stick.

Building the ground before playing upon it was simply another part of the game.

They saw no dividing wall between labour and play.

To them, the two were inseparable.

Often, after hours of work, they would sit there exhausted and drenched in sweat, yet with a curious brightness in their eyes. Before them stretched an unfinished field, but in their imagination the match had already begun. The ball was moving, players were shouting, and the roar that would greet a goal seemed already to float through the air.

Today, when I remember that field, I recall not so much its soil as the hands that shaped it.

Fields change with time. Their grass changes. Their boundaries change.

But the labour of those who built them remains preserved in memory.

That labour was not merely the labour of levelling earth. It was the labour of giving shape to a collective dream.

Perhaps that is why the memory of those companions still touches me so deeply.

They taught us more than hockey.

They taught us that before reaching any dream, one must first prepare the ground upon which it can stand.

And sometimes that ground must be created with one's own hands and one's own sweat.

That was their true victory.

And perhaps it was their finest game.



When I look back now, it seems we were building more than a field.

We were building something within ourselves, though at the time we did not know its name.

Perhaps this is life's greatest paradox: before we can possess the things, we desire most, we must first create the ground upon which they may exist.

The field that was never given to us became the field we built ourselves.

And perhaps that is why our bond with it was so profound.

The thorns of the *chakoda* plants and the bitterness of the datura were not merely obstacles scattered across the land. They were tests.

And unknowingly, at that tender age, we accepted those tests.

Every uprooted shrub, every filled pit, every white line drawn across the ground left its mark not only upon the field but somewhere within us as well.

Years later, when life offered no level paths, when the terrain became uneven and the lines blurred, perhaps it was that childhood habit that sustained us.

For we had learned long ago that before one can play, one must first build the field.

And to build a field, one needs, above all else-companionship.

□

Now let me briefly tell the long story of hockey itself.

The origins of hockey are believed to stretch back nearly four thousand years. Ancient Egypt, Persia, and Greece all provide evidence of stick-and-ball games. Modern field hockey, however, developed in nineteenth-century England, where formal rules were established and clubs were founded.

Blackheath Club, founded in 1849, is counted among the earliest hockey clubs. In 1876, a more organized set of modern rules emerged. Hockey first appeared in the Olympic Games in London in 1908. The International Hockey Federation (FIH) was established in 1924, and from 1928 onward hockey became a permanent Olympic sport.

The game arrived in India through the British Army during the latter half of the nineteenth century and rapidly became the nation's most popular sport. Early clubs emerged in Calcutta, and prestigious tournaments such as the Beighton Cup soon followed.

The Indian Hockey Federation was established in 1925.

At the Amsterdam Olympics of 1928, India won its first Olympic gold medal.

Between 1928 and 1956, India captured six consecutive Olympic gold medals and established an unprecedented dominance over world hockey. In total, India has won eight Olympic gold medals in men's hockey-an achievement unmatched in the sport's history.

In 1975, India won the Men's Hockey World Cup.

No account of this golden era can be complete without mentioning **"Major Dhyan Chand"**, whose extraordinary stick-work and goal-scoring brilliance earned him the immortal title of *The Wizard of Hockey*.

Although modern hockey was born in England, it was India that carried the game to sublime heights during the middle decades of the

twentieth century. There was a time when world hockey and India seemed almost synonymous.

Even today, India remains one of hockey's great powers, and its glorious tradition continues to inspire new generations.

Yet the years between 1956 and 1976 marked a period of transition.

Until 1956, India had been the undisputed emperor of world hockey. During the following two decades, however, its supremacy gradually came under challenge.

The Melbourne Olympics of 1956 brought India its sixth consecutive gold medal and marked the zenith of its golden age. Indian dribbling, stick-work, and ball control were admired throughout the world.

Then came the Rome Olympics of 1960.

For the first time, India lost an Olympic final. Pakistan, emerging as a formidable force in the post-Dhyan Chand era, defeated India. It was more than the loss of a match; it was a signal that other nations had finally begun to rival Indian hockey.

Yet India responded magnificently.

At the Tokyo Olympics of 1964, India defeated Pakistan and reclaimed the gold medal, proving that Indian hockey still remained one of the world's foremost powers.

In 1975, however, India once again reminded the world of its greatness by winning the Men's Hockey World Cup. Defeating Pakistan in the final, India became world champion. To this day, it remains India's only Men's Hockey World Cup title.

Then came the Montreal Olympics of 1976, which introduced AstroTurf for the first time. The Indian team had virtually no experience of playing on this new synthetic surface. Indian hockey had evolved on natural grass, where artistry, close control, and intricate dribbling flourished. AstroTurf, by contrast, favoured speed, physical power, and a more direct style of play.

The consequences were immediate. India finished seventh and, for the first time in Olympic history, failed to win a medal.

In essence, the story of Indian hockey between 1956 and 1976 resembles the story of a mighty king who remained powerful even as the world around him was changing. The invincible India of 1956 found itself challenged during the 1960s; it displayed flashes of its old brilliance by winning the World Cup in 1975; and then, in 1976, struggled to adapt to new technologies and the changing demands of the game.

It was during this period that the golden age of Indian hockey gradually drew to a close and the modern era of the sport began.

If I were to name some of the most significant players of Indian hockey's golden age-particularly the period from 1928 to 1956 and the years surrounding it-the first name would, without question, be *Major Dhyan Chand*, revered throughout the world as *The Wizard of Hockey*.

Then comes *Roop Singh*, Dhyan Chand's younger brother, a magnificent forward and prolific goalscorer. *K.D. Singh "Babu"* became renowned for his exquisite stick-work and extraordinary understanding of the game, while *Balbir Singh Senior*, one of India's greatest centre-forwards, produced several unforgettable performances in Olympic finals.

Thereafter came *Leslie Claudius*, regarded as one of the most successful Olympians in Indian hockey history. He won four Olympic medals for India-three gold medals in 1948, 1952, and 1956, and a silver medal in 1960. His consistency, exceptional midfield play, and longevity at the highest level earned him a place among the immortals of Indian hockey.

Then there was *Udham Singh*, a versatile and immensely influential player; *Richard Allen*, the great goalkeeper whose contributions were crucial to India's early Olympic triumphs; *Kishan Lal*, remembered as a captain and outstanding winger; and *Keshav Dutt*, a gifted member of India's gold medal-winning teams of 1948 and 1952.

I would also mention *Randhir Singh Gentle*, the full back who became famous for scoring the decisive goal in the Olympic final of 1956.

Moving to the period between 1957 and 1976, after the era of Leslie Claudius and Udham Singh, names such as *Charanjit Singh, Prithipal Singh, Shankar Laxman, Gurbaksh Singh,* and *Harbinder Singh* emerge prominently. They played a crucial role in preserving India's reputation during the difficult years of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Thereafter, *Ajit Pal Singh* deserves special reverence for captaining India's victorious 1975 World Cup team. Alongside him stood players such as *Ashok Kumar, B. P. Govinda, M. P. Ganesh, Surjit Singh, Varinder Singh, and H. J. S. Cheema.*

These men kept the flame of Indian hockey burning at a time when the style of world hockey was changing, competition was becoming fiercer, and India was moving from its old era of dominance into an uncertain new age.

Between 1977 and 2000, a new generation of outstanding players emerged. Among the most notable were *Zafar Iqbal, Mohammed Shahid, M. M. Somaya, Charanjit Kumar, Jude Felix, Pargat Singh, Dhanraj Pillay, Mukesh Kumar, Ashish Ballal, Dilip Tirkey*, and the later-era *Balbir Singh.*

Zafar Iqbal and Mohammed Shahid preserved much of the elegance, artistry, and flair that had long characterized Indian hockey. Pargat Singh established a new benchmark for courage, aggression, and leadership in defence. Jude Felix brought fresh rhythm and creativity to the midfield, while Dhanraj Pillay became one of the brightest stars of his generation through his explosive pace, dazzling dribbling, and insatiable appetite for goals.

Together with players such as Mukesh Kumar, Ashish Ballal, and Dilip Tirkey, they helped Indian hockey retain international respect during a period when the game had become faster, more technical, and more demanding than ever before.

If I turn to the years between 2001 and 2026, the first name that comes to mind is *Dilip Tirkey*, whose defensive mastery, composure, and

remarkable longevity provided modern Indian hockey with a firm foundation.

Then comes *Sardar Singh*, whose intelligence, balance, and leadership in midfield gave the Indian team a renewed identity.

Thereafter emerges the towering figure of *P. R. Sreejesh*, not merely a great goalkeeper but a symbol of the renaissance of modern Indian hockey. His contribution to India's bronze medals at the Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024 Olympics was extraordinary.

Manpreet Singh infused the team with resilience and determination through his leadership, while *Harmanpreet Singh* left an indelible mark on the era through his goals, powerful drag-flicks, and commanding presence.

Alongside them, players such as *Rupinder Pal Singh, Amit Rohidas, Hardik Singh, Vivek Sagar Prasad, Lalit Upadhyay, Mandeep Singh,* and *Sumit* helped Indian hockey reach new heights at a time when the global game had become faster, more scientific, and more fiercely contested than ever before.

Taken together, these years were not merely a tunnel of struggle for Indian hockey. They became a story of repeatedly rising after defeat, of connecting a glorious tradition with new technology and new tempos, and of reclaiming honour on the world stage.

"The true strength of Indian hockey lies not merely in its golden past, but in its indomitable ability to rise again after every setback."

With that thought, I would like to add my own prayer and wish:

May Indian hockey once again rules the world with all its former pride, dignity, and splendour. May another golden age dawn, and may the Indian tricolour once again fly high across the skies of world hockey.

□

Slowly, it feels as though we have arrived at the final pages of this chapter.

This journey of words now stands at that bend in the road where only a pause seems visible ahead.

Yet memory has a nature all its own.

It refuses to obey the discipline of books.

It refuses to accept that a chapter must end merely because the pages are running out.

Many times, I decide that this is where the chapter should close. But then, somewhere within, I hear a faint knock.

It is as though a window in that vast old mansion of memories has been left open.

As though a small lamp is still burning in one of its rooms, and an invisible voice is saying:

"Has everything truly been said?"

That mansion still stands within me exactly as it always did-its long verandahs, its dust-covered staircases, its closed doors, and behind them countless memories suspended in silence.

One of those rooms belongs to hockey.

It has remained closed for years, yet strangely enough, the moment its door is opened, the air inside carries the same fragrance it did during our adolescence.

The scent of earth is still there.

The faint saltiness of sweat remains.

There are whistles, laughter, the silences that followed defeat, and the rough, untamed exhilaration that came after victory-feelings that words can never fully capture.

I feel there are still corners of that room my eyes have not reached.

There are cupboards whose doors remain unopened.

There are memories that perhaps stood shyly at the back when I sat down to write, unwilling to come forward.

They are still there-wrapped around some old hockey stick, seated beside a dust-covered trophy, or hiding behind a faded photograph.

Are memories not living beings in their own way?

One must call them.

One must take them gently by the hand and bring them into the present.

They do not come forward of their own accord. They must be persuaded that their presence is needed now more than ever. Time may have relegated them to the past, but today they have become companions-friends who quietly place their hand in yours and give you something that cannot be found anywhere else.

So why not return once more to that old mansion?

Why not climb again those staircases we once raced up?

Why not open once more the door of that room where the memories of hockey still wait patiently for us?

After all, who is stopping us?

Time?

Time itself survives only through memory.

And if, for a little while, we leave the threshold of the present and return to that room of the past,

perhaps there we shall find some forgotten incident waiting for us;

a face whose name has vanished, though its smile remains;

a voice lost long ago, yet still echoing somewhere deep within.

Come.

Let us open that door once more.

Surely, we shall find something precious there-something that remained unsaid.

For you know, do you not?

The most valuable memories of life are often those that quietly step before us at the very last moment, just before they take their leave.



I told you, didn't I, that we would find something.

And now, one by one, I shall tell you what we found.

I had completely forgotten about *Shastri Club*.

Let me tell you about it.

As often happens in institutions, teams, and committees, a division of sorts once occurred within St. Paul Club as well. A few dissatisfied players, joined by one or two newcomers, decided to form a separate hockey team. They named it *Shastri Club*.

Some of the players who had come to Jabalpur from elsewhere also felt that they were unable to secure within St. Paul Club the place they believed they deserved. Together, they began practising on a vacant ground that lay beside the high southern wall of the Jabalpur Central Jail. A few boys from the Police Lines joined them as well. Soon, one or two players from nearly every hockey-playing group in Ghamapur found their way to the new team.

For a brief period, even Anil Dubey went there. I met him almost every day, even though he was no longer playing with us. It was he who told me that the principal founder of Shastri Club was a player named *Rubin*.

Rubin was the heart and soul of the team.

He played at Right Out and, according to Anil, could sprint down the flank with the ball at lightning speed. Give him a proper pass and he

could score within the opening minutes of a match. As far as I remember, Newton also joined Rubin's team for some time.

These were the final days of my own hockey-playing life.

Our team, Friends Club, played one or two matches against Shastri Club at the Police Parade Ground. It was there that I first watched Rubin play. Anil had not exaggerated. Rubin truly possessed extraordinary pace on the right wing. Once he gathered the ball, he seemed to fly down the field.

Both St. Paul Club and Shastri Club participated in several local tournaments. Yet before long, the more experienced players on both sides realised something important. The division had not strengthened Shastri Club, nor had it allowed St. Paul Club to retain its former strength.

Gradually, the players began practising together once again.

St. Paul Club adopted a somewhat renewed form. Shastri Club continued to exist but increasingly came to be regarded as St. Paul Club's "B" team.

By then I had already entered engineering college, and my own hockey-playing days were over. Therefore, this particular chapter of events is based largely on what I later heard from others.

□

Newton's name has appeared again.

I mentioned him earlier, but something important remained unsaid.

If memory serves me correctly, his full name was *Newton Daniel*.

This was the same Newton Daniel whose mother, Mrs. Saroj Daniel, owned the large old bungalow in which I attended primary school from Class Two through Class Five. The Jabalpur Municipal Corporation had rented the building and established the Government Primary School of Western Ghamapur there.

The school still stands in the same place today.

I visited it three or four years ago. It is now in excellent condition. Perhaps the Municipal Corporation has since purchased the property, though I never enquired.

Newton had three younger brothers-Robert, Richard, and a youngest brother whose name I can no longer recall. All of them played hockey.

Richard, or "Richchu" as we often called him, was a Right Out or Right In for our Friends Club team. He was equally comfortable in both positions.

But I was speaking about Newton, and as usual I have wandered away from the point.

What I wanted to say was that Newton was a magnificent player at Centre Forward, Left In, and Right In alike. He represented both St. Paul Club and the G.C.F. team.

As far as my memory and information allow me to say, he progressed as far as the selection trials for the Indian national hockey team.

There were also two former students at Model High School who eventually played for India. One of them was Sankadik Singh. The other I remember clearly but not confidently enough to write down his name.



While studying at Model High School, I represented my class in hockey during the sixth standard. That year, however, the selection of the "C" Grade team took place without my even noticing. In any case, the team was dominated by boys from the seventh standard.

When I reached Class Seven, I was selected directly into the "B" Grade team.

I continued to play in my preferred position-Left In.

Once, during practice, our senior coach, L. N. Awasthi Sir, called me aside and offered a piece of advice:

"You should hold on to the ball a little longer. You create good moves and release the pass too quickly. Many times, the move goes to waste."

In Friends Club we played not for individual glory but for the success of the team. Many of the moves I created ended in goals scored by Daniel. Anil benefited in much the same way.

School hockey was different.

There was less time for collective practice, and therefore the understanding between players was not always as precise.

In Classes Nine and Ten, I played for the school's "A" Grade team. My position remained the same: Left In, or Inside Left.

During those years I played numerous inter-school tournaments and practice matches against schools such as Anjuman School, A. P. Narmada School, Navin Vidya Bhavan, and Hitkarini School.

One match remains vivid in memory.

I cannot now remember whether I was in Class Ten or Eleven. As I have already mentioned, students of Class Eleven were generally discouraged from all activities except study, and memory grows hazy around that period.

What I do remember is that it was the final of an "A" Grade tournament against Navin Vidya Bhavan.

We lost by a single goal.

Yet that is not why the match remains unforgettable.

In the closing minutes, while we were trailing by one goal, I collected the ball near the centre line and dribbled directly toward the opposing circle. Somehow, I penetrated deep into their striking circle. At the crucial moment, however, none of my teammates were in position to receive a pass.

Nor, caught in that moment of uncertainty, was I able to finish the move myself.

Before I could decide, the defenders committed a foul and broke the momentum of the attack.

I remember almost nothing of what happened while I was dribbling through the opposition. I was scarcely aware of the players around me.

All I remember is noise.

The roar of students.

Applause.

Excited shouting.

Much later, my friend Akhilesh described the scene to me in detail.

Since I have mentioned Navin Vidya Bhavan, I should also mention one of its famous players-*Arun Yadav*.

He later played for the Railway national team.

His younger sister, *Madhu Yadav*, represented the Indian women's team.

There was another notable player named *Sunil Yadav*, who rose to a high level of hockey. He played Right Out for the Bai Ka Baghicha/Tulsi Mohalla team. Because of our respective positions, we often found ourselves facing one another in matches.

As for Arun Yadav, people affectionately called him "Laddu."

He still lives in Jay Prakash Nagar, Adhartal, Jabalpur.

Curiously enough, Laddu Bhaiya is a close friend of my younger brother, and I still meet him from time to time.

□

For me, hockey is not merely a game.

It is not even merely a word.

It is a living world that continues to exist within me.

Those who know nothing of my past cannot easily imagine, looking at me today, that somewhere inside me there still flows an entire galaxy of hockey.

And let me tell you something both amusing and deeply meaningful.

Whenever sleep refuses to come at night, I begin playing hockey in my mind.

Lying in bed, I dribble an imaginary ball across an imaginary field. I create moves. I launch attacks. I break up opposing attacks. My team is always the same-Friends Club.

The opposing teams change.

The faces of the players are never entirely clear.

And somewhere in the middle of those imaginary matches, I drift into sleep without ever noticing when the transition occurs.

It still happens.

Even now.

□

At the beginning of this chapter, I said that the awareness we call "I" is not merely the sum of body and mind.

There is something more within it-something not easily imprisoned in words.

If we attempted to analyse it fully, we would wander far beyond the boundaries of this chapter. For now, let us simply accept that while the self is certainly composed of body, mind, and consciousness, it also contains other elements that are both independent and inseparably woven into our being. They shape our nature, define our character, and give our souls a distinctive rhythm.

Within me, one such element beats in the form of hockey.

True, I have not held a hockey stick in my hands for many years.

The running across fields, the whistle of referees, the ball skimming over the grass-all of it has gradually disappeared into the mist of time.

And yet, strangely enough, hockey has never left me.

It remains alive within me as naturally as one of the body's own organs-something whose presence we may not consciously feel every moment, but without which life itself would somehow seem incomplete.

Sometimes I think hockey was never merely a sport.

It was a silent force that participated in the making of my personality.

It taught me not only how to play, but how to live.

What a goal is, and how to keep sight of it even when it appears distant-that I learned from hockey.

To commit oneself completely to a purpose.

To continue striving despite the possibility of defeat.

To fall and rise again.

To fight one's own battles while creating opportunities for one's teammates.

These lessons came not from books, but from hockey.

On a hockey field, nobody wins alone.

Success is shared.

Failure is shared as well.

Perhaps that is why hockey taught me that progress in life is ultimately something achieved together with others.

To offer help and to accept help are both essential human virtues.

To protect oneself is important.

To protect those who walk beside us is equally important.

The ability to stand before life's uncertainties as a team-this lesson, too, came from the hockey field. Patience, Discipline, Restraint, Waiting, Struggle, Perseverance -

I encountered these words later in dictionaries. Their meanings I had already learned on the hockey field.

Today, when I look back, it seems that in many difficult moments and important decisions of my life, that player remained somewhere within me.

The same player who never lost the courage to play the next match, even after defeat.

That is why hockey is not merely one part of my "self."

It is a living memory.

A formative influence.

A way of seeing.

And perhaps, above all, a teacher.

A teacher who is no longer visible on the field, yet still stands quietly somewhere within me, reminding me in every difficult moment:

"The game is not over yet."

□□□

4

Shabd Tilism

("A magical world of words, existing in parallel with life.")

If I were to speak of words, perhaps I would have to begin with previous lives.

For it seems to me that human beings are not born with words; they bring them along from somewhere unimaginably distant. The way memories return. The way an unspoken melody seems to have been playing within us long before we become aware of it.

Before we utter words, we inherit them through listening.

Long before we learn to see the world, we learn to hear it. A mother's lullaby, a father's voice, the murmurs of the household, the birds in song, the pealing of temple bells, the soft patter of rain-all these come together to build the first home of words within us. We may not yet understand their meanings, but their sounds find their way into our being. Quietly, they sink into the soil of consciousness like seeds waiting for their season.

Then come the spoken words.

They do not arrive from some foreign place either. They are the offspring of the words we have first heard. A child begins by borrowing the language of others and, little by little, blends into it the music of his own voice. One day he believes that he is speaking, when, in truth, it is the words themselves that have found in him a means of expression.

Then come the written words.

It is here that the world begins to change.

Words are no longer confined to those we have heard. New words appear before us-words no one has ever spoken into our ears. They emerge from the pages of a book, from the lines of a poem, from a novel, a work of philosophy, or the pen of an unknown writer. They arrive pristine and untouched. At first, they seem like strangers; slowly, almost imperceptibly, they become our own.

It is here that the true enchantment of words begins.

Yet this enchantment does not reveal itself in the same way to everyone. For some, words remain no more than a means of communication. For others, they become a livelihood. For still others, they open the gates to knowledge. And then there are those rare souls for whom words become an entire universe.

Some are so completely ensnared by this spell that they never find their way out again. Indeed, a time comes when they no longer wish to. They discover that breathing within the mysterious realm of words feels more natural, more effortless, more deeply fulfilling than breathing anywhere else. There they remain, watching the seasons of life turn. They step into the outer world only for as long as it takes to attend to bread, to relationships, and to the ordinary obligations of living. Then they quietly return to that other world.

A world built not of brick and stone, but of imagination, thought, memory, and feeling-a world whose every particle is fashioned out of words.

And let me make one thing clear: I am not speaking of *language*. I am speaking of *words*.

Languages change. Scripts change. Even pronunciation shifts with time. Yet the soul of words endures. They carry within them the accumulated weight of human experience-our sorrows and joys, our loves, our curiosity, our loneliness. Words do not merely convey meaning; they also carry memories, fragrances, colours, and, at times, an entire lifetime.

I no longer hesitate to admit that I, too, am an inhabitant of that enchanted realm of words.

Even in an age that has become almost entirely digital, I find immense pleasure in reading words-in turning them over and over in my mind, in uncovering the layers of their meaning, in speaking to them aloud, in sharing them with others, and, finally, in giving them a new life through writing.

There are moments when it seems that I do not write words at all; it is the words that write me. I merely hold their hand and follow. Wherever they choose to lead, I walk quietly behind them.

As children, we imagine that we have discovered our own words. Yet the truth is that we are only returning the words we have borrowed from the world. Our first sentences are never truly our own; they are echoes of the world that surrounds us.

Writing comes much later.

For the first time, while writing, something extraordinary happens. Words no longer merely come to us-they begin to descend into us. Books are no longer simply read; they begin to read us. We encounter words we have never heard before. They step out from the pages of a poem, enter through the open window of a novel, or are born from the silence of a philosopher. They are unfamiliar, and yet, the moment we meet them, we experience the strange certainty that we have known them forever-as though we had unexpectedly come upon an old friend after years of separation.

It is here that words reveal their true nature.

They do not merely give meaning; they create worlds.

Some people pass by them as one passes a river. They look at the water, feel its coolness for a moment, and continue on their way.

Others step into the river, swim for a while, and then return to the shore.

And there are those who make that river their home.

So, it is with words.

Some enter their enchanted labyrinth so completely that they never wish to return. Gradually, the outer world begins to seem a little too noisy, while the inner world grows increasingly real. They come to live among words as a fish lives in water-unaware of the water itself yet utterly sustained by it.

The outer world continues to call them. They answer its summons, for they must fulfil their responsibilities, honour their relationships, and attend to the ordinary necessities of life. But as they return, their feet turn almost of their own accord toward that invisible realm where thoughts dwell, where memories abide, where imagination flourishes, and where, amidst them all, words continue to glow with their quiet, unassuming light.

There is a world that appears on no map. It has no geography. Its only substance is words, and its only climate is human feeling.

I am not speaking here of language.

Languages are created by human beings; words, perhaps, are what create human beings.

Languages change with time. Their grammar changes, their scripts change, their pronunciations change. Yet there are certain words that carry the heartbeat of humanity within them across centuries. They are not merely spoken; they are lived.

I no longer hesitate to admit that I, too, belong to that invisible realm.

Today, when almost everything has become digital, turning the page of a book still gives me an experience that no movement of a finger across a screen can replace. To pause before a beautiful sentence, to let a single word linger in my mind, to search for the hidden meaning concealed behind its obvious one-this, for me, is nothing less than a form of contemplation.

Sometimes it even seems that I do not go looking for words.

The words find me.

I write them less than I wait for them to arrive.

And when they finally do, they do not merely write the story of my life; slowly, almost imperceptibly, they begin to write me.

□

I have no memory of the very first words I heard or the first ones I spoke. Those moments lie buried somewhere in impenetrable darkness. One can only imagine them. My mother, my father, and my aunt must have called me by affectionate names; my mother, my aunt, and my grandmother must have sung lullabies to me. But to recover those voices now, to reach them again, is almost impossible.

So let them remain where they are.

Long before I became acquainted with the vowels and consonants of Hindi, I had already heard countless words and had begun speaking some of them myself. Then, at home, my mother introduced me to the sounds and shapes of the alphabet-*a*, *ā*, *i*, *ī*, *u*, *ū*... and *ka*, *kha*, *ga*, *gha*...

The very first printed words I ever learned to read were these:

"Amar, come home. Come home, Amar."

("अमर घर चल, चल घर अमर")

That was the opening lesson in my very first primer.

Soon after came another poem:

Hidden deep inside a seed,
Beneath the quiet layers of earth,
It lay with its eyes gently closed.
The raindrops whispered,
"Wake up, little one... wake up."
The fairy-maidens of sunlight called as well.
And in a sudden eager stir,
It rose at last,

To discover
What kind of world awaited outside.

“एक बीज के भीतर गुप चुप
मिट्टी की तह में कुछ नीचे
पड़ा हुआ था आँखें मीचे
बूंदें बोलीं उठो उठो जी
बोलीं उठो किरण की परियाँ
उठा देखने तब झटपट वह
कैसी है बाहर की दुनिया”

And that was how I first became acquainted with words.

At first, they were only sounds-floating in the air, leaving someone else's lips only to find a home within me. Gradually, those sounds became recognition. Recognition ripened into familiarity, and familiarity, somewhere along the way, turned into friendship. Perhaps every profound beginning arrives with such quietness that we recognize it only long after it has taken place.

What follows is, in truth, a remarkably simple story. So simple that it can be contained within two sentences-rather like the little tales that made us laugh as children:

There was once a king, and there was once a queen.
Both died, and that was the end of the story.

"एक था राजा, एक थी रानी,
दोनों मर गए, खत्म कहानी।"

My story, too, is scarcely any longer.

In all its expanse, there seems to be room for only one word:

“Friendship.”

Not a letter more, not a letter less.

Yet life delights in its own peculiar irony. The things that appear smallest often occupy the largest spaces within us. *Friendship* is one such word-a modest little word, no more than a handful of letters, and yet a bridge so quietly built that, while crossing it, we scarcely notice the moment we leave the shore of our solitude and arrive upon the landscape of another soul.

Looking back now, it seems to me that friends are never people at first.

They are words.

A sentence that, the very first time we hear it, feels as though it has always belonged to us. A laugh that somehow recognizes the silence we carry within. A form of address that, even in the midst of a crowd, remains reserved for us alone.

Only afterward do faces appear. Then names. Then memories.

Perhaps that is why words never remain mere words. They carry within themselves the faint echoes of everyone whose life have, however briefly, touched our own. Speak the name of an old friend and back comes the voice as well-the laughter, the impatience, the letters, the long afternoons shared together. All of it lies folded inside that single word, waiting quietly to be remembered.

Words are like old houses. From the outside they appear small, almost unremarkable. But step inside, and room after room opens before you, each leading to another.

Sometimes I feel that words possess no geography of their own. They cannot be found on any map. Their true country is memory.

There, time does not move by the hands of a clock. A simple remark spoken decades ago may still be as fresh as it was on the day it was uttered, while a brilliant sentence spoken yesterday may, within days, crumble into dust.

That is why even the word *friendship* has no fixed meaning.

Each of us fills it with the substance of our own life.

For one person, it is walking beside another. For someone else, it is the quiet companionship of sitting together in silence. For one, it is the habit of writing letters year after year. For another, it is the smile exchanged upon unexpectedly meeting at a railway station after decades apart.

The word remains the same.

Only the sky above it changes.

Perhaps that is the true enchantment of words. They always conceal far more than they reveal. Their deepest meanings are never found in dictionaries. They lie scattered across the countless lives through which they have travelled.

Sometimes I wonder whether the entire world itself is made of words. We reach one another less by roads than by language. Love, trust, longing, memory, forgiveness-these all begin as words before they become experienced. And once the experience has passed, it returns once more, transformed into words.

This universe of words is no less vast than the cosmos itself. Whichever direction one chooses, a new galaxy unfolds. A new meaning, a new memory, a new human being seems to be waiting there. Every word appears to conceal another world within it, and every world, in turn, seems ready to give birth to another word.

Perhaps that is why our longest journeys are completed not with our feet, but with words.

□

The moment I learned to read, I began reading whatever printed words came my way, wherever I found them.

Naturally, my first companions were my schoolbooks. But long before I was old enough to remember, our home had already been receiving *'Kalyan'*, the monthly magazine published by Gita Press, Gorakhpur. Alongside it came two other magazines-*'Manohar Kahaniyan'* and *'Maya'*.

I am speaking of a historically significant phase in the lives of both these magazines. Today, '*Manohar Kahaniyan*' and '*Maya*' are remembered chiefly as magazines devoted to crime, suspense, sensationalism, and political intrigue. But that was a much later transformation. During the 1940s, the 1950s, and the early years of the 1960s, they possessed an entirely different character and purpose.

'Manohar Kahaniyan' was first published in 1944, twelve years before I was born. India then stood on the threshold of independence, and a fresh wind of social change was sweeping across the country. In its formative years, the magazine sought above all to provide wholesome entertainment while holding a mirror to society through the medium of fiction.

The stories published during those early decades-especially throughout the forties, fifties, and early sixties-were deeply rooted in social realism. They portrayed, with quiet sensitivity, the joys and sorrows of the Indian joint family, and explored themes such as integrity, sacrifice, love, moral responsibility, and the enduring dignity of ordinary lives. They touched readers not through spectacle, but through emotional truth. Their purpose was not merely to entertain but to leave behind a gentle moral illumination.

Its sister publication from Mitra Prakashan, Maya, occupied a somewhat different place in the literary world. It was known for publishing stories by major writers such as Premchand and Amrit Lal Nagar, along with other distinguished literary voices of the time. Manohar Kahaniyan, by contrast, adopted a lighter, more accessible style-engaging and entertaining, yet always dignified and firmly within the bounds of family reading. Together, Maya and Manohar Kahaniyan represented an important chapter in the literary culture of Hindi periodicals.

In those days, these magazines were read without hesitation by every generation of the household. Grandparents, parents, women, and children would often sit together and read them, or pass them from one pair of hands to another. They were regarded, in the truest sense of the phrase, as family magazines-publications that belonged not to an individual reader, but to the shared life of the home.

To the best of my knowledge, it was only during the late 1960s and into the 1970s that the magazine began to season its socially grounded stories with touches of mystery, adventure, and detective fiction in an effort to broaden its appeal. Even then, however, it bore little resemblance to the crime magazines of today. There were no lurid tales of violence or sensational headlines. Instead, its stories drew inspiration from writers such as Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Devaki Nandan Khatri-social narratives infused with suspense, curiosity, and a gentle air of mystery.

By the 1970s and 1980s, as Indian society changed and competition in the magazine market intensified, Mitra Prakashan gradually transformed Manohar Kahaniyan into a publication devoted almost entirely to "true crime" and crime thrillers based on real incidents. That is why the younger generation is scarcely aware of its distinguished past-when it was a magazine of social insight, literary grace, and quiet moral imagination".

My father had the admirable habit of preserving everything with meticulous care. Each year, the complete sets of all three magazines were bound separately into sturdy hardbound volumes. On the spine of every volume, he would neatly write, in bold black letters, the magazine's title and the year of publication.

I mention all this so that it may not surprise you that I slipped so naturally into the world of words.

Both my mother and my father were devoted readers. My father usually immersed himself in Kalyan, while my mother preferred Manohar Kahaniyan and Maya. From time to time, my father would also bring home the Hindi digest Navneet.

The magazine had first appeared in January 1952. It was among India's earliest digest magazines, presenting, in an elegant and highly readable form, carefully selected pieces of literature, essays, cultural reflections, and memorable ideas from India and around the world. It was later acquired by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, which has continued to publish it ever since. Today it is better known as Bhavan's Navneet. Throughout its long history, it has remained a magazine distinguished

by its high literary and cultural standards, and it continues to be published to this day.

In later years, Sarita also became a regular visitor to our home. By then, however, both Manohar Kahaniyan and Maya had undergone their transformation, and those once-familiar magazines had quietly disappeared from our household.

□

One fragment from a story I read in Maya still survives upon the screen of my memory.

It was a mysterious tale, perhaps set in China. This is all that I remember:

A young woman is sitting alone in a room. Hanging on the wall before her is a painting. It depicts the rippling waters of a river, and upon those waters floats a small boat. A Chinese boatman, wearing a broad conical hat, is rowing it with measured strokes of his oar.

Outside, evening is slowly gathering. The room is filling, little by little, with deepening shadows.

And in the painting, evening is descending too.

The young woman continues to gaze at the picture without taking her eyes away from it.

Then, all at once, the boat begins to drift slowly across the painted river.

She looks more intently.

The Chinese boatman is rowing.

Her eyes widen-not merely in astonishment, but in growing terror.

Before she can gather a single coherent thought, the boat turns.

It is coming straight toward her.

She wants to scream, but her voice has vanished somewhere beyond her reach. She tries to rise and run, yet her body refuses to obey. She longs to close her eyes, but even her eyelids seem to have forgotten how to blink.

Only this fragment of the story has stayed with me. Yet it has returned to me countless times in moments of profound solitude. Each time, I feel that it is not the young woman sitting in that room, but I myself.

My trembling memory then carries the scene a little further. The Chinese boatman steps ashore and sits down opposite me. There is no question in his eyes. He simply gazes at me with an empty, inscrutable stare.

Whenever this unfolds in my mind, I find myself seated in a bungalow perched on the embankment of the drain that flowed beside the Ramlila Ground in our Ghamapur neighbourhood. It was the very bungalow where a Bengali couple lived, and during their visits to Calcutta, my aunt and I would spend the nights there. The painting hung on the wall directly opposite the drawing room. Everything else happened exactly as it did in the story: the evening deepening into dusk, the room slowly dissolving into darkness until nothing seemed to exist except that painting and myself... the little boat, and the solitary man rowing it with slow, measured strokes towards me. I would watch him with wide, unblinking eyes as he came ever closer.

Then, all at once, everything would vanish.

Nothing remained except me, my hurried breathing, and the loud, insistent throb of my own heart echoing in the silence.

I have never understood why this happened. Yet, once it was over, I would experience an overwhelming sense of relief-as though I had narrowly escaped some terrible misfortune or an unnamed catastrophe.

□

I recount these episodes for only one reason: to show how profoundly the world of words and stories came to inhabit my inner life-or perhaps I should say, how deeply it continues to inhabit it even today.

Looking back, I realise that my fascination with language was never born of a single revelation. It seeped into me imperceptibly, like the fragrance of the air within our home, becoming a part of my being long before I was aware of it.

The incidents I have described are merely fleeting glimpses of that atmosphere. The truth is that my love for reading and writing was a legacy I inherited from my family.

My father had received little formal education. His schooling had ended at the primary school in the village of Bankhedi. Yet his devotion to books and the written word owed nothing to academic degrees. For the annual Ramlila performances in the village, he composed devotional songs and wrote the scripts for the dramatic scenes. For years, I saw bundles of his handwritten manuscripts carefully preserved at home. On those yellowing sheets of paper, the fading lines of ink seemed to carry the warmth of his voice, as though he were still speaking to us across time.

My mother was studying for the *Sahitya Visharad* qualification. Books, therefore, were never merely academic texts to her; they were a natural extension of her life. My aunt, though educated entirely at home, possessed an equally passionate love of reading. She devoured magazines, novels, and literary works with quiet delight and deep affection.

Our bookshelves held far more than school textbooks. They were lined with literature as well. It was there that I first encountered novels such as *Gunahon Ka Devta*, *Jhootha Sach*, and *Teri Meri Uski Baat*. Beside them stood numerous reference works. Even today, I can vividly recall *Braj Madhuri Saar Ki Tika* and the many special issues of *Kalyan*. They remain preserved in my memory with the same tenderness as the moments I spent nestled in the loving embrace of my mother, father, aunt, and maternal grandfather.

Perhaps that is why words gradually ceased to be merely a medium of language for me. They became, little by little, members of the family. Listening to them, reading them, and then carrying their echoes within me for days became part of my nature. If my love for literature continued to deepen in later years, its beginnings lay not in a library but in the bookshelves of my own home, where the books quietly became my companions before I even realised it.

Even today, I cannot honestly say how much of what those books contained I understood at the time, and how much remained beyond my grasp. Their meanings were probably far older than my years. Yet I found myself irresistibly drawn to them. I would turn their pages endlessly. Sometimes I would read a page or two; at other times I would simply sit with a book resting in my hands, without reading a single line, as though there existed within books another world that came before words-a world whose faint whisper alone was enough to summon me.

Many of those books I returned to years later. Only then did their meanings begin to reveal themselves. Yet, looking back now, I feel that my relationship with them had already been forged long before I understood what they meant.

I have loved books for as long as I can remember. Perhaps it would be truer to say that I loved their very presence. The faint, damp fragrance rising from the yellowing pages of old books-carrying within it the dust of time and the touch of countless unknown hands-or the fresh scent of paper and ink released the moment a brand-new book was opened: both possessed the same irresistible enchantment for me. Even today, it seems to me that books first enter the heart through their fragrance; their words introduce themselves much later.

□

Now let me move the story forward.

The books and magazines I have mentioned so far had certainly awakened my curiosity and introduced me to the world of reading. But

the one that truly made me fall in love with books was a children's magazine called *Nandan*.

I discovered *Nandan* at the house of Kedar, the second son of Kakka-Kandhilal Vishwakarma-who was only a year older than I was. I came and went from their house as freely as I moved from one room to another in my own home.

One day I noticed the magazine lying on a long table. The "table" was in fact the broad top of a long cupboard built against the wall, fitted with wire-mesh doors. Inside were all sorts of household things that were used only occasionally. But what caught my eye was *Nandan*. I picked it up and began turning its pages. At first glance, with its colourful illustrations and lively layout, it seemed utterly delightful. Sitting right there, I read a couple of stories and browsed through some of its other sections.

When I finished, I asked Kedar if I could borrow the magazine and take it home. He refused. "Shyama Bua brought it," he said. "How can I let you take it?"

Shyama Bua was known for her stern temperament. She lived in Kanpur, and I lacked the courage to ask her for the magazine myself. So I returned home, disappointed, but *Nandan* stayed with me. For the next three or four days, I found excuses to visit Kakka's house for one reason alone-to read *Nandan*.

Nandan had begun publication in November 1964.

(It was launched in memory of India's first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, soon after his passing, and its inaugural issue was dedicated to him. Another immensely popular children's magazine, *Parag*, had begun publication a few years earlier, in 1958.)

By the time I came across that first copy of *Nandan*, a few issues of *Parag* had already found their way into our home from time to time. I do not mean to compare the two magazines. I enjoyed *Parag* as well. Yet I suspect that because I could not take *Nandan* home with me, it awakened in me a longing that only made it more precious. Perhaps it

is the things we cannot immediately possess that cast the deepest spell upon us.

Whatever the reason, it was these two magazines that first opened before me the great fairground of words.

I must have been eight or nine years old then. In the beginning, my mother would read the stories from *Parag* aloud to me. Gradually, I began reading them on my own.

□

Around the same time-or perhaps a little earlier or later-two more magazines drew me irresistibly into their embrace. They were *Chandamama* and *Indrajal Comics*.

Chandamama was one of India's most beloved and enduring children's magazines, one that shaped the childhood of several generations. It first appeared in July 1947, just weeks before India's independence. Founded by the celebrated South Indian film producer B. Nagi Reddy and the renowned writer Chakrapani, it was initially published in Telugu and Tamil. Owing to its extraordinary popularity, it was soon brought out in Hindi (from 1949 onward), English, Gujarati, Marathi, and eventually in thirteen Indian languages.

The stories in *Chandamama* were told in a voice that felt as though a grandparent were sitting beside you, recounting tales from memory. Its distinctive illustrations possessed a timeless charm that captivated young readers. Drawing upon Indian mythology, history, folklore, and legendary characters, the magazine entertained while gently passing on moral values.

Among its most celebrated features was the *Vetala* series. In every episode, the ghostly Vetala would pose an intricate riddle to King Vikram, who was compelled to answer it through wisdom and reason. Another unforgettable character was Panna Lal-a remarkably clever, quick-witted, and resourceful man whose intelligence enabled him to

solve the most baffling puzzles and outsmart the wicked. These are the two characters that remain most vivid in my memory today.

In 2007, after the magazine was acquired by a digital media company, attempts were made to reinvent it for a new generation. For reasons I do not fully know, however, publication finally ceased in March 2013. Even today, countless readers continue to seek out its old issues online, returning to them with the same affection they once felt as children.

The other publication that left an equally deep impression on me was *Indrajal Comics*-a golden chapter in the history of Indian comics. First published in 1964, the series laid one of the strongest foundations for the culture of illustrated storytelling in India. For children and young people growing up during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, *Indrajal Comics* was nothing short of a phenomenon. It opened the door to a world where words and pictures worked together, transforming adventure into something one could both read and see.

The *Indrajal Comics* series introduced Indian readers to several celebrated foreign characters, thoughtfully adapted for an Indian audience. Foremost among them was *Vetal*, the Indian incarnation of the American comic-book hero *The Phantom*. In India, he came to be known as the "Walking Ghost" and was both *Indrajal*'s first and most beloved hero. The original character had been created by the American writer Lee Falk. Alongside him was *Mandrake the Magician*, the master illusionist whose hypnotic powers and magical feats invariably outwitted the most formidable criminals. Then there was *Flash Gordon*, the legendary hero of science-fiction adventures set in the vastness of outer space.

For nearly twenty-six years, *Indrajal Comics* reigned over the imagination of millions of readers. Eventually, however, the growing popularity of television and video games, along with internal difficulties, brought its remarkable journey to an end. In December 1989, publication ceased forever, after an extraordinary run of 805 regular issues. Even today, old copies of *Indrajal Comics* are prized

possessions among collectors, often changing hands for astonishingly high prices.

Of all the characters the series introduced, I read only those I have mentioned here, though there were many others. And among them all, it was Vetal who captured my imagination most completely. Even now, I remember the people and creatures who inhabited his world with such clarity that it sometimes feels as though I had lived among them myself.

There was *Devil*, Vetal's fiercely loyal wolf. He resembled a dog in appearance, but to his enemies he was death itself. There was *Hero*, the magnificent white horse that carried Vetal through countless adventures. *Diana Palmer*, first his beloved and later his wife, worked for the United Nations and stood beside him with unwavering courage. *Gurran*, the wise chief of the Bandar tribe in the fictional African jungle of Denkali, was Vetal's closest and most trusted friend. Then there was the *Jungle Patrol*, a modern police force originally established centuries earlier by one of Vetal's ancestors. Its officers faithfully obeyed the commands of their mysterious and unseen commander-who was, of course, Vetal himself.

Beyond India, this immortal hero was known simply as *The Phantom*, or *Mr. Walker*. He had been created in 1936 by Lee Falk. It was *Indrajal Comics* that christened him *Vetal* for Indian readers. Within the stories he was known by evocative titles such as *The Walking Ghost* and *The Man Who Cannot Die*.

If I were to begin describing Vetal's skull-shaped cave, his two legendary rings, the Bandar pygmies, or the mystery behind his seeming immortality, this memoir would soon cease to be my story and turn instead into a book about the adventures of Mr. Walker. So let me leave Vetal where he truly belongs-in those unforgettable, immortal tales-and continue my own journey through the fairground of words.



The enchantment of *Indrajal Comics* cast such a powerful spell over me that the arrival of each new issue felt like the approach of a little festival.

For days beforehand, I would save every coin I could. The gentle clink of those coins in my pocket sounded like a promise that the next issue would soon be mine.

As the expected day of publication drew nearer, a strange restlessness would begin to take hold of me. On that morning, I would usually wake long before everyone else. I would step outside and stand by the road in front of our house; my eyes fixed on the long stretch disappearing into the distance.

In those days, newspaper vendors carried far more than newspapers. Along with the morning editions came magazines and comics. Some copies were reserved for regular subscribers, while others they sold for cash to eager customers along their route.

I was one of those waiting children, standing by the roadside with hopeful eyes, watching for the familiar bicycle to appear, convinced that somewhere in the bundle slung across its carrier lay a new adventure waiting just for me.

The moment I spotted a newspaper vendor's bicycle in the distance; my heart would begin to race of its own accord. I would wave my arm frantically, hoping to catch his attention. Sometimes he would stop. Sometimes he would ride past without even glancing in my direction. Then I would break into a run after him, calling out between breaths,

"Brother, has the new *Indrajal Comics* arrived?"

If the latest issue happened to be tucked away in his canvas bag, he would stop his bicycle, one foot resting on the ground while I hurriedly fumbled in my pocket for my carefully saved coins. Smiling, he would hand me the comic. In that moment, it felt as though I had acquired some priceless treasure. It was never merely a thin booklet in my hands; it was an entirely new world.

Yet I never began reading it the moment I reached home.

First, I would hold it close and breathe in the mingled fragrance of fresh ink and newly printed paper. Even today, it seems to me that the scent of a new book was itself a distinct pleasure, one that words can never quite capture. Then I would spend a long time admiring its glossy cover, reading the title again and again, studying the illustrations, and turning its pages with almost ceremonial care. Sometimes curiosity would overcome me, and I would read a page or two. But just as often I would deliberately close it again, saving it for the quiet stillness of the afternoon or the deep silence of the night, when I could savour it slowly. Some joys are diminished when consumed all at once; they reveal themselves only to those willing to linger over them.

There were days, however, when the newspaper vendor carried no new issue. On such mornings my spirits would sink. But disappointment never stayed with me for long, because I knew there was one place in the city where the latest magazines always arrived first-the bookstall at Jabalpur Railway Station.

In those days, no platform ticket was required to enter the station, and boys of my age attracted little attention anyway. So, I would simply set off on foot from Ghamapur to the railway station. The journey never seemed long. Perhaps that was because the happiness of reaching my destination began accompanying me long before I actually arrived.

Gradually, that railway bookstall became far more than a place where I bought books. It became a little world of my own. Whenever I had nothing in particular to do, or whenever an inexplicable restlessness settled over me, I would walk to Platform Number One. There, rows upon rows of freshly arrived magazines, novels, children's periodicals, and comics lay displayed before me like a vibrant fair of colours and stories. I could stand there for hours without noticing the passage of time.

I was a shy child. Even before touching a book, I would glance around nervously to make sure the shopkeeper was not watching with

disapproval. Then, almost timidly, I would turn a page or two. At such moments, I felt I was not merely opening a magazine-I was gently pushing open the window to another world.

Looking back now, I realise that I was waiting for much more than the next issue of *Indrajal Comics*. Without knowing it, I was waiting for that vast realm of words, images, and imagination which would one day become an inseparable part of my life.

Little did I know then that a journey beginning with the intoxicating fragrance of a freshly printed comic book would one day lead me into the endless universe of books.

□

A small incident connected with *Indrajal Comics* has suddenly surfaced in my memory. It is a simple, almost childishly innocent episode, but perhaps that is precisely why it has stayed with me.

It must have happened when I was in middle school-most likely in the sixth standard.

Among us, owning or having read the older issues of *Indrajal Comics* was a matter of quiet prestige. We took considerable pride in telling one another just how far back our collection-or at least our reading-went. Those who were passionate about the series somehow managed to read every new issue, whether by buying it themselves, borrowing it from a friend, reading it at a lending library, or hiring it for a small fee.

Several issues had explored the early history of Vetal himself. I had been fortunate enough to read a few of those at Annu's house. But there was one condition: the comics never left his home. If I wanted to read them, I had to sit there and finish them. That never bothered me in the least. I would happily spend an afternoon at his house with a comic in my hands.

While I read, Annu would either be doing his homework or helping with the household chores. A few months before I had begun visiting

him, his mother had passed away. His father worked in one of the Ordnance Factories, and his elder brother, Nirmal Jain, had already joined the Engineering College as a lecturer in the Department of Mathematics. Both father and brother were known for their exceptional intelligence and were often spoken of with admiration in our neighbourhood.

Until they returned home from work, Annu-whose real name was Dinesh-would complete much of the preliminary work in the kitchen. Later, his father would prepare the evening meal. I always tried to leave before either of them came home.

Although Annu owned several old issues of *Indrajal Comics*, he did not possess the really early ones. There was one issue in particular that had acquired an almost legendary status among my classmates at Model High School-*Vetal Ki Mekhala* (*Vetal's Girdle*). Everyone seemed to talk about it.

By then, I had developed the habit of quietly investigating where books and favourite magazines might be found. It was during one such search that I learned that the younger son of Vikram Babu, who lived in our own neighbourhood, had an impressive collection of old *Indrajal Comics* and *Chandamama* magazines.

His name was Rajesh, though everyone at home called him Pappu. He was three or four years older than me.

I scarcely knew him. In fact, neither he nor his elder brother mixed much with anyone in the neighbourhood. Both were reserved by nature. The elder brother was already in college, while Pappu was in high school. Their world seemed to extend no farther than their home and their respective schools.

Determined to gain access to his treasured collection, I began making friends with him.

Pappu happened to be an excellent chess player. He had even won several prizes in competitions. Curiously enough, Annu was equally accomplished at the game. Older boys in the neighbourhood would

often argue over which of the two would win if they ever played against each other. Whether that match was ever held, I never came to know.

Pappu taught me the basics of chess. Later I played several games with Annu-and lost every single one rather comprehensively. Even so, I learned a great deal from both of them.

Yet chess never truly appealed to me.

Perhaps it was because my heart belonged to hockey. Hockey demanded speed, stamina, quick reflexes, and decisions that had to be made in the blink of an eye. Chess, by contrast, asked one to spend long minutes contemplating the movement of a single piece. This is not to belittle chess in any way. It is merely to explain why I could never fall in love with it, while hockey captivated me completely.

One day, summoning my courage, I finally asked Pappu,

"Do you happen to have the issue called *Vetal Ki Mekhala*?"

He looked at me for a moment before replying quietly,

"Yes... I do."

My heart leapt with excitement. At the same time, I felt a flicker of anxiety. Would he even let me see it?

Trying to sound casual, I asked,

"Would you lend it to me to read?"

"I'll have to look for it," he replied. "Some day, when I have the time, I'll take it out."

His answer disappointed me a little, but I was not prepared to give up so easily.

"Is it difficult to find it right now?" I asked.

He replied, "They're somewhere in the cupboard. I'll have to look for them. Give me a day or two, and I'll find the volume and lend it to you."

I had little choice but to accept his promise.

Over the next few days, I reminded him two or three times. Each time there was a fresh excuse. Yet I refused to give up.

One afternoon, while returning home from school during the monsoon, fortune finally smiled upon me. It had rained a little while earlier, and the roads still glistened with water. Vikram Babu's bungalow stood on the main road, and as I happened to be passing it, I saw Pappu stepping out into the verandah enclosed with its latticework screen.

I stopped instinctively. He noticed me, smiled faintly, and motioned for me to wait.

I walked through the gate into the compound. A few moments later he returned carrying a thick, cloth-bound volume. A slip of paper marked a particular page. Opening the book at that place, he revealed what I had been longing to see-*Vetal Ki Mekhala*, neatly bound into the volume.

It was not merely that single comic.

It was an entire year's collection of *Indrajal Comics*, beautifully bound together.

Handing me the hefty volume, he said, with perfectly justified seriousness,

"Anil, take good care of it. Don't lend it to anyone, and please return it soon."

For a few moments I could scarcely believe my good fortune.

Not only had I finally obtained the coveted issue of *Vetal Ki Mekhala*, but eleven other issues from the same year lay in my hands as well. I could already imagine the admiration-and perhaps a little envy-with which my classmates would listen when I told them of this extraordinary treasure.

"You'd better hurry home," Pappu added. "If it starts raining again, the book will get wet."

As if I needed any encouragement.

I hurried home as fast as I could. No sooner had I reached than the rain began once more.

I placed the bound volume carefully on the table, hung my schoolbag on its peg, changed out of my uniform in great haste, and settled cross-legged on a mat, my back resting against the wall, the book open on my lap.

There was still enough daylight filtering in from outside to read comfortably. Our house had not yet been connected to electricity, but the fading afternoon light was sufficient.

I read *Vetal Ki Mekhala* from beginning to end without once getting up.

By the time I finished, darkness had gathered outside, and my mother was preparing to light the kerosene lamp.

Pappu also possessed bound volumes containing stories like *Vikram and Betaal*, *Durgeshnandini*-originally authored by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay-and *Nawab Nandini*, a novel by Pratap Chandra Ghosh that serves as a sequel extending the lore and characters of *Durgeshnandini*. These books had been meticulously crafted by binding together tear-outs from the pages of *Chandamama*. Of those, I borrowed and read *Vikram and Betaal* as well as *Nawab Nandini* from him.

Perhaps I should say a few words about *Vetal Ki Mekhala* itself.

Mekhala literally means a belt or girdle. In Vetal's attire, it was no ordinary accessory; it was one of the defining emblems of his identity. According to the mythology of *The Phantom*, this belt formed part of a tradition that stretched back through countless generations. At its centre gleamed the unmistakable skull emblem, while on either side rested the famous twin rings and the holsters for Vetal's iconic pistols. Within the stories, the belt symbolised not merely his strength, but his

commitment to justice and his enduring legacy as the guardian who never truly dies.

Vetal Ki Mekhala revolved around this legendary belt. In the story, a band of cunning thieves succeeds in stealing it. News spreads swiftly through the jungles and tribal settlements of Denkali that the Walking Ghost has been stripped of his sacred girdle. His enemies rejoice, convinced that without it Vetal has lost his power and become vulnerable.

What follows is a thrilling adventure in which Vetal sets out to recover the stolen belt and bring the culprits to justice. Deprived of his traditional weapons and the symbol of his office, he nevertheless triumphs through courage, intelligence, and sheer physical prowess, dismantling an entire network of criminals without surrendering either his dignity or his resolve.

The remaining eleven issues in that bound volume were equally captivating. For anyone who loved Vetal and the remarkable world he inhabited, they were nothing less than a treasure chest.

But if I allow myself to linger over each one of those adventures, this memoir will quietly transform into a book about Mr. Walker rather than the story of my own life.

So, with gratitude for the countless hours of wonder he gave me, it is time to bid farewell to Mr. Walker and return to my own journey.

□

Meanwhile, in the neighbourhood of my maternal grandparents' home, I discovered a few small bookshops that mostly sold religious literature. Tucked away among the scriptures and devotional booklets were thin volumes of magical romances and tales of enchantment. Fascinated, I pleaded with my grandmother until she finally bought me one or two of them.

When my grandfather caught me reading those books, however, he frowned with gentle disapproval. Out of respect, I quietly placed them

aside whenever he was around. But every afternoon I would slip away with them to the little room on the terrace, where, hidden from everyone's eyes, I devoured them from beginning to end.

I loved those stories.

They almost always began with the prince-or the young heir to a kingdom-setting out on a royal hunt deep into the forest. There, before his astonished eyes, an extraordinarily beautiful princess from some distant kingdom would be abducted by an evil sorcerer. Ignoring the desperate pleas of his companions, the prince would set off alone to rescue her.

Then the labyrinth of enchantment would begin.

One by one, the prince would overcome impossible magical traps until he finally reached the princess, who had already been transformed into a lifeless stone statue. Yet even after finding her, he could not free her. Instead, he himself would fall into the sorcerer's captivity.

Somehow, he would discover the truth: killing the sorcerer would accomplish nothing. The sorcerer's life was hidden elsewhere-in the body of a parrot.

Escaping from captivity, the prince would embark on an even more perilous journey in search of that mysterious bird. Each step would bring new enchantments, new illusions, and increasingly terrifying creatures conjured to guard it. With courage, endurance, and quick wit, he would overcome every obstacle until at last he reached the parrot's cage. The moment he wrung the bird's neck, the sorcerer would die, his entire magical kingdom would collapse, and the spell would be broken.

The princess, restored from cold stone to a living, radiant young woman, would somehow know everything-that the prince had risked his life for her without ever thinking of his own safety. She would fall deeply in love with him. Together they would return to their kingdoms, and, as every such tale demanded, they would be married.

The details changed from one book to another. The names were always different. Sometimes the sorcerer lived not in a cave but in an enchanted palace perched upon a mountain. Towering peaks gave way to wild rivers teeming with crocodiles and gharials. Dense forests were replaced by endless deserts shimmering beneath a pitiless sun. The magical snares constantly assumed new forms. The sorcerer's life might be concealed not in a parrot but inside a doll, a mysterious book, or a cryptic spell inscribed upon an ancient wall. Yet the three essential figures never changed: the prince, the princess, and the sorcerer.

These little books were printed on coarse recycled paper. Rarely did they exceed fifty or sixty pages. Their brightly coloured covers invariably featured a dramatic scene-the handsome prince, the beautiful princess, and the fearsome sorcerer, frozen together in a moment of high adventure.

Before long, I found a place from where I could rent them.

Less than a kilometre from our house in Ghamapur, in the locality known as Lal Mati, stood a modest establishment that sold tea, samosas, potato fritters, spicy sev, savoury mixtures, and traditional Indian sweets. Attached to it was the owner's tiny paan shop, where he also kept these inexpensive magical novels, both for sale and for rent.

Beside the paan stall he had planted a sturdy bamboo pole, from which several ropes were stretched across the front of the shop. New books and cheap magazines hung from these lines like colourful flags fluttering in the breeze, inviting every passer-by to stop and look.

For fifty paise I could rent one of those books and read it.

It was an exorbitant charge, considering that a brand-new copy cost only sixty-five or seventy-five paise. But buying them and taking them home was out of the question.

And yet, I simply had to read them.

□

The kingdom of my reading is so vast that, even today, I cannot see where it ends. I often find myself wondering where to begin and what to leave for later. Perhaps the wisest course is simply to tell the stories as they rise, one after another, from the depths of memory.

It is quite possible that, in the haze of recollection, a few incidents have drifted out of chronological order. You may occasionally feel that the ages and events do not quite add up. Yet I know with certainty that everything I am about to recount belongs to those years between the ages of eight or nine and thirteen or fourteen. If I were to stop at every turn and calculate my exact age, the stories themselves would be left behind while the arithmetic took centre stage. So let the numbers rest where they are and let the memories speak for themselves.

At the very end of the narrow lane where we lived resided an Agarwal family. It was a large household-four or five brothers, their parents, and, if memory serves me right, a little sister. Like ours, their home consisted of a single room, though calling it merely a room would hardly do it justice. It was really a spacious hall. A small verandah stood in front, with a bathing area tucked into one corner. One end of the hall served as the kitchen, while the remaining space had been silently divided into separate family quarters by invisible boundaries that everyone instinctively respected.

One of the brothers, Anil Agarwal, became my friend. I no longer remember how our friendship began. What I do remember is that he was three or four years older than I was.

Their home had a carrom board, and it was almost as though it were another member of the family. A game was nearly always in progress. Anil's father was an exceptionally skilled player. In truth, he seemed to spend most of his day seated before that board. The players around him kept changing, but he remained its constant companion. I must have played countless games with him on that very board.

In his younger days, Anil's father had earned his living by pushing a handcart that sold roasted chickpeas, peanuts, puffed rice, sugar candies, biscuits, and other small treats. As age caught up with him,

he gradually gave up the business, leaving it to his two eldest sons. The elder was named Jai Narayan, and the next one Namo Narayan. Looking back now, I find myself amused by a question that never occurred to me then: if two sons were named Jai Narayan and Namo Narayan, how did the third come to be called Anil? It is a question that has surfaced only now, after all these years. Anil had a younger brother as well, but his name has long since slipped beyond the reach of memory.

Perhaps there was something in my nature that allowed me to become, little by little, a member of every family with whom I formed a bond. The Agarwals were no exception. They all treated me with remarkable warmth and affection. On holidays, or whenever I found even a little free time, I would make my way to their house. And almost without fail, the first thing I would hear was Anil's father calling out with a smile, "Come, let's have a game." Quite often, he would spend hours playing carrom with no one but me.

In truth, it was Jai Narayan I had intended to talk about. But memories seldom travel in straight lines. They wander down unexpected paths before quietly returning to the place they were always meant to reach.

Beneath Jai Narayan's handcart was a large wooden compartment meant for storing merchandise. But it held far more than goods for sale. It held books-stacks upon stacks of them. That humble compartment was his travelling library. He had a small circle of regular customers to whom he rented books, and thus, from beneath an ordinary street vendor's cart, an extraordinary world of stories found its way into eager hands.



Once I discovered his little lending library, I too became one of Jai Narayan's regular customers. Besides novels, he also kept a modest collection of old magazines, which he bought from the bustling second-hand market at Gurandi Bazaar. Even so, novels made up the greater part of his collection.

I began with the magazines. When I had read every last one of them, he looked at me one day with the quiet confidence of an experienced bookseller and said, "Now try this."

He placed a Tarzan novel in my hands.

I accepted it without much enthusiasm, almost reluctantly. Until then, Tarzan had been no more than a familiar name to me. But with every page I turned, an entirely new world unfolded before my eyes. Dense forests, hidden mysteries, thrilling adventures, and the intoxicating scent of an untamed life drew me irresistibly into their embrace.

After that first novel, there was no turning back.

Jai Narayan owned a fair number of books in the Tarzan series, and I read them all, one after another.

When the Tarzan adventures finally came to an end, Jai Narayan handed me another book.

"This one."

It was *Lal Rekha* (*The Red Line*), the celebrated novel by the immensely popular Hindi writer Kushwaha Kant.

First published around 1950, *Lal Rekha* would go on to become one of the milestones of Hindi popular fiction, winning an enormous readership across North India. It was remarkable for the way it brought together almost every major ingredient that captivated readers of its time-romance, suspense, mystery, patriotism, social conflict, and idealism.

Kushwaha Kant possessed a deeply romantic and emotionally resonant style. In *Lal Rekha*, love and human tenderness were portrayed with rare warmth, while an intricate web of mystery kept readers engrossed until the very end. The novel placed the welfare of the nation above personal interests, explored the tensions between the individual and society, and, remarkably for its time, argued for equality between men and women. Its language was at once simple, powerful, and quietly lyrical, making it effortless for the reader to disappear into its world.

During his tragically brief life-he died at only thirty-three or thirty-four years of age-Kushwaha Kant wrote thirty-five novels. Among them, *Lal Rekha* became his most celebrated work and his greatest commercial success. From the 1950s through the 1980s, it enjoyed an almost legendary popularity among young readers.

In those days, however, Kushwaha Kant's novels were generally regarded as books meant for adults. Both my mother and my father forbade me from reading them when they discovered what I had brought home. But prohibitions have a curious way of sharpening a young reader's curiosity. Secretly, I read every Kushwaha Kant novel that Jai Narayan had on his shelves.

A few of their titles still linger in my memory: *Lal Rekha*, *Paras*, *Manzil*, *Jalan*, *Ahuti*, *Basera*, *Kumkum*, *Neelam*, *Vidrohi Subhash*, *Apna Paraya*, and *Bhanwara*. I had devoured all of them before I was even in my teens.

When there were no more Kushwaha Kant novels left for me to read, Jai Narayan introduced me to another distinguished Hindi novelist-Rangeya Raghav. And thus, almost without my noticing it, the next chapter of my reading life quietly began.

Rangeya Raghav, whose original name was T. N. Srinivasa Acharya, was one of the most gifted and versatile figures in modern Hindi literature. Though he lived for barely thirty-nine years, he left behind an astonishing body of work. His novels are marked by a profound social consciousness, a keen historical imagination, progressive ideals, and a deep compassion for the oppressed and the forgotten.

Among his finest works is *Murdon Ka Teela* (*The Mound of the Dead*), a celebrated historical novel set against the backdrop of the Indus Valley Civilization at Mohenjo-daro. His other notable novels include *Kab Tak Pukaroon*, *Loi Ka Taana*, *Ratna Ki Baat*, *Bharati Ka Sapoot*, *Lakhima Ki Aankhen*, *Gharaunde*, *Vishad Math*, *Seedha-Saadha Raasta*, *Huzoor*, *Andhere Ke Jugnu*, and *Ujali Dhool*. Few writers have woven together history, culture, and the struggles of ordinary people with such depth

and conviction, and it is this rare achievement that has secured Rangeya Raghav a distinguished place in Hindi literature.

When I had exhausted the Rangeya Raghav novels in Jai Narayan's collection, he led me to yet another remarkable writer-Vrindavan Lal Verma.

Vrindavan Lal Verma is regarded as one of the foremost historical novelists in Hindi. His enduring contribution lay in bringing to life the history, culture, and indomitable spirit of Bundelkhand. From Jai Narayan's handcart library, I read many of his novels-*Jhansi Ki Rani*, *Mrignayani*, *Garh Kundar*, *Virata Ki Padmini*, *Toote Kaante*, *Bhuvan Vikram*, *Kundali Chakra*, *Pratyagat*, *Satya Ki Khoj*, and *Achal Mera Koi*, among others.

Yet Jai Narayan's little library had still not run out of surprises.

The next books he placed in my hands were the novels of James Hadley Chase. They came in Hindi translations by different translators-some acknowledged, others anonymous. Printed as inexpensive pocket editions on coarse recycled paper by various publishers, they were worlds apart from the historical novels I had been reading, yet no less compelling.

Looking back now, it seems to me that Jai Narayan unknowingly unlatched a door for me-a door that opened onto a world utterly different from the one inhabited by children of my own age.

At the time, I had no inkling of it.

I simply thought he was lending me books.

Today, however, I realize they were never merely books. They were the threshold to another life, and I happened to step across it much earlier than I should have.

Sometimes I wonder whether every human life contains such a moment-a moment when its course changes without the slightest sound. At the time it appears utterly ordinary, carrying no hint of the future concealed within it. Only years later, when memory returns to

touch it, do we discover that life had quietly altered its direction at that very point.

Meeting Jai Narayan was, perhaps, such a moment in my own life.

During those years I read an astonishing number of books. Judged by my age, they belonged to a later stage of life. They were books I was meant to encounter as a young man, yet I found them in that innocent, unformed season of childhood. I cannot measure how much wiser they made me. I could not have measured it then, and I cannot measure it now.

But I know this much.

Somewhere within me, another life had begun to breathe.

It is still alive.

It still beats quietly within me-a life forever searching, forever asking, forever reaching towards something just beyond the horizon.

Today it seems to me that those books gave me far less at the moment I read them than they gave me in the years that followed. They remained stored away somewhere deep inside me. Then, a loss, an unexpected joy, a parting, or simply a lonely evening would suddenly open one of their long-forgotten pages. Only then would I understand that the things I had skimmed over as a child had never truly passed me by.

They had simply been waiting for me to grow into them.

How much of what I read in those pages I truly understood at the time-and in what sense I understood it-I can no longer say. Those meanings belonged to that particular present and remained there. But the pages themselves stayed with me. It is as though they were placed inside a secret chest beyond the reach of time, travelling silently beside me through the years. Then, without warning, at some unexpected moment in life, they return and introduce themselves once again.

Whenever I find myself in need of a companion-someone to offer sound counsel, restore my courage, strengthen my resolve, or help me

unravel one of life's perplexities-those very pages come and stand quietly beside me, carrying meanings they had never revealed before.

Perhaps that is how great books work.

Even as we read them, they are quietly reading us. And when the hour demands it, they return-not merely as books, but as friends, as healers, as guides.

While the boys of my age were absorbed in games of tip-race, *pithoo*, and countless other street games, I was often lost among the pages of a novel. To an outside observer it might have seemed rather strange. Many people must have wondered why this boy was not quite like the others.

Yet I never felt that I was drifting away from my childhood.

I was just as mischievous, laughed just as freely, and ran about with the same boundless energy as every other child. The only difference was that another world had quietly taken root within me-a world where people carried their joys and sorrows, where love and loneliness walked side by side, where failures and dreams intertwined, and where the countless hidden voices within the human heart could be heard. I had acquired the habit of listening to those voices much earlier than most.

I had not become prematurely wise, nor had I grown old before my time.

Childhood remained entirely intact within me, with all its laughter, innocence, and sunlight. It was simply accompanied by another landscape. Perhaps books are the first to recognize a person's loneliness. Without asking our permission, they create within us a place where, for the first time, we encounter ourselves.

Among the many other writers I discovered during those years, the names of many have faded with time. Yet the atmosphere surrounding those books remains astonishingly vivid. I can still recall the faint fragrance of old paper, the rough feel of worn bindings beneath my

fingers, the soft whisper of turning pages, and the warm or cool breeze drifting around me-not settling upon the words themselves but seeming to rest upon time itself.

Perhaps memory remembers books less by their plots than by the silence that surrounded them.

Gradually, I found myself reading people in much the same way that I read books. What a person said became less important than what they could not bring themselves to say. A fleeting shadow of sadness crossing a face, the brief silence after a sentence, the weariness concealed within a laugh-these began to fascinate me.

Perhaps this is the first gift that literature bestows upon us: it teaches us to see a human being not as an event to be described, but as a mystery to be contemplated.

Around that time another quiet conviction also began to take root within me-that every person is far larger than the face he presents to the world. Hidden within each of us lives another self, one that remains silent most of the time. It was the characters in novels who first introduced me to that silent inhabitant. And somewhere along the way, without even realizing it, I began to look at the people around me in exactly the same manner.

My father, my mother, my aunt, my neighbours, my teachers, strangers passing by on the road-each of them seemed to carry an unspoken life breathing beneath the surface. I owe that way of seeing almost entirely to books.

They did not make me older than my years.

They simply built another room within me.

Childhood remained where it had always been. But beside it, another window quietly opened-a window through which I could already feel winds that usually touch a person much later in life.

Perhaps that is why so many events began to reveal themselves to me in ways that seemed subtly different from how others perceived them.

There are very few people in life who alter the course of our destiny without ever announcing their presence. More often than not, they themselves remain unaware of what they have done. Jai Narayan, too, probably never realized that he had placed far more than a few books in my hands. He had awakened within me a hunger for words-a hunger that has never been satisfied. He gave me the opportunity to become a reader, and with it, perhaps, the first invisible possibility of becoming a writer.

Now, after so many years, whenever his face emerges through the dust of memory, those books return with him. I can almost smell the mingled fragrance of old ink and ageing paper rising from their pages. Inwardly, I feel an immense gratitude towards him.

Many kindnesses in life fade with time, but there are certain debts that can never be repaid. They can only be acknowledged.

We are indebted to countless people throughout our lives. Most of those debts are eventually settled by time or circumstance. But there are others that can never be discharged, because they concern not what we possess but who we become. My debt to Jai Narayan belongs to that rare kind. If words ever made their home within me, if books taught me another way of looking at life, then it was he who laid the very first brick-so quietly that even today only memory can hear the sound of it.

□

Every morning Jai Narayan would wheel his handcart, laden with roasted chickpeas, peanuts, sugar candies, and biscuits, past our house. I would return the book I had finished and collect a new one before he moved on. If I happened to be away from home, I knew exactly where to find him. He would park his cart beside the wall of the CTO Compound at Tehsili Chowk, and I would make my way there.

Around the same time, my maternal aunt Kamla's youngest son-whom everyone simply called *Chhote*-started a tiny lending library of his own. On a vacant plot opposite Vikram Babu's bungalow, beside the roadside, he erected a makeshift kiosk on a patch of land barely ten or

twelve feet square. It was built from brick walls, bamboo poles, wooden beams, and rough planks.

Inside, a wooden rack ran through the middle of the room, leaving only a doorway-wide passage on one side. It divided the little structure into two almost equal sections, one at the front and one behind, each with its own entrance. The front door was broad enough to welcome customers, while the rear entrance was considerably smaller.

He named his tiny establishment *Rajesh Pustakalaya-Rajesh Library*-after one of his cousins.

Unlike Jai Narayan's collection, Chhote Bhaiya's library was dominated by popular detective fiction and romantic pulp novels. Most of the books were by writers such as Ibn-e-Safi, Ved Prakash Kamboj, Raj Bharti, Prakash Bharti, Prem Vajpayee, and others who enjoyed immense popularity among young readers of the time.

Among them, the most eagerly awaited were the novels published under the famous *Jasoosi Duniya* ("The World of Detective Fiction") series, most of which had originally been written in Urdu by the legendary Ibn-e-Safi before being translated into Hindi.

Interestingly, when Nikhat Prakashan of Allahabad brought out the Hindi editions, many of the principal characters were given new names so that Hindi readers would find them more familiar. Thus, Colonel Ahmed Kamal Faridi-or simply Colonel Faridi in the Urdu originals-became *Colonel Vinod*, while his irrepressible companion Sajid Hameed retained only his first name and military rank, appearing in Hindi as *Captain Hameed*.

Another of Ibn-e-Safi's celebrated series featured the unforgettable detective *Ali Imran*, but in the Hindi translations he was rechristened *Rajesh*.

Whether in Urdu or Hindi, Ibn-e-Safi's novels commanded an extraordinary following. The partnership of Colonel Faridi-known to Hindi readers as Colonel Vinod-and Captain Hameed became one of

the most beloved detective duos in the history of South Asian popular fiction.

Even today, people of my generation-and those slightly older or younger-remember with unmistakable affection the excitement of waiting for the next adventure featuring Colonel Vinod and Captain Hameed.

Some of the best-known novels in that series included *Dilchasp Daku* (*The Fascinating Bandit*), *Maut Ki Chattan* (*The Rock of Death*), *Neeli Roshni* (*The Blue Light*), *Jahannum Ki Roshni* (*The Light of Hell*), and *Khaufnaak Imarat* (*The Terrifying Mansion*).

Khaufnaak Imarat also marked the beginning of the Rajesh-originally Ali Imran-series, introducing the wonderfully paradoxical detective who appeared hopelessly foolish on the surface but was, in reality, a brilliant genius. Other memorable titles in that series included *Lakeeren*, *Bhayanak Aadmi*, *Chattanon Mein Fire*, and *Johnson Ke Karname*.

As for me, I always found myself more deeply drawn to the adventures of Colonel Vinod and Captain Hameed than to those of Rajesh. Even now, when I think back on those years, it is their companionship-their wit, courage, and effortless chemistry-that returns most vividly to my mind.

□

There were two more lending libraries of this kind in our neighbourhood. One stood somewhere between the first lane of Bai's Bageecha and Ghamapur Chowk. Its name has long since slipped from my memory. It flourished for three or four years and was run by a young man whose face I can still vaguely picture, though his name, too, has faded with time.

Since I was one of his regular patrons, we gradually came to know each other well. Whenever a new book arrived, he would quietly set it aside for me before anyone else could borrow it. His shelves carried almost

every popular magazine of the day, along with an impressive collection of the inexpensive pulp novels that dominated the Hindi literary marketplace. It was from his library that I first read detective and social novels by celebrated writers such as Ved Prakash Kamboj, Ved Prakash Sharma, Gulshan Nanda, Om Prakash Sharma, and many others.

On holidays I would sometimes borrow two or three books at once-occasionally even four. He never objected. There was something particularly endearing about the way he issued books. Before handing one over, he would carefully cover it with old newspaper so that its original jacket would not be damaged. It was a small gesture, but it revealed the affection of someone who regarded books as companions rather than commodities.

That little library survived until my high-school years. Then, for reasons I never came to know, it quietly disappeared.

Another library stood at Tularam Chowk. It did not possess as many books as the one at Bai's Bageecha, but it was an excellent place to find newly published magazines, and I visited it whenever I could.



Around that time, I also became acquainted with a young man named Govind. He was four or five years older than I was and lived in Ghamapur, next door to my friend Asharfi Lal's house. His family-his father, elder brother, and he himself-were tenants in the house owned by Asharfi Lal's father, Pach Kaudi Lal.

Govind owned an impressive collection of detective stories and social novels. Unlike the others, he did not run a shop. His lending library operated from his own home, while his father and elder brother worked in one of the ordnance factories.

I borrowed many books from him as well.

When he discovered that I was also reading books borrowed from other libraries, he proposed an arrangement. Instead of charging me a rental fee, he allowed me to exchange those books for the ones in his

own collection. It was an act of generosity that considerably widened my reading world.

My appetite for books had become so insatiable that I was always trying to discover yet another place from where I could borrow something to read.

Reading this chapter, one might easily imagine that I spent all my time immersed in detective fiction, social novels, and magazines.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

I read these books only after finishing my schoolwork-or later, my college studies-and after returning from hockey practice. They belonged to the hours left over after everything else had been done.

Most of that reading happened at night.

Once my academic studies were finished, I would light the kerosene lamp that we called a *chimney*. Everyone else in the house would have gone to bed by then. Lying on my mattress with the lamp placed beside my pillow, I would read late into the night.

Sometimes my mother or my father would call out, asking me to put the book away and sleep.

Occasionally I obeyed.

But if the story had truly taken hold of me, I would answer, "Just a little longer," and keep reading.

□

From the eighth standard onwards, I began receiving the National Scholarship, worth twelve hundred rupees a year. By the standards of those days, it was neither a fortune nor a trivial sum.

The first year's scholarship was paid to me in cash. From the ninth standard onward it came by cheque, which meant I had to open my first bank account. I chose the State Bank of India branch at Tularam Chowk, partly because it was close to Akhilesh's house.

The scholarship eased a substantial part of my educational expenses. It paid for notebooks and textbooks, but it also enabled me to buy colours and brushes for painting. Whatever remained covered small personal indulgences-chief among them, magazines.

By then I had begun purchasing *Dharmyug*, *Saptahik Hindustan*, and the film magazine *Madhuri* whenever I could afford them. Around the same time *Kadambini* also began appearing on the newsstands, and I would occasionally buy that as well.

There were two principal places from which I bought these magazines.

One was *Sahu News Agency*, then situated on Lord Ganj Road opposite the old bus stand. Today it has shifted to Satna Building near Malviya Chowk.

The other was a curious establishment that appeared every morning and vanished every evening. It stood in Andherdev Bazaar, at the great arched entrance to the famous Dixit Bada. If one walked from Tularam Chowk towards Tilak Bhumi Talaiya, the imposing gateway stood on the right. Today the place has changed beyond recognition, but in those days newspapers and magazines were displayed there in a wonderfully improvised fashion. Nails were driven into the walls, sturdy ropes were stretched across the entrance, and magazines were clipped or hung from them, fluttering gently in the breeze like colourful banners announcing the arrival of new worlds.

After Akhilesh and I became friends in the ninth standard, an evening walk became almost a daily ritual. Around six or half-past six we would leave his house, talking without interruption as we wandered through the city.

Usually, we followed one of two routes.

Sometimes we walked from Karamchand Chowk to Malviya Chowk, then through Teen Patti Chowk before turning back.

On other evenings, especially when we expected a new magazine to have arrived, we took the longer route-from Karamchand Chowk to

Tularam Chowk, through Andherdev Market, along Lord Ganj Road to Malviya Chowk, and then on to Teen Patti Chowk before eventually returning to Akhilesh's home.

The second route was longer, but it passed the magazine stall at Dixit Bada, and that alone made the extra distance worthwhile.

Even after we returned to Akhilesh's house, our conversations rarely ended.

More often than not, we remained standing outside the small iron gate at the entrance, leaning against it, swinging on it, or simply lingering nearby, talking endlessly. Many nights it would be half past ten before we realized how late it had become. In the beginning, someone from inside the house would eventually step out and remind us that it was time to go home, bringing our gathering to an abrupt end. I would mount my bicycle and ride back.

Gradually, however, we grew shamelessly persistent. Nobody bothered to interrupt us anymore, and our nightly conversations stretched even later into the night.

Anil Dubey often joined us, and from time to time so did our friends from Garha.

By then another habit had firmly settled into my life.

I could not go to sleep without reading something.

Not my textbooks.

Something beyond the prescribed curriculum.

When I returned home, dinner would be waiting for me on the centre table, carefully covered. After eating, I would spend some time leafing through whichever magazine I had bought that day, reading an article here, a story there, until drowsiness slowly overtook me and I drifted into sleep.

Besides the two magazine stalls I have mentioned, there were two other places that occasionally drew us whenever we were searching for

something new to read-the bookstall at Jabalpur Railway Station and the bookshop at the old bus stand.



There is one more bookshop that deserves to be remembered by name-'Sushma Sahitya Mandir'.

For a long time, it was the only place in Jabalpur where one could reliably find serious works of Hindi literature. *Narmada Book Depot* and *Universal Book Depot*-later known as *Universal Book Centre*-also stocked Hindi literary books, but only in limited numbers. Sushma Sahitya Mandir was different. It maintained a substantial collection, and every important new publication found its way there.

The shop occupied the first floor of a building on the main road leading from Kamaniya Gate towards Bade Fuhara. A narrow flight of stairs, tucked beside the shop on the ground floor, led upstairs.

Long before I ever entered it, I had admired it from below.

Whenever I visited my maternal grandparents as a child, I would pause outside and gaze up at the books displayed beyond the glass windows or hanging near the entrance. I would strain to read their titles, wondering what worlds lay hidden inside them. Yet I never climbed those stairs.

Perhaps desire itself was enough.

Only after I began receiving the National Scholarship did I finally have enough money to buy books of my own. I must have been in the eleventh standard-or perhaps the first year of engineering college-when I climbed those stairs for the first time.

By the time I joined my first job in September 1977, several books by Mohan Rakesh and Nirmal Verma had already become part of my personal library. Every one of them had been bought from Sushma Sahitya Mandir.

In those days an elderly gentleman presided over the shop. Clad in a spotless white kurta, dhoti, and Gandhi cap, he wore thick spectacles whose heavy lenses betrayed failing eyesight. Age had also made him somewhat irritable. His young son worked beside him, but it was the old man who occupied the cashier's seat like the unquestioned custodian of the kingdom.

The son would fetch books from the glass-fronted cabinets and carefully replace them afterwards. If he happened to be away, the old gentleman often refused requests for books-even when he knew they were in stock-simply because getting up had become too much of an effort.

As the years passed, he began to recognize me, if only by face. Eventually he allowed me to open the cabinets myself and even permitted me to step into the inner room in search of books. But the privilege always came with a stern warning to handle every volume carefully and return it exactly where it belonged.

Today the shop has moved to the Kachhiyana area of Jabalpur. It still bears the same name, but the old bookseller is no longer there. His son, once the young assistant who fetched books from the shelves, now sits at the counter himself, having grown old in turn.

The building that houses the shop now belongs to the family. The ground floor has several rented commercial establishments, while the bookshop itself has changed almost beyond recognition.

Its opening hours are irregular. Literary books occupy only a small corner of what remains. Their place has largely been taken by religious literature, books on astrology, tantra, occult practices, folk remedies, and devotional booklets stacked in untidy bundles. It resembles a warehouse far more than the sanctuary of books it once was. Perhaps that is how the business survives now, dispatching books in bulk to smaller towns and villages nearby.

Time, after all, changes everything.

For the past fifteen years or so, *Prem Book Depot*, situated in Sadar, has become one of the few places in Jabalpur where a substantial selection of both Hindi and English books can still be found.

The digital age, of course, has transformed the landscape even more profoundly. Today almost every book can be found online, often instantly and at a lower price than its printed counterpart.

And yet, somehow, the printed word continues to defend its existence.

There remains something about a physical book that no screen has yet managed to replace.

□

Perhaps it was while I was still in middle school that I made another discovery.

On one of my visits to Bankhedi, I came across a tiny library maintained by the village panchayat. There I found *Samudra Mein Nark* (*Hell in the Sea*), a detective novel by the celebrated Hindi writer Om Prakash Sharma. It was the first of his books I ever read.

I have already described that visit to Bankhedi in detail in the chapter titled *Bankhedi Connection* in the first volume of these memoirs. Bankhedi-now a tehsil in Narmadapuram district, formerly Hoshangabad-was my ancestral village on my father's side. In those days it was little more than a quiet rural settlement.

Samudra Mein Nark revolved around several of Om Prakash Sharma's memorable recurring characters-Gopali, Lily, Tau, Rajesh, Bagaroff, and others who would become familiar companions to generations of readers.

Curiously, I remember almost nothing of the novel's actual plot today. To recover it, I would have to search for the book and read it again-a task that would take time and, in any case, seems unnecessary here.

What matters is something else.

After reading that one novel, I set out to find almost every detective and social novel Om Prakash Sharma had ever written. I hunted them down from one library after another until I had read nearly all of them.

That, I feel, is worth recording.

From the third or fourth standard until the final year of my engineering studies, I read an astonishing number of books.

So far I have spoken mostly of magazines, detective fiction, and the historical novels of writers like Rangeya Raghav and Vrindavan Lal Verma that I found in Jai Narayan's collection.

But alongside them I was also discovering the finest voices of modern Indian literature.

I read Mohan Rakesh, Rajendra Yadav, Amrita Pritam, Mannu Bhandari, Dr. Rahi Masoom Raza, Rajendra Awasthi, Shani, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Yashpal, Upendranath Ashk, Amrit Lal Nagar, Bhagwati Charan Verma, Nirmal Verma, Agyeya, Ashapurna Devi, Mahasweta Devi, Dr. Dharamvir Bharati, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Vimal Mitra, and many others whose names deserve equal mention.

I know I have omitted many.

Memory, however faithful, cannot preserve every title and every author.

But of one thing I am absolutely certain.

In those years, if I could find a work of literature anywhere, I read it.

My father, too, was a lover of books. He also nurtured a quiet desire to write. But a lower middle-class man, responsible for a household of six children and three adults, seldom enjoys the luxury of pursuing his passions as he wishes.

Even so, he found his own small ways of remaining faithful to them.

Every Sunday he went to Gurandi Bazaar to buy vegetables. Yet he never headed straight for the vegetable stalls. His first destination was always the *kabadi* market-the sprawling second-hand bazaar that occupied another large section of Gurandi. There, among piles of old belongings and forgotten possessions, stood several stalls selling used books. My father would patiently browse through them, often returning home with unexpected literary treasures.

Among his finest discoveries were the first two volumes-if memory serves me correctly-of *Sher-o-Sukhan*, published by Bharatiya Jnanpith.

Sher-o-Sukhan is one of the most respected anthologies ever compiled on the history and development of Urdu poetry, bringing together the lives and selected works of its greatest poets.

Its compiler, the distinguished scholar Ayodhya Prasad Goyaliya, introduced each poet with remarkable clarity, sensitivity, and critical insight. He wrote not merely about their verses but about the lives they had lived, the struggles they had endured, the age in which they wrote, and the distinctive qualities that shaped their poetry.

Perhaps the books' greatest gift lay elsewhere.

Every poem was printed in the Devanagari script, allowing readers unfamiliar with the Urdu alphabet to experience the richness of Urdu poetry without difficulty. Alongside the verses, difficult Urdu, Persian, and Arabic words were carefully explained in simple Hindi through footnotes placed at the bottom of each page. The reader never had to struggle alone; the books gently held one's hand.

For this reason, *Sher-o-Sukhan* has long been regarded as one of the strongest bridges ever built between Hindi and Urdu literary traditions.

The first volume appeared in 1951 under the imprint of Bharatiya Jnanpith. Over the following years the series gradually expanded until it comprised five volumes, documenting nearly three centuries of Urdu poetry-from its earliest flowering to about 1954.

Across those five volumes marched an extraordinary procession of poets. From the pioneers such as Wali Dakhni, Mir Taqi Mir, Khwaja Mir Dard, and Mirza Rafi Sauda, to later masters like Sheikh Ibrahim Zauq, Momin Khan Momin, Mirza Ghalib, Dagh Dehlvi, Amir Minai, Altaf Husain Hali, Allama Iqbal, Brij Narayan Chakbast, Akbar Allahabadi, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Majaz Lakhnavi, Sahir Ludhianvi, and Jigar Moradabadi-their lives and their finest verses unfolded one after another.

Taken together, the five volumes were far more than an anthology. They formed a complete literary chronicle, preserving nearly two and a half centuries of the history of Urdu poetry.

Only the first two volumes lived in our home.

Even so, I found myself returning to them again and again, turning their pages without any particular purpose, lingering over the poems and the notes beneath them.

Looking back now, I think my affection for the Urdu language probably began there.

Those footnotes fascinated me. I would read an unfamiliar Urdu word in a ghazal or a couplet, then lower my eyes to the simple Hindi explanation beneath it. It felt almost like solving a riddle. There was something deeply satisfying about discovering how a word from another language revealed itself so naturally within the embrace of my own.

I do not know the Urdu script.

Twice I tried to learn it, and twice life intervened before I could go very far.

I felt it necessary to speak of these books because the seeds they quietly planted within me never truly stopped growing. They may never have become a great tree, but they have certainly blossomed into a cherished little plant that continues to flourish in the garden of my life.

Today my personal library contains numerous collections of ghazals, nazms, and anthologies of Urdu poetry-all printed in the Devanagari script. I read them with immense pleasure. Among the poets who return to me most often are Ghalib, Dagh, Mir, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Bashir Badr, Nida Fazli, Munawwar Rana, Ahmad Faraz, and Wasim Barelvi.

In more recent years, the Hindi edition of *Rekhta* has given fresh wings to this enduring love. Whenever time permits, I wander through its vast world of Urdu literature, discovering both forgotten masters and contemporary voices.

Each visit feels less like reading and more like returning to a beloved neighbourhood whose streets I never tire of walking.

□

I was living in two worlds at once.

One was the world before my eyes-real, tangible, made up of school, home, familiar faces, and the countless small anxieties of everyday life. The other existed on no map. It belonged to the realm of imagination, metaphor, and possibility-a vast inner country fashioned from the words of great writers.

Gradually, reading those books ceased to be merely an activity.

I began to live inside them.

Their characters no longer stood outside me; they came to dwell within me. At times I felt that I was walking the very roads they travelled. Someone's defeat became my own defeat, someone's waiting my own waiting, someone's loneliness quietly settled inside me. There were moments when it seemed that everything unfolding in a novel was happening to me; and even when it was not, I experienced it as though it were passing through my own being. My soul had become the silent witness to lives that were not mine.

Perhaps that is literature's greatest miracle.

It grants us the ability to live other people's lives.

At an age when my own life had scarcely begun, I had already lived through the lives of countless others. I had wandered through cities I had never seen, suffered griefs with which I had no direct acquaintance, and experienced forms of love and human relationships whose meaning I could not yet fully comprehend. Even so, they quietly became part of my own memory, as though they had happened to me.

The remarkable thing was not that I read so much.

The remarkable thing was that I never felt any conflict between my textbooks and these books of stories. It was as though two rivers flowed within me. One carried me towards the life expected of me by my family and by society. The other flowed towards a life that had no prescribed syllabus, no examinations, no certificates.

Yet it was the second river that ran deeper.

It was in those unseen waters that my imagination, my sensibility, and even my solitude slowly found their shape.

Surely, I cannot have been alone in this experience. Countless readers must have built a second world within themselves through books. And yet, like every human experience, mine remained uniquely my own.

There were times when I genuinely felt that two people lived inside me.

One walked through the visible world-going to school, preparing for examinations, meeting people, living an ordinary life.

The other entered a new existence with every new book.

Looking back, I feel it was this second self that was quietly creating the first.

Had he not lived within me, I doubt I would ever have become the person I eventually did.

As the years passed, the boundary between those two worlds grew increasingly indistinct. At times it became difficult even to know

which one I inhabited. While reading, I no longer merely followed events; I became part of them. The faces of fictional characters began to resemble people I knew. Their homes felt strangely familiar, as though I too came and went through their doors. Their anxieties found a permanent home within me. A solitary figure walking through the melancholy streets of an unknown city often seemed no less familiar than a friend from my own neighbourhood.

Even after I closed the book, that world refused to disappear.

Its people continued walking beside me.

I would go to school, memorize lessons, solve mathematical problems, and carry on with the ordinary business of life. Yet somewhere within me another self was travelling along an altogether different road. He remained in the company of people I had never actually met, and yet who had somehow become my own.

Now, when I look back, it seems that those characters never entered my life.

It was I who entered theirs.

I do not imagine this experience was mine alone. Many readers must have discovered another life within themselves through books. Yet, as with every human being, that hidden life ultimately becomes one's own.

Within me, too, another "I" gradually came into being.

He spoke very little to the person the world knew, but perhaps he understood me far better than I understood myself.

Even today, after all these years, I sometimes feel that the most enduring inhabitant of my memory is that second self. My outward life has changed with time, but that imagined world remains untouched somewhere within me-preserved between the pages of old books, where the past begins to breathe again the moment they are opened.

There is one final thought I hesitate to write.

Yet I feel I must.

What I have described in these pages is not merely the story of a child's love of reading. It is, perhaps, the story of how a writer-and a painter-is born.

Before an artist can create another world, he must first learn to live a second life within himself.

□

By now, everyone knew about my love for books and my almost obsessive need to read them-my family, our neighbours, and indeed the entire neighbourhood. They had also come to accept another truth: trying to separate me from books would be no more than a futile attempt to accomplish the impossible.

People who happened to see me for the first time reading in one of my favourite corners around the house would often stop in surprise. Some even interrupted me, curious to know what could hold a young boy's attention so completely. Before long, however, the sight became so familiar that no one paid it any special notice. It simply became another ordinary scene in the neighbourhood.

I had several favourite reading places.

The first was the broad cement platform outside our house. I would spread out a jute sack, sit down-or sometimes lie flat upon it-and lose myself in a book.

The second was a long, broad slab of sandstone, nearly four inches thick, built beside the entrance to Kakka's house. Above it was another step, constructed from carefully dressed sandstone slabs set in cement. That became one of my favourite reading seats. People passed through the lane all day long, greeting one another, exchanging news, carrying on with their lives, while I remained quietly absorbed in my book, scarcely aware of the world moving around me.

The third place was an almost identical sandstone platform outside the permanently closed wooden doorway next to Harumal's grocery

shop. It was even larger than the first, and I often settled there for hours.

My fourth refuge lay directly opposite these platforms, on the left side of our lane. In front of Annu's grandmother's house stood an earthen plinth. Beyond it rose the wall of the neighbourhood grain-roaster's shop. Leaning against that wall were five or six beautifully carved sandstone pillars, each nearly twelve feet long and about ten inches wide and thick. They had originally been meant for Kakka's house but had remained unused.

Whenever Annu's grandmother swept her courtyard, she carefully dusted those pillars as well.

I would sit on them-or sometimes stretch out full length upon their cool, stony surface-reading for hours, enjoying both the silence and the soothing touch of the stone beneath me.

At home, too, I had my favourite corners. I loved lying on the floor of the verandah, in the courtyard, or on the bedspread spread across the wooden *takhat*.

Summer offered yet another cherished ritual.

I would place a pillow beside the outer door of my room and lie on the cool stone floor. The heavy wooden door remained closed, but between its broad planks ran narrow slits through which the fierce afternoon sunlight streamed in. Those thin shafts of blazing light became my reading lamp as I lost myself in another world.

Winter and the monsoon had pleasures of their own.

Wrapped snugly inside a quilt, with a kerosene chimney lamp glowing beside my pillow, I would read until sleep quietly claimed me.

When my father realized that this endless reading had done no harm whatsoever to my studies, he began bringing books home from the library at his factory.

I never saw that library myself, but judging by the books that arrived in our home, it must have possessed a remarkably rich collection.

Through those borrowed volumes I first encountered the minds of Rabindranath Tagore, Jaishankar Prasad, Premchand, Bhagwati Charan Verma, Rahul Sankrityayan, Gurudutt, Upendranath Ashk, Phanishwar Nath Renu, Ilachandra Joshi, Agyeya, Acharya Chatursen Shastri, Naresh Mehta, and many other towering figures of Indian literature and thought.

How much of what they wrote I truly understood at that immature age is beside the point.

The important thing is that I came to know their names.

I entered their worlds.

I learned that such minds existed.

Could the soil of my own imagination ever have been prepared in quite the same way had I never encountered them?

I make no claim to being a great scholar, philosopher, or thinker.

But neither did I remain an empty vessel.

If I were now to begin deciding which novel I loved most, or arranging those writers in some order of greatness, I would not merely be making a mistake-I would be committing an act of arrogance.

Who am I to rank them?

What measure of understanding do I possess that would allow me to place one above another?

To me, they are all my teachers.

Each poured the very best of himself into his words, and through those words into me.

How much of that gift I was able to receive depended not upon the generosity of the giver but upon the capacity of the vessel that received it.

For many years my father continued bringing books home from the factory library. Whenever I finished reading one, he would return it and bring back another.

Looking back now, I sometimes feel that he was doing much more than borrowing books.

Without saying a word, he was helping to build the inner library that would remain with me for the rest of my life.

□

I continued to walk the road of my real life. Running alongside it was another path-the imagined one. It was in that parallel world that my batteries were recharged, and the strength I drew from there sustained me in the harsher landscape of reality. Otherwise, I was an intensely sensitive person. Living in the real world was never easy for me. I instinctively looked at everything through the prism of my own understanding, and that was where things often went wrong. I responded not to what people intended, but to what I believed they meant. More than once I ended up spoiling situations that might have turned out well or taking offence where none had been intended. Such lapses visited me from time to time. Yet the countless lessons in grace, kindness and quiet wisdom that I absorbed from the world of imagination would gently lead me back to the right path.

How I came to be so deeply sensitive is a complicated question-one I shall wrestle with another time.

For the moment, let me recount a small incident that has suddenly resurfaced in my memory.

In Jabalpur there is a literary and cultural organisation called *Milan*. It still exists today. In those days, however, it was remarkably active. Throughout the year it organised a wide range of literary, artistic and cultural competitions for schoolchildren. Almost every school in the city participated, and Model High School was always among the most enthusiastic competitors, frequently returning with prizes.

At the school level, *Milan* awarded shields and trophies to the winning and runner-up schools. Individual students, too, received certificates and prizes, and those prizes were most often books. The certificates and books would be sent to the participating schools, where they would later be distributed on suitable occasions. The shields and trophies, however, were presented at formal functions organised by *Milan*, usually by some distinguished guest. Quite often these ceremonies were held in the assembly hall of our own school.

When I was in Class XI, I served as the President of the School Art Committee. One day, the student president of the Literary Committee and I were asked to visit the office of *Milan* to collect the certificates and books meant for the prize-winning students of our school.

There we met Mohan Shashi ji and a couple of other members of the organisation.

In one corner of the room stood a large heap of brand-new books. The titles and the names of celebrated Hindi authors were visible on many of their covers. It was a treasure trove of literature-works by both contemporary and classic writers. I found myself gazing at them, secretly hoping that these very books would become the prizes to be awarded to us.

Mohan Shashi ji first handed us a thick bundle of certificates. Then he unfolded a list containing the names of all the students from our school who had won prizes in various competitions-first, second, third, commendation and consolation awards.

Next, we were given two large jute sacks.

Working with astonishing speed, the organisers began picking books directly from that magnificent pile. According to each student's position on the list, they selected three books for some prizes, two for others, and dropped them into our sacks. Within minutes the task was over. Both sacks were more than half full.

To me, those books were nothing less than a treasure.

We hired a rickshaw and returned to the school. In the Literature Room, Gontia Sir asked us to arrange all the books neatly on the tables. Once again, I had the chance to touch each one of them before placing it in its stack. I, too, had won several prizes that year. As I handled those books, I kept wondering which among them might eventually become mine.

Soon all the books had been arranged. Gontia Sir collected the certificates and told us to return to our classrooms.

Three or four days passed.

The prizes were not distributed.

Every afternoon I would wait with quiet anticipation, imagining that perhaps today's assembly would finally be the occasion. And each day I found myself wondering which of those wonderful books I would carry home.

Then, on the fourth or fifth day, the long-awaited moment finally arrived.

During the afternoon assembly I noticed a table placed a little away from the stage. Upon it stood several tall stacks of books. I was usually second or third in the line of my class, and from where I stood, I could clearly see that these were not the books we had brought from the *Milan* office. They were identical volumes-three or four different titles repeated over and over again, recognisable from their matching bindings and uniform thickness.

After the prayers, the principal began distributing the certificates and books. First-prize winners received three books, second- and third-prize winners received two or one, according to the category, while those who had earned commendation or consolation prizes were given only certificates.

I, too, received seven or eight books.

But they were not the books we had carried back from *Milan*.

The disappointment cut deep.

The books we were given consisted largely of government publications-research reports, informational booklets, and publicity material relating to various government schemes. Some were substantial volumes; others were slim pamphlets distributed free of cost. They undoubtedly possessed their own value and purpose.

And yet...

What had become of the books we had brought from the office of *Milan*?

I never found an answer to that question.

Not then.

Not even today.

I shall offer no comment on the matter.

I will only say this: whenever that afternoon returns to my memory, it still leaves behind a quiet ache.

□

My chapter, "Shabd Tilism", *The Magic of Words*, would remain incomplete unless I spoke of those great writers and the works that shaped my inner world. I have already confessed that it is beyond my capacity to draw up a definitive list of such master's or arrange them in any meaningful order. They come to me as memories do-not in sequence, but in moments. At this moment, the writer who comes most vividly to mind is Dr. S. L. Bhyrappa.

Dr. S. L. Bhyrappa was one of the foremost novelists of the Kannada language, a philosopher, and a screenwriter. He is widely regarded as one of modern India's most distinguished and widely read serious authors. His novels are remarkable for their extraordinary blend of painstaking research, Indian history, cultural consciousness, and philosophical inquiry.

He was born on 20 August 1931 in the small village of Santeshivara in Karnataka's Hassan district and passed away in Bengaluru on 24 September 2025 at the age of ninety-four.

His childhood was marked by profound tragedy. During the plague epidemic, he lost his mother and several of his siblings. Poverty shadowed his youth, compelling him to undertake every kind of work to finance his education. For a period, he lived in Bombay, where he even worked as a railway porter and spent time wandering with ascetics. Yet hardship could not extinguish his hunger for learning. He completed his master's degree in philosophy from the University of Mysore and later earned his doctorate from the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. He taught philosophy for many years and retired in 1991 as a professor at the Regional College of Education in Mysore.

The first of his works that I encountered was *Parva*, in its Hindi translation. It is widely acknowledged as his magnum opus-a monumental reimagining of the *Mahabharata*. Instead of treating the epic as mythology alone, Bhyrappa presents it through a deeply human, historical, and sociological lens. Before writing any of his novels, he was known to spend years researching his subject, travelling extensively and immersing himself in the worlds he wished to recreate.

His grounding in philosophy lends extraordinary depth to the conversations between his characters. Their dialogues probe questions of life and death, morality and duty, society and the human condition with a rare intellectual and emotional intensity.

The other two novels of his that I have read are *Griha Bhanga* and *Vamsha Vriksha*. *Griha Bhanga* is an intensely moving portrayal of the fragile fabric of family and rural life in India. *Vamsha Vriksha* raises a question that is at once simple and profound: *What truly constitutes a lineage?* Is it merely a biological succession of blood from one generation to the next, or is it the continuity of ideas, values, and cultural inheritance? The novel reveals with remarkable sensitivity how rigid social codes can devastate human relationships and extinguish the tenderest of emotions.

For his immense contribution to Indian literature, Dr. Bhyrappa was honoured with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1975, the Padma Shri in 2016, and the Padma Bhushan in 2023.

Like Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, and Premchand before him, Dr. Bhyrappa kept alive, through his literature, a powerful sense of India's civilisational identity and cultural consciousness.

Although I have read only three of his novels, and that too not in the original Kannada but in Hindi translation, I was deeply affected by them. The authority with which he handled his themes, the depth of his scholarship, and the philosophical texture of his writing had a remarkable power. The worlds he created were so vividly realised that I often found myself drawn into them, standing among his characters, witnessing their lives from within. Even today, after all these years, I can say that those books have never really left me.

Besides writing this memoir, I have written numerous unpublished poems. During my college years I also wrote a rather immature novel titled *Bikhre-Bikhre* (*Scattered Fragments*), along with several short stories and poems. Yet, overcome by a strange mixture of frustration and despair, I consigned almost all of those writings to the flames. That is a story I shall have to tell in due course. Fortunately, the poems I wrote later have survived. Once this second volume of my autobiographical series is published, I hope to bring those poems out as a separate collection. After that will come the third and fourth volumes of this memoir.

Before I begin writing anything, I invariably undertake at least a modest amount of research. These pages may recount my own life, but even for my own story I spoke with a few surviving elders, sought out old friends, and revisited, time and again, the places that had once formed the landscape of my life. I sometimes feel that this habit is an inheritance from reading Bhyrappa. And if, every now and then, philosophical reflections find their way into my writing-even in their

raw, unfinished form-that too, I suspect, is a quiet echo of his influence.

□

I have read Hindi translations of many novels originally written in other Indian languages. Among the writers who have left a lasting impression on me, Ashapurna Devi occupies a place of special importance. She was one of the most celebrated novelists and poets of Bengali literature and among the few women writers of the twentieth century whose work illuminated, with extraordinary depth, the condition of Indian society-particularly the inner lives, struggles, and silent resilience of women.

She was born on 8 January 1909 in North Calcutta (now Kolkata) into a middle-class family and passed away on 13 July 1995.

Over the course of her prolific career, she wrote more than two hundred books. I have read the Hindi translations of her celebrated trilogy, widely regarded as one of the crowning achievements of Bengali literature.

The first novel, *Pratham Pratishruti* (*The First Promise*), is considered her masterpiece. Set in the closing years of the nineteenth century, it tells the story of Satyabati, a woman who dares to challenge the oppressive conventions of her time and fight for her dignity and freedom.

The second, *Subarnalata*, follows the life of Satyabati's daughter, portraying with remarkable sensitivity the invisible chains that bind women and the emotional conflicts they are forced to endure.

The third novel, *Bakul Katha*, brings the saga into the modern age, examining the changing yet still complex realities of a woman's life.

In 1976, Ashapurna Devi received the Jnanpith Award, becoming the first woman to be honoured with India's highest literary distinction. The award was conferred for *Pratham Pratishruti*. In the same year, the Government of India honoured her with the Padma Shri.

I admired these novels so deeply that I presented my own copies to one of my closest friends. Soon afterwards, however, I realised that I could not bear to have them absent from my own shelves. I bought the entire trilogy once again, and those three volumes continue to occupy a cherished place in my personal library.



Ganadevata is one of the most celebrated and enduring novels of the great Bengali writer Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay. First published in 1942, it earned its author the Jnanpith Award in 1966, India's highest literary honour.

I believe I first read its Hindi translation during my college years.

The novel is set in the fictional Bengali village of Shivkalipur and portrays rural life in all its complexity-its poverty and ignorance, its exploitation, and the gradual disintegration of an old social order. At its centre stands an idealistic village schoolteacher who fights tirelessly for justice, for the rights of ordinary villagers, and for social reform. His struggle costs him dearly; he even loses his family. Yet he refuses to surrender.

Another of Tarashankar's novels in my collection is *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* (*The Tale of Hansuli Bend*), one of the finest achievements of Bengali literature. Published in 1947, it has long been regarded as a literary landmark.

A *hansuli* is the traditional crescent-shaped necklace worn by women. *Bank* means a bend. At one point, the Kopai River curves in a broad arc resembling the shape of a hansuli, and that stretch is known as Hansuli Bank. The novel tells the story of the people who inhabit that riverside world.

The more one reads Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, the more one realises that, in his fiction, the village is never merely the backdrop against which events unfold. It is itself a living presence-breathing,

changing, rejoicing, suffering-standing before the reader as vividly as any human character.

His gaze never lingers on a single individual. Instead, it embraces the entire community: its families, castes, relationships, conflicts, traditions, and its slow encounter with a changing world.

His characters are neither saints nor villains. They are ordinary men and women, recognisable in us, carrying their virtues and weaknesses side by side.

His language possesses the warmth and earthiness of rural life. Folk speech, proverbs, songs, and village customs flow naturally into the narrative without ever seeming imposed. Fields, rivers, forests, the monsoon, and the changing seasons do not merely provide scenery; they appear to breathe with the emotions and destinies of the people who inhabit them.

His stories never hurry. Like life itself, they unfold slowly and organically. Within that gentle current emerge human sorrow, struggle, defeat, and, above all, the astonishing resilience that compels people to go on living despite everything.

If Premchand revealed the social reality of the Indian village with uncompromising honesty, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay transformed that same village-its collective life, its folk traditions, and its beating heart-into an epic narrative.

□

You may well wonder how I can speak with such confidence about Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay when I have read only two of his novels.

The answer is quite simple.

Ganadevata is universally regarded as his representative masterpiece. Sometimes, one or two truly great works are enough to reveal the genius of a writer.

Besides, as I have already mentioned, I have developed the habit of making a modest enquiry before expressing an opinion about any writer, any place, or any event that does not directly belong to my own life but finds its way into these pages because it illuminates my story. I read, I verify, I reflect-and only then do I write.

I hope that answers your question.

Yet, having reached this point, another thought occurs to me.

I wonder whether all this is becoming rather tedious for you.

After all, there is no reason why what fascinates me should necessarily interest you to the same degree. I must remember that. At the very least, I must try to ensure that whatever I write carries enough life and curiosity to persuade you to keep turning the pages of my story.

Before I move away from this subject, however, I must add one more name to this gallery of literary companions-Amrit Lal Nagar. I simply cannot resist speaking of him.

After that, I promise, I shall change the subject.

Among his novels, *Amrit Aur Vish* (*Nectar and Poison*), published in 1966, is generally regarded as his finest work. It presents a sweeping portrait of Indian society, with all its contradictions, virtues, and failings, and earned him the Sahitya Akademi Award. His other celebrated novels include *Boond Aur Samudra*, *Manas Ka Hans*, *Khanjan Nayan*, *Mahakaal*, *Suhag Ke Nupur*, *Shatranj Ke Mohre*, *Karvat*, *Peedhiyan*, and *Ab Main Nachyo Bahut Gopal*. Except for *Mahakaal* and *Peedhiyan*, every one of these novels' forms part of my personal collection.

Nagar's language is disarmingly simple, effortless, and deeply rooted in the speech of ordinary people. He captures the colours of Lucknow with remarkable authenticity, blending Awadhi expressions, colloquial idioms, and local sayings so naturally that every scene seems to spring to life before the reader's eyes.

His narrative possesses the flowing ease of a traditional Indian storyteller-a *kathavachak* or *dastango*. Reading him, one often feels that he is speaking directly to the reader, drawing us into an intimate conversation that never loosens its grip until the story reaches its conclusion.

Running beneath his prose is a quiet current of wit and satire. He exposes social hypocrisy, superstition, and injustice with penetrating insight, yet his language never turns bitter. Even in criticism, it retains an effortless warmth and humour.

There is a Hindi proverb: *"Where King Bhoj, and where Gangu the oilman?"*-a reminder of the absurdity of comparing unequals.

I mention it before I say what follows.

It is Nagar's conversational style of storytelling-his habit of speaking directly to the reader-that I sometimes recognise, in however modest a form, in my own writing. To me, it is the most natural and compelling way of telling a story.

To compare myself with a writer of his stature would be sheer arrogance. That is not my intention. I merely wish to acknowledge that after reading him, I have often felt my own writing becoming a little more refined, a little more confident, within the limits of my own abilities.

For whatever growth there has been in my craft, I owe him a debt of gratitude.

□

Let us pause here for a while and take a small detour. We shall return to this place in a little while.

In the first volume of my memoir, *Some Memories Remained, Some Slipped Away*, I spoke about the storeroom at my maternal grandparents' house. Just inside its main doorway, to the left, stood a little mountain of bundles of wastepaper. Hidden among those

bundles was, for me, the entrance to an undiscovered treasure. I would pull out whichever book happened to catch my eye and consider it the greatest prize I could possibly have found.

Whenever I stayed at my grandparents' home, I remained on the lookout for such an opportunity. The moment my younger grandmother unlocked the storeroom, I would quietly slip in behind her. I knew my time was limited. Within a few minutes she would ask me to step outside, and the heavy door would once again be locked.

The moment I entered that room; I was greeted by a strange yet intoxicating fragrance. Looking back today, I feel it was the mingled scent of old and new paper, forgotten books, lac and the materials used for making lacquer bangles, worn wooden moulds, dust, and the stale breath of a room that remained shut for most of the year.

Even now I cannot find words adequate to describe that fragrance.

I can only say that it possessed a curious enchantment.

After all these years its memory still lingers within me as vividly as ever. Sometimes I even feel that I was drawn to that storeroom less by the books themselves than by that unforgettable smell. Perhaps my first love affair with books began not only with words, but with their fragrance.

For a time, my grandfather had also dealt in scrap paper. That was why bundles of old newspapers, magazines, and books were stacked there. Yet the storeroom served another, more important purpose. It housed the valuable tools, moulds, materials, and equipment used in the family's lacquer bangle-making business. Consequently, it was not opened every day. The door was unlocked only when the craftsmen needed to take out some essential item.

The keys always remained with my younger grandmother. She entrusted them to no one. She would unlock the door herself, supervise the removal of whatever the craftsmen required, lock the cupboards again, and finally secure the storeroom itself.

Whenever I happened to be there, I waited eagerly for just such a moment.

Inside, only a single yellow bulb cast its dim, uncertain light. In that half-darkness I would hurriedly rummage through the bundles of discarded paper. My eyes searched desperately for a page, a colourful cover, or the corner of a book peeping out as though beckoning me. The instant I spotted something promising; I would tug at it with all my strength. Sometimes I emerged with a single book, sometimes two, and on particularly fortunate occasions, three or four magazines at once.

Everything after that depended entirely upon chance.

There was never any way of knowing what would come into my hands. One day it might be a copy of the *Panchatantra* or a collection of moral tales; another day an old English grammar or mathematics textbook. Sometimes a dust-covered Hindi magazine appeared, and sometimes an English film magazine.

One day, hidden among those bundles of scrap, I discovered a magazine that quietly opened an entirely new window within me.

In those days an Urdu film magazine called *Shama* enjoyed immense popularity. By sheer accident, I found its Hindi edition. I must have been in the third or fourth standard at the time. Most of its stories and articles were probably beyond my understanding. I would not claim that I grasped very much of what I read. Yet whatever little I did understand was enough to leave me spellbound.

I still remember that almost every page carried, in its upper corner, a photograph of a film star accompanied by a couplet beneath it. Those verses were even more difficult for a child of my age, yet whatever meaning I could gather fascinated me. The stories, too, were woven from the threads of ordinary social life-family relationships, joys and sorrows, emotional entanglements, and the quiet dramas of everyday existence.

It was an entirely different world, and it captivated me completely.

Years later I borrowed and read many issues of *Shama* from libraries. But that came much later.

Today, when I look back, I realise that the magazine I rescued from those dusty bundles in that dark storeroom was far more than a magazine.

It was another small window opening onto the vast and magical world of books and words.

□

Another magazine that found its way into my hands was *Niharika*, which I bought one day from a bookstall. It was published by Mitra Prakashan of Allahabad-now Prayagraj. Its distinguishing feature was its collection of straightforward social, family, mystery, and adventure stories. Before long, I had begun buying it occasionally and reading it with equal delight.

Then there was *Sarika*, one of the finest magazines devoted to the modern Hindi short story.

Launched in 1960, *Sarika* was published in Bombay by the Times of India group and was devoted primarily to prose fiction, especially the short story. In its formative years, writers such as Mohan Rakesh and Kailash Vajpeyi were associated with its editorial work. Later, Kamleshwar assumed its editorship with remarkable vision. During his tenure, the magazine became the driving force behind the *Parallel Story Movement* and established itself as the foremost literary journal devoted to contemporary fiction. In its final years, the editorship passed to Kanhaiyalal Nandan. The magazine continued publication until around 1985.

Soon afterwards came the rebirth of another legendary journal-*Hans*.

Originally founded in 1930 at Banaras by Munshi Premchand, *Hans* had played an important role in both the Indian freedom movement and the evolution of modern Hindi literature before ceasing publication in 1953. Nearly thirty-three years later, Rajendra Yadav,

one of the foremost figures of the *Nayi Kahani* movement, resolved to revive it. On 31 July 1986, coinciding with Premchand's birth anniversary, he relaunched the magazine from Delhi.

Under Rajendra Yadav's editorship, the new *Hans* ushered in a remarkable transformation in contemporary Hindi literature. It brought voices from the margins-particularly Dalit and feminist writing-into the very centre of literary discourse. He remained its editor with unwavering commitment until his death in 2013, nearly twenty-seven years later. The magazine continues to be published to this day.

To my mind, *Hans* carried forward the literary mission that *Sarika* had so admirably begun-and carried it forward with remarkable success.

There is something personal I would like to add here.

In 1995, I wrote to Rajendra Yadav, requesting him to consider publishing some of my sketches in *Hans*. If memory serves me correctly, it was Veena Uniyal who responded to my letter.

I sent them a series of sketches. The first nine or ten were studies of the black rocks that had fascinated me for years. I believe they appeared in the June 1995 issue. Encouraged by their publication, I continued sending several more series throughout 1995 and 1996.

Rajendra Yadav published every one of them.

Since I usually worked in thematic series-eight or ten sketches sharing the same mood and visual language-they would appear throughout an entire issue of the magazine. I still possess all those issues in my personal library.

As I write this chapter, I am staying with my son in Bengaluru, and therefore I do not have those old copies at hand to verify the exact publication dates.

Later, however, life's complications multiplied. Responsibilities, disappointments, and unforeseen circumstances gradually carried me away from colours, brushes, pens, and even books. In a sense, I slipped once again into depression.

Those difficult years-their confusions, their losses, and their long stretches of darkness-belong to another story.

I shall tell it in the third volume.

The present volume covers the years from Class Six to the final year of my engineering studies. Inevitably, a few incidents from earlier or later years have found their way into these pages whenever the narrative demanded them. That, I suppose, is one of the unavoidable liberties of memoir.

Since I have just mentioned my published sketches, I should also add that many of my drawings appeared regularly in newspapers such as *Nav Bharat*, *Nai Duniya*, and *Swatantra Mat*.

Then, as I have already hinted, circumstances took an unfortunate turn.

Much within me broke.

For a time, I too became scattered.

But those are stories for another day-stories that belong to the third volume.

□

One thought has a way of leading to another, and that is the true pleasure of conversation.

I was speaking of *Sarika*. My acquaintance with the magazine had begun even before 1972, but with time it grew into something far deeper. It was *Sarika* that introduced me to Mohan Rakesh.

On 3 December 1972, Mohan Rakesh-the foremost standard-bearer of the *Nayi Kahani* (New Story) movement and one of India's greatest modern playwrights-passed away unexpectedly. Soon after his untimely death, *Sarika* published a historic memorial issue in tribute to its former editor. The *Mohan Rakesh Memorial Special Number* appeared in February 1973.

That issue has since come to be regarded as a landmark in the history of Hindi journalism and literary publishing.

At the time, *Sarika* was being edited by the eminent writer Kamleshwar, one of Mohan Rakesh's closest friends and a member of the celebrated literary trio of Kamleshwar, Rajendra Yadav, and Mohan Rakesh, whose names became synonymous with the *Nayi Kahani* movement. Kamleshwar prepared the memorial issue with deep emotion, affection, and an acute sense of responsibility.

It was a remarkable attempt to gather, within a single volume, the life, personality, and literary genius of Mohan Rakesh.

Some of the most distinguished writers of the period-including Rajendra Yadav, Kamleshwar, Dharamvir Bharati, Mannu Bhandari, and others-contributed deeply moving memoirs, recalling the moments they had shared with him and reflecting upon his singular way of living.

The issue also contained critical essays on his major plays-*Ashadh Ka Ek Din*, *Adhe-Adhure*, and *Lehron Ke Rajhans*-along with discussions of his novels and other writings.

Rakesh was also known for keeping a diary. The memorial volume presented, for the first time, rare extracts from those diaries as well as selections from his personal correspondence with friends. It also included discussions of his unfinished final play, *Pair Tale Ki Zameen* (*The Ground Beneath the Feet*), together with other unpublished writings.

Mohan Rakesh himself had served as editor of *Sarika* for a brief period during 1962–63. For that reason, this special issue was far more than a formal tribute. It possessed the warmth and intimacy of a farewell offered by one's own family.

Even today it is regarded by scholars and students of Hindi literature as one of the most authentic and indispensable sources for understanding Mohan Rakesh's life and work.

Before reading that special issue, I knew Mohan Rakesh only vaguely-as one among the important modern Hindi fiction writers.

That single volume changed everything.

Like the proverbial ocean contained within a pitcher, it introduced me to the fullness of his personality-his life, his literary journey, his works, and, above all, the intimate voice that emerged from the pages of his diary.

Only then did I begin to understand what an extraordinary human being Mohan Rakesh had been.

I never knew him personally. Nor, in all probability, was I ever destined to.

Yet for a very long time, an inexplicable sadness lingered within me-that I had discovered him only after he was gone.

□

I mentioned earlier that I received a National Scholarship during those years.

After Mohan Rakesh's death in 1972, Rajpal & Sons brought out his complete short stories in four separate volumes. Three of these collected the stories that had already been published during his lifetime, while the fourth consisted of previously unpublished stories, edited and prepared for publication by his close friend and fellow writer, Kamleshwar.

The four volumes were titled *Quarter*, *Pehchan* (*Identity*), *Waris* (*The Heir*), and *Ek Ghatna* (*An Incident*).

Those were among the very first books I bought.

All of us in our circle of friends read them with enormous enthusiasm.

What became of those volumes afterwards, I do not know.

When I left Jabalpur in 1977 to take up my first job, most of my books gradually disappeared-some lent and never returned, some misplaced, others simply scattered by the passage of time.

The books that now fill my personal library were all acquired later. I shall speak of them in due course.

Today, Rajpal & Sons has brought together all of Mohan Rakesh's stories in a single handsome hardbound volume titled *Mohan Rakesh ki Sampoorna Kahaniyan* (*The Complete Stories of Mohan Rakesh*).

That volume occupies an honoured place on the shelves of my own library.

□

Looking back now, it seems to me that we do not always choose certain books; sometimes, they choose us. The February 1973 *Mohan Rakesh Memorial Issue* of *Sarika* entered my life as one such book. After reading it, it was as though some long-forgotten door within me had quietly swung open. For the first time, I realised that language is not merely a vehicle for ideas; it can also become the very presence of a human being.

Until then I had read the novels and stories of many writers. They had plots, incidents, memorable characters, and each possessed its own distinctive beauty. But while reading Mohan Rakesh, I sensed that something altogether different was taking place. He did not write *about* his characters; he lived alongside them. His words carried a warmth so intimate that it could never have been achieved by literary craftsmanship alone. It seemed to arise from having lived life to its deepest core.

There was an extraordinary transparency in his sentences. While reading him, one ceased to notice the author; only the experience remained. It felt as though the words themselves had slowly withdrawn, leaving the man behind them quietly seated before the reader.

Perhaps part of this fascination was inseparable from the silent sorrow of his untimely death.

Forty-eight years is not an age at which a writer reaches his end; it is the age at which his true journey has scarcely begun. The premature and deeply unsettling loss of such an exceptional literary voice remains an irreparable loss to Hindi literature. What astonishes me even today is how much he created within so brief a lifetime. His body of work is itself an enduring literary inheritance.

When I discovered how young he had been when he died, an unnamed sadness settled within me for days.

Sometimes, when a great writer departs, it is not only his family that is bereaved; the language itself becomes orphaned.

For me, Mohan Rakesh was such a writer.

Even today, when certain titles return to memory-*Adhe-Adhure*, *Andhere Band Kamre*, *Ashadh Ka Ek Din*-they no longer seem merely the names of books. They feel like the names of different rooms within human life, rooms in which a solitary soul sits quietly with its loneliness, its failures, its desires, and its silences.

To read him was never simply to follow a story.

It was to descend into oneself.

His plays and novels are not merely works of literature; they are profound meditations on human existence-on loneliness, relationships, longing, and the quiet ironies that shape our lives. Reading them, one comes to understand that literature is not simply an art of storytelling; it is one of the rarest means by which life, in all its complexity, may be understood.

And then there were his diaries...

I do not know whether Hindi literature possesses another example of diary writing more disarmingly honest than these.

Sometimes there is only a single sentence.

Sometimes only half a sentence.

Sometimes merely an unfinished note.

Yet behind those fragmentary words an entire day continues to breathe.

Again and again, while reading them, I felt that a human being leaves far more unsaid than he ever expresses. Perhaps the deepest truths are precisely those that language can never fully contain.

At times those brief entries reminded me of the ancient Vedic *suktas*-a handful of words unfolding into immeasurable meanings.

They never impose an interpretation.

They merely point towards a direction.

The rest of the journey belongs to the reader.

It is as though the writer quietly whispers, "Now see as far as you are able."

Gradually I also came to understand that reading a great writer is itself a discipline, almost a spiritual practice.

Writing alone is not enough; one must also learn how to read.

Just as only a listener whose heart has become receptive to music can truly experience its beauty, only a reader capable of hearing the silence between words can savour literature in its fullest measure. One must be able to feel the rise and fall of emotions, their faint tremors, their hesitations, their sudden surges and quiet withdrawals.

Only then does a work of literature blossom within us in all its fullness.

Today I realise that Mohan Rakesh gave me far more than his books.

He taught me how to read.

He showed me that the greatest miracle of literature is not the story itself but human sensibility; not language alone, but the life that beats quietly behind it.

Perhaps that is why, even today, whenever I return to his writings, I feel as though a very old and deeply cherished companion has come to sit silently before me, speaking of life's most difficult truths without the slightest trace of performance.



It was through *Sarika* that I first encountered Nirmal Verma.

Looking back today, I realise that it was not merely an introduction to another writer. It was my first glimpse of an unseen landscape within myself-a country whose existence I had never before suspected.

His novel *Ek Chithra Sukh* (*A Rag Called Happiness*) was published as a book in 1979, but portions of it had appeared serially in *Sarika* during 1978. It was there, on those pages, that I first discovered Nirmal Verma's language.

His prose made no display of ornament.

It never attempted to dazzle the reader.

It was so quiet, so effortless, that at first glance it almost appeared simple. Yet the deeper one entered it, the more it unfolded.

To me, it resembled a mystical poem.

The sentences were short, almost understated, yet each carried an ocean of lived experience within it. Long after I had finished reading, they continued to resonate in my mind.

Some meanings revealed themselves of their own accord.

Others deliberately remained hidden, as though waiting for the reader's own inward journey to reach them.

The emptiness that haunted the lives of his characters, the unspoken pain in their relationships, the silent conflicts and inward hesitations they carried-all these gradually began to create a parallel world within me.

I was no longer merely reading those characters.

Somewhere, I was living them.

Perhaps because whose life is free from confusion, conflict, or uncertainty?

Every human being carries within himself a few rooms whose windows remain closed for years.

At that time I was only twenty-four or twenty-five.

Young in years, perhaps-but by then my mind had already been shaped by enough experiences, questions, and emotional upheavals to recognise the world that Nirmal Verma was revealing.

My own sensitivity had woven an invisible web around me.

The world outside that web seemed every bit as tangled as the one within.

Every road appeared to lead towards another question, and every answer carried the seed of a fresh uncertainty.

I, too, stood before questions whose answers perhaps only I could discover.

Yet finding them demanded a courage whose price seemed unbearably high.

I could not decide which direction to take.

One thing alone had become clear.

Escape is never a solution.

A person may run as far as he wishes, but where can he flee from his own mind?

Sooner or later, one must choose a path and begin walking.

Life cannot be lived standing forever at the same crossroads.

Nirmal Verma's novel offered me no ready-made answers.

It never declared which road was right and which was wrong.

It passed no moral judgement on my behalf.

Yet it helped me understand one profound truth.

Life does not always unfold according to the wishes of the heart.

There are times when we must learn to accept even what feels impossible to accept.

Acceptance is not defeat.

Sometimes, it is the greatest test of being human.

Perhaps it was around that time that I decided to accept my circumstances.

Looking back now, I sometimes feel that I failed to pay the price that courage demanded of me then. Instead, life exacted a far greater price. It seems to me that I have never truly repaid the principal; only the interest has continued to accumulate over the years. By lacking courage at that decisive moment, I may have postponed an immediate hardship, but life does not abolish difficulties-it merely defers them. At times I feel that existence itself settled the account for my refusal to face the truth-with immense patience, yet with equal severity.

For the moment, these words may sound like riddles. Some of them may even seem unnecessarily enigmatic. But every life contains certain events that lose their true meaning if revealed before their proper time. The answers to these riddles will come, but only when the journey of this memoir reaches the place where they belong. Memory, too, has its own discipline. It reveals only as much as the moment can bear.

Nirmal Verma remained far more than a novelist for me. I eventually read all five of his novels, nearly every collection of his short stories, his essays, travelogues, interviews-indeed, everything of his that I could lay my hands on-and I read many of them again and again. Each reading felt strangely different, as though it was not I who was reading the book, but the book that was reading me anew.

As the years passed, I changed. My experiences changed. And with them, the meanings of those same books changed as well.

Perhaps that is the defining quality of great literature: it never reaches its end. It continues to grow alongside its reader.

Later, I shall also speak about Osho.

Nirmal Verma and Osho entered my life from two entirely different directions, yet each, in his own way, helped me survive.

Osho illuminated my questions.

Nirmal Verma taught me how to live with them.

With Osho, I often found answers.

With Nirmal Verma, the urgency of finding answers quietly dissolved.

His writing filled me with an invisible strength.

Life itself did not become any lighter, but I found within myself the strength to carry its weight.

And perhaps that is all a human being ultimately needs-not a life free of suffering, but the quiet strength to endure, without complaint, what at times seems impossible to endure.



It was during those years that I consigned everything I had written until then to the fire.

Sometimes I wonder whether it was truly fire that consumed those pages, or whether it was my own impatient youth, transformed into flames and standing before me.

Even after all these years, the memory of that afternoon has never been completely extinguished. Its heat still lies buried somewhere deep within me.

Whenever I revisit those moments, I remember the thought that drove me to destroy everything I had written.

The one person for whom those words had truly been written had never even heard their faintest echo.

If they could never reach the one heart that mattered, what purpose did they serve?

Why should they remain forgotten on the shelves of my room, slowly gathering dust?

Better, I thought, that they should become ashes once and for all.

It was that wounded frustration, that bitterness and inward turmoil, which compelled me to take what now seems almost an act of self-destruction.

At the time, the decision appeared perfectly natural.

Today, whenever I remember those moments, I still feel a quiet ache somewhere within.

Sometimes I find it difficult to believe that the impulsive young man who surrendered so completely to his emotions was, in fact, myself.

Now I understand that I was not burning words.

I was burning my own impatient waiting.

Looking back, I can see that it was not an act of courage at all. It was the violent eruption of wounded pride, unfulfilled love, frustration, resentment, and profound despair.

That emotional storm forced me into an act that was, in many ways, self-destructive.

In truth, I did not merely burn paper.

I consigned to the flames a large part of the writer I might one day have become.

Among that pile lay my unfinished novel, *Bikhre-Bikhre* (*Scattered Fragments*).

There were several diaries, countless loose pages, and three thick notebooks.

Two were filled entirely with poems.

The third contained my short stories.

I have no idea what literary value those pages possessed.

Perhaps very little.

But they were the most honest testimony of my inner life.

When I wrote them, I was never driven by the ambition to become a writer.

I merely wanted to give words to the crowd of voices within me that refused to remain silent.

Most of those poems had been written with one particular young woman in mind.

She was exceptionally intelligent.

For her, books were instruments of knowledge rather than objects of sentiment. I never saw her take much interest in reading beyond her academic studies.

Oddly enough, perhaps that was precisely what drew me towards her.

She spoke without pretence.

There was in her a simple, luminous honesty.

Her sincerity never sought attention.

She was natural, cheerful, and possessed the rare gift of making everyone around her feel at ease.

She existed outside my words.

I kept searching for her within them.

Perhaps we were walking side by side along parallel paths, never realising that our destinations were different.

Yet I found myself drawn towards her almost effortlessly.

It was not her interest in literature that attracted me.

It was her personality.

Her honesty, her unaffected truthfulness, her unselfconscious kindness, and her effortless sense of humour touched me deeply.

We spent long hours together.

We talked endlessly.

Our conversations were full of life, laughter, and vague imaginings of the future.

But never of poetry.

The emotions that filled my poems never found a place in our conversations.

Perhaps because they existed only within me, not within her.

Time moved on.

A few years later she slowly began to understand me.

Between us there grew an unspoken sense of closeness.

Poetry was still absent.

In its place, however, something more real, more deeply human, and perhaps more enduring quietly began to emerge-small, unnamed shoots of affection pushing through the soil.

Had I possessed a little more patience...

Had I been able to hold back the storm within me for just a little longer...

Perhaps the story would have unfolded very differently.

When I look back now, it is my impatience that I regret most.

Many of life's greatest mistakes are born not of malice but of haste.

I gave neither my words nor my relationships the time they deserved.

The consequence was inevitable.

Those things that might still have been saved were destroyed by my own hands.

The irony is that this was neither the first nor the last time I allowed impatience to govern my life.

A few years later I repeated the same mistake.

Once again, the greatest loss was my own.

In one sense, I became the architect of my own undoing.

But that is another story-one so long and so intricate that it deserves a chapter of its own.

For now, this much is enough.

After all, this episode belongs only to the unfolding 'Shabd Tilism',enchantment of words.

For this chapter is the story of the birth of words, and this part of it is the story of their cremation.

The rest of the tale still waits upon the unwritten pages of the future.

□

When I think of *Bikhre-Bikhre* today, I realise that the soil of my emotions had become fertile long before its time. Whether that was the gift of circumstance or part of some larger design conceived by existence itself, I still cannot say with certainty.

The life I longed to see around me-the kind of relationships I yearned for, the depth of feeling I believed human beings were capable of-seemed nowhere to be found. Perhaps it could not have been found, because inwardly I had already begun living in a time that had not yet arrived. Experiences that would take other years to reach were unfolding prematurely within my own imagination. It was only natural, then, that I wished to see some reflection of that inner world in the lives around me-not an exact replica, perhaps, but at least an echo.

Out of that longing, *Bikhre-Bikhre* was born.

It seemed to me that the people around me, who ought to have been strung together like beads on a single thread, had instead scattered in every direction. There should have been some invisible strand binding them together, yet I could find none.

When I failed to discover that world in life, I created it in words.

Those whom life had left disconnected, I brought together within the pages of my manuscript. I decided where they would stand, what they would think, what they would say to one another. I allowed events to unfold exactly as I had seen them unfolding within myself.

Looking back now, I feel I was not writing a novel at all.

I was giving shape to an inward world where human beings could become what, in my heart, I believed they ought to be.

That young woman was there too.

She had to be.

The truth is that *Bikhre-Bikhre* was written for her.

She may not have appeared as its visible heroine, but her presence spread through the manuscript like an invisible heartbeat.

Without her, the novel could never have existed.

Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if the manuscript had survived.

Perhaps I would read it again today.

Perhaps, with the maturity, experience, and perspective that the years have given me, I would revise it and reshape it.

It would probably never have become a timeless masterpiece.

Yet it might have remained an authentic document of its time-a portrait of an era before mobile phones, before social media, before digital devices began consuming every waking moment.

It belonged to a world where waiting was still an essential part of relationships, where conversations unfolded slowly over weeks and

months, and where love often expressed itself more eloquently through silence than through speech.

At the very least, I believe it would have stood as an honest attempt to capture the minds of young people of that generation-their aspirations, their loneliness, their confusions, and their dreams.

Perhaps I should also tell you something about the stories and poems that perished in that impulsive blaze.

Otherwise, you might conclude that my writing consisted of nothing more than the silent love letter of an immature young man.

Had those stories survived, there would have been no need for such an explanation.

There were only seven or eight of them.

Yet each explored a very different world.

One story was titled *The River Flows in Silence*.

It told of the exploitation of an innocent young girl from an impoverished family.

The story ended with her body lying face down beside the quietly flowing river.

In reality, the setting was not a river at all. I had transformed the drainage canal that flowed behind our neighbourhood of Western Ghamapur into a river.

The background was entirely familiar to me: the wide-open grounds, neglected gardens, black rocky outcrops, old colonial bungalows, the crowded rows of uneven tiled houses leaning into one another as though holding each other upright, the church, and the old British-era bridge.

Behind that familiar landscape, something terrible unfolded almost noiselessly.

And then came the ending.

A silent body lying face down upon the riverbank.

What was that silent body trying to say?

Some people looked upon it as mere spectacle.

Others guessed, rightly or wrongly, what might have happened.

Those who knew the truth remained silent.

And the river...

The river continued to flow in silence.

Another story that still returns to me bore the simple title *The Man*.

It was inspired by my father's life.

In it I tried to portray his extraordinary journey and the relentless courage with which he lived.

I wrote of how his own father abandoned him, leaving him alone with his ailing mother and younger sister.

How, at the age of barely fourteen, he brought his sick mother from their village to Jabalpur, only to lose her in the district hospital.

How he then decided to leave the village forever.

How he cared for his younger sister, found employment at the Central Ordnance Depot while still very young, educated her at home, arranged her marriage, endured the heartbreak of its failure, and later sacrificed his own career-declining promotion twice because it would have required transferring away, thereby disrupting his children's education.

It was, above all, a story of endurance.

Of an ordinary man's extraordinary resilience.

One or two other stories survive only as faint shadows in memory.

After all, more than fifty years have passed.

And during all those years, they were never spoken of again.

The only person who had ever heard them was my friend Akhilesh.

He has now lived in America for more than forty years.

For the past two or three years, for reasons of life that need not be recounted here, I have lost touch not only with him but also with his wife, who was herself a dear friend.

Whenever we did meet during his visits to Jabalpur, or occasionally spoke over the telephone, those forgotten stories never once found a place in our conversations.

The words that rose as smoke and disappeared...

Who knows where they now drift in this immeasurable universe?

Perhaps existence has its own mysterious way of carrying everything it creates to the place where it truly belongs.

If so, let those stories remain wherever the cosmos has quietly ordained them to dwell.

Diary pages are different.

They are ledgers of lived pain.

One day, when I come to settle my accounts with sorrow, I shall also speak of the griefs that quietly exhausted themselves upon those pages.

As for the poems...

Many of them-not all, but many-were written with that young woman before my eyes, addressed to her alone.

Others belonged to entirely different worlds.

Yet I carried one persistent hope.

I wanted her to read every word I had written.

Only then, I believed, would those words fulfil the purpose for which they had been born.

But destiny had written something altogether different for them.

Among those poems was one that has never entirely left me.

It was titled *A Letter to My Unborn Daughter*.

Perhaps it was no longer merely a poem.

The helplessness of my silence had compelled my imagination to take one more impossible flight.

In it I found myself speaking to a daughter who had not yet entered this world.

The young woman for whom so much had been written never read that poem.

Her elder sister did.

She was two or three years older than I was.

After reading it, she was deeply moved.

She spoke warmly of it, and I still remember her quiet appreciation.

Only one line from that poem has remained with me all these years:

My daughter,
I do not yet even know the womb
through which you will enter this world.

"मेरी बेटी, मुझे तो अभी उस कोख का
पता भी नहीं मालूम;
जिस रास्ते तू इस दुनिया में आएगी"

□

Just as long highways today are punctuated by wayside halts and mid-journey cafés, the passage I have just written felt like such a resting place to me.

At this point I cannot resist recalling one of S. D. Burman's unforgettable songs:

"Who waits for you there?
Traveller, where are you going?
Rest here for a little while-
Where else will you find such shade..."

"वहाँ कौन है तेरा?
मुसाफ़िर, जायेगा कहाँ?
दम ले-ले घड़ी भर
ये छैयां पायेगा कहाँ?

The song came to my mind quite suddenly.

So, I have placed it here.

If you have read or listened to the complete lyrics of this song, you will understand.

Is there anything left for me to add after that?

Perhaps not.

Shailendra possessed the rare gift of expressing life's deepest truths in words of effortless simplicity. He wrote one immortal song after another, each illuminating some quiet corner of human existence. This, to me, is among his finest creations. It has remained close to my heart for as long as I can remember.

One day I intend to write an entire chapter devoted to radio.

It will not merely be about radio itself, but about songs, ragas, unforgettable broadcasts, and the voices that travelled through the air and quietly became companions to our lives.

I want to write about the songs that stood beside my restless soul when no one else did.

The songs that walked beside my loneliness.

Those stories belong there.



Perhaps this is the right place to tell you something else.

I dream a great deal.

Many of those dreams remain with me after I wake.

Some stay with me for years.

Here I shall speak only of those dreams that have endured dreams somehow connected with my lifelong love of books.

I once read that within the subconscious certain places gradually become permanent homes.

For me, libraries, second-hand bookshops, the storeroom at my grandparents' house, and railway bookstalls are not merely physical locations. They are gateways through which I entered my second life.

Perhaps they return to me again and again because, in dreams, the mind instinctively wanders back through the corridors where it first recognised itself.

Very often I dream of a railway station I have never actually seen.

There is always a bookstall.

The platform is crowded.

The crowd prevents me from reaching the books.

Somewhere in the background the whistle of a departing train keeps reminding me that I may miss my journey altogether.

Looking back now, it seems almost symbolic.

The unfamiliar station itself feels like a place of transition, while the bookstall represents yet another opportunity for knowledge, experience, and a fresh way of seeing the world-as though every new journey begins with a book quietly waiting for me.

The shelves draw me towards them.

The train threatens to leave.

I stand suspended between the two.

And just then...

I wake up.

A specialist in dreams might perhaps offer a more precise interpretation.

Psychology would probably say that it symbolises a search that still remains unfinished.

It is as though my own mind whispers to me:

"There is still one more book to read...

One more writer waiting to be discovered...

One more story that has been waiting patiently for you."

Perhaps that station is not part of the outer world at all.

Perhaps it belongs entirely to the landscape within.

I have often written that books shaped the person I eventually became.

Now I sometimes feel they have left the shelves outside and taken up permanent residence upon the shelves within me.

The bookshops that appear in my dreams are perhaps nothing more than the library of my own memory, where the books I have read, the life I have lived, and the unwritten words that still await me all stand quietly beside one another.

If I were to express this in the language of memoir, perhaps I would write something like this:

Even today, bookshops sometimes wander into my dreams. *Sometimes they are the familiar little shops where I spent countless hours during my adolescence. At other times they appear as tiny bookstalls on unknown railway platforms-stations I have never visited in waking life.*

The curious thing is that even in my dreams I find myself trying to read the titles on the shelves, as though I were searching for one particular book whose name I do not know yet somehow feel certain has been waiting for me all along.

Now I wonder whether it is really books that I am searching for.

Perhaps I am looking for that forgotten part of myself which changed, ever so slightly, after every good book I read.

Perhaps that is why, in my dreams, railway stations turn into libraries, and every journey passes through rows of books before it reaches its destination.

Perhaps these dreams are quietly handing me the key to understanding myself.

For me, books have never been objects.

They have always been a parallel geography of life.

Their reality-and the memories they left behind-have become so deeply inscribed within me that even today their map survives intact in my dreams.

□

Let us now turn to a few books that are not merely read but gradually sink into one's being until they become part of one's understanding of life itself.

Nirmal Verma's *Ek Chithra Sukh* (*A Rag Called Happiness*) is one such book for me.

It moved me deeply the first time I read it. Yet when I returned to it years later, its meanings became even richer, more intimate, and profoundly personal. Today I can open the novel almost anywhere and begin reading. Every time I do, some new layer quietly reveals itself.

On the surface, it appears to be the story of a handful of modern, middle-class individuals leading lonely lives. But beneath that surface lies something far more enduring: the condition of being human itself-a condition in which one remains lonely even while surrounded by others, remains unspoken even while speaking, and continues to fracture inwardly despite every attempt to belong.

Its principal characters-Bitty, Munnu, Derry, and Ira-are not bound together by any conventional narrative design. Each embodies, in a different way, the fragmented consciousness of modern life.

Among them, Bitty has always touched me most deeply.

She is much more than a female protagonist.

She becomes the image of a human being whose sensitivity is genuine, yet who cannot free herself from the vast emptiness that inhabits life. The sadness she carries, her quiet dissatisfaction, her persistent sense of incompleteness-these do not belong merely to an individual woman. They seem to express the anguish of an entire age.

Munnu, on the other hand, represents the restless uncertainty of youth.

He possesses energy, longing, and an instinctive attraction towards life, yet lacks any clear direction. Suspended emotionally between his sister Bitty and Derry, he embodies the instability that has become characteristic of the modern individual.

Derry is especially significant to me.

Although he belongs to the theatre, his own life resembles an unfinished performance. He carries within him the weight of memory, the fatigue of the past, and a curious stillness that appears calm from the outside but continues, quietly and ceaselessly, to lose something within.

Ira embodies another dimension altogether.

She represents modernity, independence, and inward conflict. Outwardly she appears composed, self-reliant, and strong. Yet inwardly she is every bit as lonely and unresolved as the others.

Through these characters, Nirmal Verma reveals one of the deepest paradoxes of contemporary relationships: people may live in close proximity and yet remain strangers to one another; they may share the same spaces while never truly entering each other's inner worlds.

What captivates me most about this novel, however, is its silence.

In Nirmal Verma's fiction, what remains unsaid often carries greater significance than what is spoken.

He composes the pauses between conversations, the hesitations hidden within his characters, and the quiet unease that lies beneath ordinary sentences with such extraordinary delicacy that the reader does not merely follow a story but enters an entire emotional climate.

Even the title-*A Rag Called Happiness*-contains the novel's entire philosophical vision.

Happiness here is neither complete, nor permanent, nor triumphant.

It exists only in fragments.

Like pieces of torn cloth, it is scattered, fragile, and temporary.

Whatever joy human beings receive in life does not arrive as some final fulfilment. It emerges instead from broken memories, fleeting intimacies, unfinished conversations, and unfulfilled longings.

Perhaps this is the novel's deepest truth: perfection is beyond human reach, and all we can do is gather together the scattered rags of our lives and fashion from them whatever meaning, warmth, or consolation we can.

Delhi itself becomes far more than a geographical setting.

It is a living symbol.

It embodies alienation, exhaustion, anonymity, and the emotional hardness of modern urban existence. Here one may live amidst millions and yet remain profoundly alone.

Its ancient ruins and perpetual haze remind me of an inner landscape where the present stands precariously upon the debris of the past.

Every character struggles, in one way or another, to preserve a fragile sense of self, yet none succeeds entirely.

The city becomes an outward reflection of their inward fractures.

Equally unforgettable is the recurring image of the dwarf and the old woman seated upon her throne.

To me, it is one of the novel's most poignant and philosophical symbols.

The dwarf embodies human helplessness, limitation, and the cruel inevitability of fate.

The old woman, watching from her throne, resembles Time itself-or perhaps society, or destiny-looking on with complete detachment as human suffering unfolds before its eyes.

"The dwarf suffered, and the old woman watched."

Few sentences, to my mind, capture the human condition with such haunting simplicity.

We are all, in one way or another, the ones who endure.

Time often remains nothing more than the silent spectator.

The recurring rehearsals in the novel are equally meaningful.

They are not merely theatrical rehearsals.

They become rehearsals for life itself.

The boundary between performance and reality has gradually dissolved.

The characters rehearse endlessly, yet no final performance ever arrives.

This perpetual preparation becomes a metaphor for the incompleteness and apparent purposelessness of human existence.

We spend our lives striving, gathering, preserving, building-yet seldom arrive at any final meaning.

And still, it is precisely within those unfinished efforts that life continues.

Even Bitty's rooftop room-the little *barsati*-functions as one of the novel's quiet symbols.

Within an otherwise harsh and desolate world, it offers only a temporary refuge.

It suggests that, amid life's indifferent winds, even the briefest shelter may become the greatest blessing available to us.

That is why *Ek Chithra Sukh* has never seemed to me merely a novel.

It is one of the most delicate and compassionate explorations of life's fragmented truth.

It teaches us that we must learn not the art of achieving perfection but the art of living with incompleteness; that happiness is rarely grand or whole but arrives in torn and scattered fragments; and that amid the profound estrangement of modern life, a few fleeting moments, a handful of relationships, and certain enduring memories are enough to keep us from falling apart.

Perhaps this is the novel's greatest achievement.

It never romanticises suffering.

Nor does it offer the false consolation of perfect happiness.

Instead, it presents life exactly as it is-broken, unfinished, vulnerable, and unmistakably real.

□

Nirmal Verma's *The Last Wilderness* (*Antim Aranya*) is, for me, far more than a novel. It is an experience of that profound and silent territory of life where words begin to recede and feeling takes their place. It belongs to that rare class of books which, once finished, leave one with the impression not of having followed a story, but of having travelled through the inner geography of human silence.

The character of Mehra Sahib remains vividly alive within me even today. Standing at the twilight of his life, he appears outwardly composed, yet carries within himself an entire forest of memories, regrets, and unspoken emotions. While reading him, I often felt that

as we grow older, it is not so many events that surround us as our own memories.

I read the novel as soon as it was first published. Two or three years later, I returned to it and discovered that it had opened itself in entirely new ways. The first reading had left me admiring it as an exceptional work of literature; the second allowed it to enter much deeper into my being. Since then, life itself has continued to write its own chapters within me. Now, at the age of seventy-one, having endured the loss of my wife earlier this year, I find the novel speaking to me with an intimacy that is almost unsettling. Its real story unfolds not in external events but within the invisible landscape of memory, solitude, ageing, the fragility of human relationships, and the quiet anguish of living beneath the shadow of mortality. For this reason, it no longer feels to me like a literary work alone; it has become an echo of my own life.

The relationship between Mehra Sahib and Diva has always moved me deeply because it embodies a form of love that rests neither upon display nor upon eloquence, but upon years of companionship, habit, compassion, and shared silence. There is little of romantic excitement in their relationship, yet in its place there exists an intimacy that grows denser and more luminous through life's hardships. Diva's illness, the gradual frailty of her body, and the approaching certainty of her death transcend the story of one woman; they become a reminder of that universal human experience in which the slow departure of one companion quietly creates an unbearable emptiness within the other.

Diva's greatest concern is never for herself, but for Mehra Sahib. She knows how profoundly his life will change after she is gone, and it is in that concern that her love reveals itself in its most tender and poignant form. It is not the love of possession, but of care; not merely the love of walking together, but of protecting the other from collapse even after the companionship itself has come to an end. That quiet generosity of love has always touched me profoundly.

Diva herself is an extraordinarily moving presence in the novel. She is present, and yet curiously absent. It is within the space between her presence and her absence that Nirmal Verma creates one of the novel's deepest emotional resonances. Tiya, Mehra Sahib's daughter, loves her father, yet finds herself unable to reach the innermost recesses of his being. The silences between them speak far more eloquently than the few words they exchange. For the first time, this novel made me realise with such intensity that even those who inhabit the same home may remain strangers to one another's inner worlds.

Nor did Niranjan, the narrator, ever seem to me merely another fictional character. More often, he appeared to represent the reader himself-watching quietly, listening patiently, and attempting to gather together the scattered meanings of the lives unfolding before him. Characters such as Annaji bring a gentle warmth into the narrative, reminding us that even in the final season of life, small acts of affection and human companionship can prevent a person from breaking apart.

When I first read *The Last Wilderness*, it was its language and atmosphere that captivated me. Reading it again years later, I realised that its true narrative unfolds not through incidents but within its characters. What remains unsaid between them is infinitely more powerful than what is spoken. Perhaps that is why the novel continues to reveal new meanings with every return.

Even while painting, I often find myself remembering Mehra Sahib's quiet, mist-filled world. In the empty spaces upon a canvas, in unfinished lines, and in the white that remains between colours, I encounter once again the silence of *The Last Wilderness*. Nirmal Verma taught me that the greatest strength of both literature and painting often lies in what they deliberately leave unsaid. That is why this novel has become, for me, not merely a book but a trusted companion in the later years of my life-a companion that, with every reading, leads me into another unexplored wilderness within myself.

Now, as I pass through this stage of life marked by the loss of my wife, the world of *The Last Wilderness* feels even closer to me. The departure

of one's life partner is never merely the loss of an individual. It is the disintegration of a shared rhythm of living-of conversations, memories, habits, quiet gestures, and the invisible architecture that two people build together over the years. Every home possesses an unspoken language, and when one partner departs, much of that language disappears with them. Outwardly, one may continue to appear composed, but inwardly one carries an emptiness that never entirely leaves.

It is this emptiness that Nirmal Verma renders with extraordinary restraint and compassion. He never turns grief into spectacle, nor suffering into melodrama. Instead, he shapes it with the same quietness with which it unfolds in real life. That is why the novel has become inseparable from my own experience. Within its pages I recognise my solitude, the weariness of time, and that peculiar quality of memory which becomes even more luminous after bereavement.

This book has taught me something else as well: certain works are not meant for a single period of one's life; they accompany us through several seasons of existence. A book that merely delights the mind in youth may one day reach the soul in later life. By then, the reader is no longer simply a reader; he enters the work carrying the weight of his own lived experience.

The Last Wilderness has become such a book for me. Within it I encounter the quiet dignity of life's final season, the silent grace of enduring love, and the helpless yet profoundly human courage with which one stands before mortality. That is why I wish to speak of this novel in the chapter *The Enchantment of Words* in my memoir. It strengthened my conviction that certain books gradually become part of one's life. They are not simply read; they are lived. And when life finally confronts us with its hardest truths, it is these very books that give us the courage to look within ourselves.

There is one more book I cannot leave unmentioned. I must speak of it because the poetry it contains has, more than once, kept me from collapsing under the weight of my own grief. The questions that Radha

asks Krishna-her *Kanu*-have, in an inexplicable way, become answers to many of my own.

Dharamvir Bharati's *Kanupriya* has always seemed to me the voice of a woman who stands at the very centre of love and yet remains untouched by its outward clamour. She lives instead within a deep, quiet, almost unspoken sorrow. The voice one hears in this work is not Radha's alone; it belongs to every human being who knows that love is not merely something to be possessed, but something to be endured, understood, and carried within oneself.

Whenever I read *Kanupriya*, it feels as though an old memory, long blurred around its edges, is slowly coming into focus. It is as if the dust is being gently brushed away from a forgotten photograph, revealing beneath it a face I have always known but could never quite name.

To me, *Kanupriya* is not simply a poetic work. It is the autobiography of love itself, where separation is not presented as deprivation but as a mature and abiding presence. It speaks not of the failure of love but of its trial by fire; not of brokenness, but of the quiet dignity that survives even after one has been broken. Perhaps that is why it draws so close to the memory of my own first love-a love that has long ceased to belong to any one person and has instead become a lasting touch within me, an unspoken grace, a gentle consolation to which I return again and again.

Whenever I remember that first love, it is never a particular incident or conversation that comes to mind. It is a season.

That love had its own season, its own language, a measure of youthful innocence, and an abundance of silence. We understood very little about love, yet somehow, we wandered into it as a child wanders into a garden without a map. Everything there felt strangely intense-the inexplicable brightness in our eyes, the incompleteness of our words, and the silence that somehow spoke more eloquently than speech itself.

While reading *Kanupriya*, I often feel that Dharamvir Bharati must have recognised precisely this incompleteness; that he, too, had listened to the eloquence of the unspoken. Radha's love for Krishna seems to me far greater than the love of one woman for one man. It resembles that first experience of love most of us encounter, when the beloved is not merely someone standing before us but an entirely new sky unfolding within us.

With time, however, one realises that first love is less about being with another person than about watching someone quietly take root within oneself. It is perhaps the most innocent and tender of all human experiences.

The memory of my own first love still accompanies me like a gentle ache. There was no great tragedy, no dramatic parting, and yet its ending touched me in much the same way that the last raindrop touches dry earth after a shower has passed. Much remained unsaid. Much was silently understood. And even what was understood could not ultimately be lived.

This is where *Kanupriya* feels most intimately my own.

Radha never speaks like a tragic heroine. She speaks as a woman who understands that the essence of love lies not in possession but in acceptance. She does not wish to hold Krishna captive. She wishes only to understand him completely-to accept his coming and his going, his choices, and even his right to remain forever in memory.

Gradually, this too became my understanding of love.

Once I believed that love meant remaining together.

Later I thought it meant remaining in each other's memory.

Now I believe it means allowing someone's presence to become so deeply human within us that even their absence loses its cruelty.

The language of *Kanupriya* touches me because it never raises its voice. It carries a quiet, intimate, distinctly feminine, and yet profoundly universal sorrow. It is the same sorrow I recognise within myself

whenever the memory of an old relationship is awakened by something utterly ordinary-a familiar fragrance, a forgotten melody, a deserted road, or simply the vibration of an old name left unspoken.

At such moments, a strange tenderness settles over the heart. The pain itself changes. It no longer wounds sharply; it becomes gentle.

That, perhaps, is the greatest beauty of *Kanupriya*. It never scratches at the wound of separation. Instead, it transforms longing into music. There is grief in it, but no bitterness; waiting, but no despair; fulfilment, but never the humiliation of love.

My own first love unfolded in much the same way. Though the relationship remained incomplete, it broke something within me without ever making me bitter. On the contrary, it taught me patience, introspection, and the quiet dignity of human feeling. Perhaps that is why I remember it today less as sorrow than as a blessing that shaped me.

The feminine spirit Dharamvir Bharati creates in *Kanupriya* is, for me, far more than a mythological or historical figure. She is a figure of the human conscience itself. She reminds me that love's greatest defeat is not being abandoned but allowing the love within us to become hollow. And its greatest victory is not in possessing another person, but in preserving their memory with tenderness and grace.

My first love taught me precisely this. Love does not always survive as presence. Sometimes it endures as an inward presence that quietly accompanies every important decision we make thereafter.

In the relationships that followed, I found companionship, understanding, attraction, even comfort-but never again that first tremor of the heart. Perhaps because first love begins with another person but ultimately becomes a journey towards oneself.

That is what *Kanupriya* means to me.

It does not ask where Krishna is.

It asks who Radha becomes after Krishna has gone.

That question has always felt deeply personal.

After my own first love slipped away, I, too, found myself asking one day: *Who am I without her?*

The answer did not arrive immediately. It revealed itself slowly. Love does not merely create a place for another person within us; it also builds an entirely new chamber within our own being-a place where feeling grows deeper, language becomes gentler, and memory shines with a quieter light.

If I were to speak autobiographically, *Kanupriya* is not a direct account of my own love story. It is its refined echo.

Within it I recognise the innocence of my first love transformed by time into understanding; attachment mellowed into blessing; expectation ripened into prayer.

Today, when I look back, I feel far more gratitude than sorrow for that love. It did not make me sentimental; it made me sensitive. It taught me that not every relationship requires completion. Some remain unfinished yet possess the extraordinary power to complete the human being.

Kanupriya is the most beautiful expression of that incompleteness-not an incompleteness that shattered, but one that quietly transformed itself.

Radha's silence, her acceptance, her inward burning, and her refusal to let love be diminished by resentment-these are the very qualities that return to me whenever I remember my own first love. There, too, there was no proclamation, no dramatic declaration-only an affection so deeply rooted that even its ending could not harden the heart.

Whenever I return to the pages of *Kanupriya*, it feels as though a very old, very private sadness places a gentle hand upon my shoulder and whispers:

Even after everything is lost, love is never wasted.

Somewhere, in some quiet form, it remains with us, making us a little more human than we were before.

That is why *Kanupriya* is, for me, not merely a work to be read but an experience to be lived again and again. It moves softly across the memory of my first love like a reassuring hand, reminding me that what has gone may indeed be gone, yet its sweetness, its warmth, its quiet radiance continue to endure.

Perhaps this is love's greatest consolation. It never leaves us empty. It enlarges us from within.

My first love took nothing away from me. It gave me something that even today I cannot fully put into words.

Kanupriya gives voice to that very inexpressible truth.

It touches, all at once, the child I once was, the young man I became, and the ageing man I continue to be.

And every time I close the book, I am left with the feeling that love has not truly ended. It has merely changed its form.

It is no longer the waiting for a person to return.

It is the serenity of memory.

No longer the longing for reunion.

It is an inward music that quietly says:

First love may never return, but it remains forever within us-as consolation, as tenderness, and as one of the silent lights by which we continue to live.

□

For the moment, I have spoken only of these three books. Perhaps another day I shall return to speak of a few others that have accompanied me through life.

You can understand, I am sure-after writing about *Kanupriya*, I find myself feeling a little sentimental.

So, for now...

Enough.

And yet, one must not stop, must one?

The story still has a long way to go.

So, come... let us move on.



There are many other books that have touched the deepest layers of my being and quietly transformed the way I think. If I were to write about all of them, the only thing that would certainly grow would be the number of pages in this memoir, while my story would still be standing where it is. Even so, I cannot resist mentioning at least a few of them.

Mohan Rakesh's *Andhere Band Kamre* (*Closed Dark Rooms*) and *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* (*One Day in Ashadh*); Nirmal Verma's *Lal Teen Ki Chhat* (*The Red Tin Roof*); Vimal Mitra's *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* (*The Master, the Mistress and the Slave*) and *Khareedi Kaudiyon Ke Daam*; Manohar Shyam Joshi's *Kasap*; S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*; Syed Haider Raza's autobiography, *The Heat of the Soul*, written and edited by Ashok Vajpeyi; Amrita Pritam's memoir *Raseedi Ticket* (*The Revenue Stamp*); every volume of Gagan Gill's poetry; and Dr. Rahi Masoom Raza's *Aadha Gaon* (*Half a Village*).

I shall stop the list here, for if I do not stop of my own accord, it certainly will not stop by itself.

And yet, even after stopping, I feel compelled to add Ravindra Kalia's *Ghalib Chhuti Sharab*, every book written by Harishankar Parsai, Badal Sircar's *Pagla Ghoda*, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's *Kai Chand the Sare Aasman*, and-yes-Ismat Chughtai's remarkable autobiography *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan*.

Even now, more books keep appearing before my mind's eye, one after another, like models walking down the ramp at a fashion show.

But enough.

Now we enter the next lane of *The Magic of Words*.

This is the street where all those novelists, poets, storytellers, and shayars reside who placed, one by one, the bricks and stones that became the foundation of my inner life. Whatever I have become today owes as much to these unseen teachers as it does to my parents, my family, and the experiences life has given me.

They never handed me ready-made answers.

Instead, they taught me how to live with questions.

They gave me the courage to descend into myself, the vision to see the world from many different angles, and the patience to understand human beings in all their bewildering complexity.

Whatever little fertility there is in the soil of my thought has come from their writing.

They taught me that life's most difficult questions are not always answered by the straight line of reason. Sometimes the answer lies hidden in the silence of a story, in the unfinished line of a poem, in the suffering of a solitary character in a novel, or in a single verse written by a poet.

They also taught me that no truth is ever the final truth, and that behind every decision there exists a human story that must be heard before any judgement can truly be made.

Whenever I stumbled along life's uneven roads, their words rested upon my shoulder like an invisible hand.

They taught me how to rise after falling.

How to preserve the inner flame even in defeat.

Above all, they taught me that to remain sensitive is not a weakness, but the greatest strength of being human.

If you have watched my life's journey from a distance, perhaps you already understand that whatever you may find admirable in me has never been mine alone.

It belongs to all of them.

I am, in many ways, a man made of their words.

Whatever thoughts, feelings, questions, or convictions live within me carry echoes of their voices.

And if you have not witnessed that journey, then I have now revealed its secret to you.

Whether you choose to believe it is entirely up to you.

Come then.

Let us walk slowly into this lane.

There is no place for haste here.

Behind every doorway waits a different universe.

From one house comes the quiet music of poetry.

From another, the whisper of stories.

Elsewhere, the long silence of a novel welcomes us.

And on yet another threshold, a smiling poet waits to greet us.

Within these houses dwell many fragments of my own soul.

Let us begin with the very first house-the one from which my literary journey truly took its first breath.

This is no ordinary lane.

You will not find its name on any city map.

No municipality has ever paved its road.

There are no streetlights here.

No house numbers.

And yet it is the most inhabited street of my life.

It exists in the city of my memory, and everyone who lives here has helped shape the human being within me.

They gave my language its voice, my sensibility its form, my thoughts their direction, and my imagination its sky.

Here, every house has been built out of books.

Some have windows made of poems.

Others have verandas fashioned from novels.

Still others open into courtyards filled with stories.

Since my adolescence I have wandered through these houses as a reader.

Sometimes I spend hours in one.

At other times I return only when life tells me I must.

This pilgrimage has continued, uninterrupted, ever since.

Whatever I can think, feel, or write today rests upon foundations laid in these homes.

Each time I leave one of them, I am no longer quite the same person.

One house refines my language.

Another deepens my vision.

A third enriches my sensitivity.

A fourth reshapes my thinking.

As we walk together, you will gradually recognise traces of each of these houses in my own writing.

Their soil, their water, their sunlight, and their air have all found their way into my words.

You may think of these memories as nothing less than the story of how my own personality was built.

Come.

Let me take you into that lane.

The very first house belongs to Mohan Rakesh.

He stands at its doorway, his face marked by a quiet sadness, his eyes alive with restless questions.

He taught me that a story is never merely a sequence of events; it is also a record of the invisible movements taking place within the human heart.

His characters speak little.

They remain silent much more often.

Yet it is precisely within those silences that life's deepest music is hidden.

From him I learned that the more restrained language becomes, the more powerful it is.

A little farther along stands the home of Nirmal Verma.

It always seems bathed in a gentle, diffused sunlight that somehow gives both warmth and shade at once. The air carries the cool freshness of a mountain stream, and through the windows memories drift in and out as softly as the breeze itself, while time appears to pause, quietly watching them pass.

His language does not flow like a river.

It settles within us like a still lake.

For reasons I cannot fully explain, I have always felt that it was he who first taught me this simple truth:

"Memory is never merely the past. It continues to breathe within the present."

His books taught me to look inward, to listen to silence, and to understand that the greatest struggles human beings endure are often those no one else can see.

The next house belongs to Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore.

The moment one enters, it seems as though literature, music, painting, and philosophy have gathered together in the same courtyard for an endless conversation.

He taught me to love nature.

He awakened in me a sense of the soul's boundless freedom.

His writing holds compassion, beauty, spirituality, and the dream of a universal humanity in perfect harmony.

From him I learned that literature celebrates not merely society, but creation itself.

It was Tagore who first taught me how profoundly beautiful this world truly is.

Nature never hesitates to reveal itself.

Why, then, should we?

Are we not its own most beautiful expression?

Whatever truly exists is, in its deepest essence, truth, goodness, and beauty.

It was Gurudev who taught me how to recognise beauty, how to live it, and how to let it become part of myself.

Whenever my thoughts, my actions, or my words lose their balance, I quietly return to his house.

Nearby lives Ashapurna Devi.

Her home is not a grand mansion but the modest dwelling of an ordinary middle-class family.

Yet upon its threshold sit the silent struggles of Indian women, their quiet rebellions, and countless unspoken griefs.

Without ever raising her voice, she wrote the inner world of women with such authenticity that the reader inevitably begins to inhabit it.

From her I learned that the greatest revolutions are often born not on battlefields but in kitchens and courtyards.

Mahadevi Varma's home resembles an ashram.

It is bathed in the sunlight of compassion.

Her poetry is filled with longing and pain, yet it is never the despair of defeat; it is the soul's own discipline of becoming.

She extended her compassion not only to human beings but to birds and animals as well.

From her I learned that sensitivity is not weakness but the highest expression of our humanity.

If the river of compassion flows within us, then we become, in the truest sense, representatives of the divine.

No storm, however violent, can extinguish the lamp of such faith.

Agyeya's house is perhaps the most contemplative in the entire lane.

Books, paintings, memories of journeys, and countless experiments in thought fill every room.

He opened new paths for modern literature.

From him I learned about self-exploration, artistic freedom, modernity, and the courage to experiment with language.

He taught me that a writer's greatest responsibility is to preserve the independence of his vision.

In my own case this may sound slightly paradoxical.

Yet before one can develop an independent vision, one must first learn how to see.

That lesson I continue to learn from him even today.

At Mahakavi Nirala's house, even the wind seems to change its voice.

There one encounters rebellion, compassion, and an uncompromising dignity.

His poetry refuses every form of confinement.

He liberated language, liberated poetic form, and placed human dignity above everything else.

From him I learned that courage is as indispensable to literature as beauty itself.

A little farther on stands Premchand's house.

Its door is always open.

Farmers, labourers, women, children, old men-they come and go as naturally as members of one extended family.

Premchand showed me the true face of India.

He taught me that literature is not only an instrument of beauty but also of justice.

His characters still walk among us because they were born directly out of life itself.

Next door lives Krishan Chander.

Reality and imagination, satire and compassion, all coexist effortlessly under his roof.

His language possesses such natural fluency that even the gravest truths seem beautifully simple.

From him I learned that a story need not become ponderous in order to touch the reader's heart.

A short distance away stands the house of Harishankar Parsai.

From outside one hears nothing but laughter.

Step inside, however, and one discovers that the laughter is performing delicate surgery upon society's deepest wounds.

He taught me that satire is not merely entertainment; it is one of the sharpest weapons against injustice.

This is the only house in the lane whose resident I was fortunate enough to meet in person.

All the others touched my life through the pages of their books.

But Harishankar Parsai once placed a prize in my hands with his own.

At the time I had no idea that the man standing on that stage would one day become the highest peak of Hindi satire in my own consciousness.

That day I received an award.

Today I feel that the far greater gift was his vision-and his writing.

Next comes the home of Amrita Pritam.

It feels like an extension of one of her poems.

Love lives there.

So does separation.

So does the free and fearless voice of a woman's soul.

And so does the unbearable pain of Partition.

Her writing taught me that love and suffering are not opposites but two notes of the same experience.

Love opens us to the world.

Suffering deepens us within ourselves.

Love taught me to trust people and relationships.

Pain taught me how to bend without breaking, how to lose without losing myself, and how to search for the smallest light within every darkness.

Together they helped shape the person I have become.

Entering the home of Dharamvir Bharati, one finds history, mythology, and the modern individual conversing with one another.

His language is lyrical, thoughtful, and profoundly humane.

He taught me that the past never remains locked inside museums.

It continues to breathe within the present.

Or perhaps it is better to say that the past is the foundation upon which the building of the present is erected, moment by moment.

His poems gave my earliest poetry its first true direction.

Among all his works, *Kanupriya* has influenced me most deeply.

Its questions are timeless.

Perhaps even God Himself has never fully answered them.

Who has experienced loneliness more completely than the Divine?

And yet who can say whether He found answers to the questions that arose within His own heart?

Kanupriya is filled with questions that seem to have waited through countless lifetimes.

Imagine, then, how much one can learn from Bharati.

Rahi Masoom Raza's house is the liveliest gathering place in the lane.

The composite Ganga-Jamuni culture breathes there with effortless ease.

Language refuses every boundary.

Village, town, politics, religion, love, and humanity all coexist beneath the same roof.

From him I learned that India's truest identity lies in its diversity and its shared civilisation.

Manohar Shyam Joshi's house is unlike any other.

Gravity and playfulness live there side by side.

The story never moves in a straight line.

It keeps discovering unexpected turns.

He taught me that if life is endlessly complex, literature too may be endlessly inventive.

One should never be afraid to experiment.

Kuru Kuru Swaha is not merely an extraordinary novel; it is an extraordinary teacher.

How much you learn from it depends entirely upon you.

And *Kasap*?

It is a milestone.

Not only does it reveal how far you have travelled, but it also quietly reassures you that you are travelling in the right direction.

Kunwar Narayan's house is the quietest in the lane.

There are few words.

Yet their meanings run immeasurably deep.

His poetry achieves a rare equilibrium between thought and feeling.

From him I learned that the highest calling of a human being is to continue asking questions-and never to mistake any answer for the final truth.

And at the very end of the lane lives Osho.

His dwelling scarcely resembles a house at all.

It is more like an open sky.

There are no fixed doors.

No prescribed path.

Sitting with him, I learned that borrowed truths can never truly become our own.

Each person must learn to see with his own eyes, understand through his own experience, and live through his own awareness.

If one wishes to discover truth, one must also possess the courage to walk alone.

When I turn and look back upon this entire lane, I realise that every house is different.

Their languages differ.

Their philosophies differ.

Their paths differ.

Yet some invisible bridge connects them all.

It is by walking across that bridge, year after year, that I have arrived where I stand today.

If my own writing carries something of Mohan Rakesh's silences, Nirmal Verma's awareness of memory, Tagore's open sky, Premchand's earth, Parsai's smile, Amrita Pritam's sorrow, Rahi Masoom Raza's gentle breeze of shared culture, Kunwar Narayan's contemplative wisdom, or Osho's relentless questioning, it is not because I consciously imitated any of them.

It is simply the natural consequence of spending a lifetime walking in and out of their homes.

□

I still visit that lane.

I still wander through it.

I still spend time there.

Whenever my own language begins to falter, I sit for a while on Nirmal Verma's veranda.

Whenever anger rises within me at some social absurdity, I stroll through Parsai's courtyard.

Whenever my faith begins to waver, I sit quietly upon the threshold of Premchand's house.

Whenever my prose becomes too ornate or unnecessarily heavy, Mohan Rakesh gently advises me to remove a few unnecessary words.

And whenever every answer begins to seem futile,

I walk to the very end of the lane

and sit silently beneath the open sky of Osho.

□

"You are wondering," you ask, "who lives in that empty house at the very end?

It does not even have a nameplate."

My answer may sound strange.

Perhaps even absurd.

For the truth is that I do not yet know who will one day come to live there.

"Perhaps it belongs to the writer who has not yet written me completely. Or perhaps it awaits the human being I am still searching for during whatever remains of my life."

Has my answer satisfied you?

□□□

5

Redio

(Memories Floating on the Sound-Waves)

When the foundations of my personality were quietly taking shape, the radio, too, played its own silent yet profound part in that construction. But that story begins when I entered the eighth grade. It was around that time that our home was connected to electricity for the very first time.

To today's generation, it may sound almost unbelievable, but until the seventh grade I had studied entirely under the trembling light of an oil wick lamp and a kerosene lantern. In that dim, yellow glow I not only completed my school lessons but also devoured one literary work after another by some of the greatest writers. That tiny flame illuminated my books, but the books, in turn, filled my inner world with a far greater light.

By then, transistor radios had begun to appear in one or two homes we knew. They fascinated me, but my father held a firm conviction. He would say, "When we buy a radio, it will be an electric one." He believed in acquiring things later rather than sooner-but only if they were durable and useful to the entire family.

So electricity came first, and a few months later the radio entered our home. That day, it was not merely a new appliance that crossed our threshold; it felt as though the voice of the world itself had found its way into our little house. Cities and countries far away, music, news, dramas, and countless unseen voices began to echo within our walls. The radio did much more than entertain us; it widened the horizons of my inner world in ways I could never have imagined.

The two households I mentioned, where transistor radios had arrived before ours, belonged to our closest neighbours. One was the home of Manik Rao ji, perhaps the most intimate friends of our family in the neighbourhood; the other was the home of my childhood companion, Anil Dubey.

As far as memory serves me, both transistor radios reached those homes under remarkably similar circumstances. Someone known to Manik Rao ji found himself in urgent financial need and, out of sheer compulsion, sold him his transistor radio. Likewise, one of Anil's father's acquaintances fell upon difficult times and pawned his transistor to them in exchange for a small sum of money.

In those days, a transistor radio was far from being an ordinary household object. It was regarded as a symbol of prosperity and modernity. Whenever one appeared in a home, it instantly became an object of wonder for every child in the neighbourhood. We, too, would occasionally invent some excuse to visit those houses, just so we could spend a few precious moments listening to the world flowing out of that little box. Looking back today, it seems to me that the radio did not merely broadcast songs or news; it gently expanded the boundaries of our small universe.

In truth, I never needed an excuse to visit either of those homes. Manik Rao ji was so close to our family that, like everyone else in the neighbourhood, I always addressed him simply as *Bhaiya Ji*. His wife, Meera Bai, was *Bhabhi Ji* to me, although my parents always called her by her given name. Yet even that carried no trace of formality; affection needed no honorifics. The bond between our two families was so deep that Bhaiya Ji and Bhabhi Ji regarded my parents as their elder brother and sister-in-law, and they continued to honour them with the same warmth and respect throughout their lives.

The ways of destiny are often strange. Even before my parents departed from this world, both Bhaiya Ji and Bhabhi Ji had already passed away. Bhaiya Ji left us at a painfully young age, barely fifty or fifty-two.

At that time, he served as the official driver to the Chairman of the Madhya Pradesh Electricity Board. Naturally, that position carried its own dignity and prestige. Fellow drivers, officers, and employees across the department all knew him. He certainly enjoyed an occasional drink, but it would be unfair to suggest that he lived in perpetual intoxication. That would hardly have been possible, for driving the Chairman's official car demanded complete discipline and responsibility. Only after returning home would, he indulges his habit in moderation. What his routine might have been while accompanying the Chairman on official tours is something I could never know.

One thing, however, I can say with complete confidence: no one in the neighbourhood ever had cause to complain about him. Indeed, many people may never even have known of his fondness for drink. He would return home, have a modest drink, eat his dinner, and quietly retire for the night. To judge his entire character by that one habit would be a grave injustice, for as a neighbour and as a human being he was warm-hearted, gracious, and unfailingly ready to help anyone in need.

□

The history of radio is not merely the story of a technological invention; it is also the story of humanity's timeless desire to carry one voice across distance to another human being. It took years of patient research and countless experiments by many scientists before that dream became reality. The practical invention of radio is generally credited to Guglielmo Marconi, who transformed wireless communication into a dependable technology during the closing years of the nineteenth century. In Russia, however, Alexander Popov is regarded as the inventor of radio, while Reginald Fessenden became the first to successfully broadcast the human voice and music over the airwaves, proving that sound itself could one day undertake extraordinary journeys-journeys requiring neither roads nor railways nor ships.

India, too, gradually embraced this remarkable invention. What began with small radio clubs in Bombay and Calcutta evolved into regular broadcasting in 1927, and in 1936 assumed a national identity as All India Radio. After Independence, the organisation came to be known as Akashvani-"the Voice from the Sky"-and true to its name, its broadcasts spread across villages and cities alike, carrying news, music, ideas, and companionship into countless homes.

That journey eventually reached Jabalpur as well. The All-India Radio station at Jabalpur was established on 16 August 1964, becoming the third major broadcasting station in Madhya Pradesh. Radio broadcasting in the state had begun earlier in Indore in 1955, followed by the establishment of stations in Bhopal, Gwalior, and later Jabalpur.

By then, the radio had ceased to be merely a machine; it had become a member of the household. Its arrival quietly reshaped the rhythm of everyday life. Mornings began with the news, afternoons were filled with music, evenings brought dramas and variety programmes, and the day drew to a close with the nightly bulletin. Any home fortunate enough to own a radio would naturally become a gathering place for neighbours. The voices that emerged from it did not merely reach people's ears; they drew people closer to one another.

In my childhood, the radio meant far more than news or songs. It was the first window through which I looked out upon the wider world. Until then, my universe had been confined to my lane, my school, my city, and the people I knew. It was the radio that first revealed to me that beyond this little world stretched another, immeasurably vast-a world where something new happened every single day. Whether floods had struck a distant corner of the country, elections were under way, a scientific breakthrough had been achieved, a new song had been composed, or the Indian cricket team was playing somewhere, the first whisper of it always reached my ears through the radio.

Perhaps that is why the sound of the radio has never remained merely a sound in my memory; it returns as the voice of an era. There are

announcers whose voices remain as vivid in my mind today as they were then, although I never once saw their faces. How strange it is that we may forget a face yet never lose the memory of a voice that once felt close to our hearts.

For today's generation, it may be difficult to imagine that an entire family would gather around a single radio, waiting for a favourite programme to begin. Whether it was a beloved programme on *Vividh Bharati*, *Binaca Geetmala*, *Hawa Mahal*, *Jaimala*, a live cricket commentary, or the nine o'clock news, it was not merely the clock that announced the hour; the entire household seemed to know it instinctively. Those moments carried with them an unspoken discipline and a shared anticipation that quietly bound the family together.

Time transformed the appearance of the radio. The large valve-operated sets gave way to transistor radios; then came FM broadcasting, digital transmission, and now even internet radio. The technology changed, the medium evolved, but the soul of radio remained untouched. Even today, it remains one of the simplest and most dependable ways for one human voice to reach another. In times of crisis, during natural disasters, in remote regions, or wherever other means of communication fail, radio continues to perform its duty with the same quiet reliability and reassuring calm.

Yet for me, the significance of radio is far more personal than any of these facts. It is the music of my memories. Without it, the picture of my childhood would remain incomplete. Whenever I return to those years, I do not remember the radio as an inanimate object. It comes back instead as an old and cherished companion who never truly stopped speaking. Time has moved on, technology has changed, and the pace of life has quickened, yet somewhere deep within me I still feel as though an old radio, resting in some distant house, has just warmed up and come alive-and that at any moment its familiar signature tune will once again fill the air.

□

My earliest memory of listening to the radio is of the live commentary on the funeral procession of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. His passing was mourned in every home across India as though each family had lost one of its own. It seemed that the entire nation felt orphaned.

As far as I can remember, the only house in our lane that owned a radio at that time belonged to Kakka-Kandhi Lal ji. I do not know whether Kamal Bua or Bitti Bua also had one, though it is quite possible they did. But Kakka's house was where everyone gathered most naturally. In the spacious hall on the first floor stood a large wooden-cabinet radio placed upon an equally imposing table in one corner. It was there that we listened to the live broadcast describing Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's final journey.

There must have been at least fifteen or twenty people in that hall, my father among them. I, too, sat quietly to one side. Some were seated on sofas, others on iron chairs, while several sat cross-legged on a rug spread across the floor. The atmosphere was heavy with sorrow. Every now and then the silence was broken by someone's deep sigh, a muffled sob, or the sound of restrained weeping.

I no longer remember what passed through my young mind that day. Yet whenever, after all these years, memory carries me back across its valleys and hills into that room, I experience something that is difficult to describe-not quite astonishment, but something very close to it. A question quietly presents itself before me: How does one human being become so deeply loved by millions? And yet, that was precisely what Jawaharlal Nehru had become. He was a symbol of trust and hope for an entire nation.

For many years, I never questioned this memory. I remained convinced that, at the age of eight, I had heard the news of Pandit Nehru's death on the radio and then listened to the live account of his funeral procession. The experience had left such a profound impression upon my young mind that even today it remains remarkably vivid.

Many years later, however, I happened to read that the All-India Radio station at Jabalpur had begun operations only on 16 August 1964, whereas Pandit Nehru had passed away nearly three months earlier, on 27 May 1964. For the first time, I found myself doubting my own memory. Had I become the victim of some trick of time? Had the years rearranged the sequence of events in my mind?

The confusion did not last long. As I learned more about radio broadcasting in those days, I realized that my memory had been entirely accurate. Although Jabalpur did not yet have its own radio station, the national broadcasting network of All India Radio had already woven the country together through invisible waves. Programmes transmitted from major stations such as Delhi, Bhopal, Indore, Allahabad, and Nagpur reached listeners across vast distances. Events of national importance were broadcast simultaneously throughout the country. Pandit Nehru's death was not merely the passing of an individual; it was a moment of national bereavement. His funeral procession was broadcast live from Delhi and carried to every corner of India. That day, I was sitting in Jabalpur, but I was listening to Delhi.

Now I also remember those homes and the imposing radio sets that occupied places of honour within them. There was something else, too, that often fascinated me. Stretched across one corner of the room to another was a web of wires, from which a single lead descended to the back of the radio. To my childish eyes, it seemed nothing short of mysterious. I often longed to touch it, wondering what magical power it possessed that enabled voices from such unimaginable distances to find their way into our home.

Only much later did I learn that it was the radio's aerial. It was no ordinary wire, but a carefully designed arrangement of several fine copper strands, engineered to capture as many radio waves travelling through the air as possible. The larger the spread of that wire mesh, the greater its ability to receive distant broadcasts with clarity.

All those invisible radio waves were gathered by that aerial and carried through a single slender wire into the radio set. There, those unseen signals were transformed into a world of news, music, voices, and stories that unfolded before us.

Today, with even a modest understanding of science, all this appears perfectly ordinary. But in those days, it was nothing short of miraculous. Without a single visible wire, without any tangible medium connecting one place to another, a person sitting hundreds of kilometres away could suddenly begin speaking in our room, and it felt as though he were sitting only a few feet from us. I knew nothing of science then, yet I had already encountered one of its greatest miracles.

I also remember that homes fitted with such aerials received distant radio stations much more clearly. People would proudly announce that Delhi was coming in perfectly that evening, or that Bhopal's transmission could be heard with exceptional clarity. Sometimes one even heard excited claims that Radio Ceylon had come through loud and clear. In those years, radio was much more than a source of entertainment; it was the nation's most dependable bridge across distance. It brought us the news, filled our days with music, carried the thrill of live sports commentary, and, perhaps most remarkably, allowed us to witness history even as it was unfolding.

Looking back today, it seems to me that the simple web of copper wires stretched across the room was far more than a technical accessory. It was an invisible bridge connecting our modest home with the vastness of the world beyond. Through it flowed the heartbeat of an entire nation. Through it I experienced, for the very first time, the weight of a national sorrow settling quietly into my own heart.

Perhaps that is why the scene remains so vividly alive in my memory. The people seated before the radio, the unusual silence filling the room, the calm and solemn voice describing the funeral procession, and the aerial stretched overhead-all of it returns with astonishing clarity. What was then merely an aerial having, in memory, become a

bridge suspended between my childhood and history itself, a bridge across which the voice of that distant day continues to echo within me.

□

I can only estimate when the radio first entered our home; to state the exact year or date would be difficult. The principal reason is that our family never had an ancestral house in Jabalpur. The place I knew as my paternal home was in Bankhedi village-now a tehsil in Narmadapuram district-where there once stood a family house. Whether I should say it *still exists* or *once existed* is a question I have already discussed at length in the opening chapter of this memoir.

As I was told, after my grandmother's death in Jabalpur, where she had been brought for medical treatment, my father simply handed over that house-without any legal deed or written agreement-to his childhood friend, Phulla Bhagat, whom I knew as *Bhagat Ji Dada*, or perhaps to his elder brother, known in the family as *Bade Veer*. My grandfather had long before left my father, my grandmother, and my young aunt, remarried, and settled in Mauranipur near Jhansi. After my grandmother passed away, my father decided to leave Bankhedi forever. Accompanied by his younger sister, he moved to Jabalpur, living first in rented accommodation in Gokalpur and later in Ghamapur.

That is why we never possessed an ancestral home in Jabalpur.

Only in 1989 did our family finally purchase a house on Katra Road in Adhartal. I obtained a loan from the Madhya Pradesh Electricity Board, while nearly one-third of the purchase price was contributed by my father. At that time, I was serving at the Amarkantak Thermal Power Station in Chachai, in Shahdol district, where I lived with my wife and children. By then, my own marriage, as well as those of my three sisters, had already taken place while the family was still living in Ghamapur. My younger brother and youngest sister were married from the Adhartal house.

After that, however, our family life gradually entered a period of increasing difficulties. As far as I remember, sometime in March 2002-perhaps shortly after Holi-something happened that changed everything. I shall narrate that story in detail in the third volume of this memoir. For the present, it is enough to say that nothing now remains with me from my childhood, adolescence, or college years-no keepsake, no family relic, no object that could truly be called ancestral.

Today I live alone in the Adhartal house. My father, mother, aunt, and younger sister have all passed away. My wife, too, left this world earlier this year, in 2026. My younger brother now lives near the Radio Station in Karmeta.

Fortunately, my relationship with my younger brother has always remained warm, and, indeed, I have been able to preserve good relations with everyone in the family. Looking back, that seems to be one of the few blessings that survived the storms of time. Everything else unfolded according to the will of Lord Rama. The fuller account belongs to the third volume.

This little digression, however, explains why I possess nothing tangible that might help me determine exactly when the radio first entered our home in Ghamapur. My best estimate is that it was sometime in 1969.

It was a four-band Murphy radio.

My father and I brought it home together in a cycle-rickshaw. In those days, owning a radio required an official government licence. We obtained one, and every year it had to be renewed at the local post office.

The radio found its place in our second room, where the wooden sofa set stood. A copper-wire aerial was stretched from one corner of the room to the other and connected to the set.

How wonderful it would be if I could remember the very first song that our new radio played in our home. The memory of that single song would make this moment infinitely more thrilling. But life seldom grants us precisely the memories we long to preserve.

Had the world worked according to our wishes, perhaps God would have sent each of us into it carrying our own little radio, allowing us to tune life itself to our favourite station and let everything unfold exactly as we desired.

But life is not like that.

How I wish it were.



As I continued listening to the radio, I gradually realised that not every radio station was the same.

Some stations were places where programmes were actually created. They housed studios where news was written and read, announcers spoke directly to listeners, musicians performed, actors recorded dramas, and programmes were produced before being broadcast for the very first time over the airwaves. Such centres were known as broadcasting stations, or main broadcasting centres.

Others served a different purpose altogether. They had no studios and produced no programmes of their own. Instead, they received broadcasts from the main station and retransmitted them unchanged, strengthening weakened signals so that they could reach distant villages, small towns, mountainous regions, forests, and places where the original transmission would otherwise have been too faint to hear. These were known as relay stations.

At the time, of course, I knew nothing of such technical distinctions. Every voice emerging from the radio seemed magical to me. Only later, when I came to understand how the entire broadcasting system functioned, did I realise that behind every programme reaching the listener stood not only the artists and announcers, but also the silent and indispensable work of broadcasting centres and relay stations.

The All-India Radio station at Jabalpur, located in the Karmeta area, now houses only the transmitter. The studios were later shifted-first to the vicinity of Anand Talkies in Jabalpur, and eventually to their

present location at Katanga. From the information I have since gathered, it appears that the Jabalpur Radio Station had been producing and broadcasting its own programmes right from its inception. Over the years, its activities continued to expand and evolve. Since I came across these facts only while writing this chapter, I have chosen to include them here without altering what I have already written. After all, my purpose is not to write a history of the Jabalpur Radio Station. What truly concerns me is the role that radio-and, above all, the songs it carried into our lives-has played throughout my own journey. So, without claiming complete technical or historical precision, I shall return to the story I wish to tell.

□

Even before a radio entered our home, it had already entered my life. Its voices reached my ears long before they became part of my daily surroundings, and slowly they settled into my memories. That journey began at my maternal grandparents' house. In *Beginning*, I have already described how my maternal uncle persistently persuaded my grandfather to buy a radio. That very radio became, for me, nothing less than a magical window opening onto another world.

Whenever I visited my grandparents, a part of every afternoon and evening belonged to the radio. I certainly enjoyed the film songs, but what fascinated me most were the request programmes in which the announcers read aloud the names of listeners along with the towns and cities from which they had written.

Looking back now, I realise that before I became a listener of songs, I had first become a listener of voices.

The announcers spoke with such clarity, grace, and warmth that every unfamiliar name seemed to carry me on an imaginary journey across the country. A village, a small town, a neighbourhood, a Station Road-each placename painted a fresh picture in my mind. Though I had never visited any of them, they gradually began to feel strangely familiar.

Some names were repeated so often that they engraved themselves upon my memory without any conscious effort. Even today I remember places like Ghat Pindrai, Ghat Parasia, and Ghat Piparia. I have no idea what those villages were actually like-what their roads looked like, how many houses they had, or how their people spoke-but my childhood imagination created an entire world around each one. Merely hearing their names was enough for my mind to wander through their unseen streets.

At the time, I had no idea that this experience was shared by millions of others. Only much later did I realise that an entire generation of radio listeners in the 1970s and 1980s was making these same invisible journeys through sound. Request programmes did much more than play songs; they quietly engraved a living map of India upon our minds.

During those years, certain places acquired an almost legendary status. The most famous of them all was *Jhumri Telaiya*. Its name was mentioned so frequently on the radio that one could easily imagine every resident spending the entire day writing postcards requesting songs. Years later, I learned that this little town-then in Bihar, now in Jharkhand-had indeed become famous across the country because of its extraordinarily enthusiastic radio listeners. Whether on All India Radio or Radio Ceylon, requests arriving from Jhumri Telaiya were so numerous that its name became permanently lodged on the tongues of radio announcers.

Delhi's *Majnu-ka-Tila* was another such place. As a child, I would smile merely at the sound of its name, inventing all sorts of fanciful images in my mind. Only many years later did I discover that it was a real neighbourhood in Delhi. Yet for me it existed first as a place on the radio and only afterwards as a place on the map.

And so countless towns and cities gradually took up residence within me-Bareilly, Jalandhar, Lucknow, Allahabad, Patna, Amritsar, and so many others. Often the announcers would read out complete addresses: "Station Road," "Radio Club," the name of a

neighbourhood, even the name of an entire family. Listening to them, I felt as though the map of India was not being drawn from books but from voices.

Today it seems to me that radio had discovered a wonderfully original way of teaching geography to children like us. It did not ask us to trace our fingers across printed maps; instead, it guided us across the country through sound. Long before we ever visited those places, they had already become familiar to us. Villages and towns we knew only by name came to occupy our memories as firmly as the streets of our own city.

Perhaps that was radio's greatest magic. It was never merely a medium for songs; it was an invisible bridge connecting people and places. When a listener sitting in some distant little town sent a postcard requesting a song, it was not his voice but his name and address that travelled across the nation. For a brief moment, he became part of one immense family of listeners.

When I look back now, I realise that my journey across India did not begin with a railway ticket. It had begun much earlier, seated before a radio. Those request programmes introduced me not only to songs but also to people, cities, villages, and the many dialects of this country. They drew within me a map of India-not on paper, but in memory. On that map are Jhumri Telaiya, Majnu-ka-Tila, Ghat Pindrai, and countless other little places whose names may rarely be heard today, yet which continue to resonate on the radio of my memory just as they did during those quiet childhood afternoons and dusks.



As I have already mentioned, long before our family owned a radio, transistor sets had already found their way into the homes of Anil Dubey and Manik Rao Ji.

At Manik Rao Ji's house, the transistor ran on dry-cell batteries. Anil's home, however, already had an electricity connection, so their transistor operated through an AC-to-DC converter-a small device that

later came to be commonly known as an adaptor. When electricity was eventually connected to Manik Rao Ji's house as well, they too began using an adaptor instead of batteries.

I had two entirely different routines for listening to the radio-one at Anil's house and another at Bhabhi Ji's.

More often than not, I listened to the radio at Bhabhi Ji's house in the afternoons, especially on Saturdays. Our school functioned only from half-past seven until half-past ten that morning, leaving the afternoon entirely free. Whenever I had finished reading my books, I would often walk over to her house to listen to programmes on '*Vividh Bharati*' or '*All India Radio*'.

If Bhabhi Ji happened to be at our house-as she very often was-I would simply ask her permission before going across to her home. Once there, I would quietly tune the transistor to whichever station happened to be playing the songs I liked. Sometimes it was Vividh Bharati, sometimes All India Radio.

I always kept the volume very low and stood close to the transistor while listening. Even today I cannot fully explain why. Somehow, I felt that playing songs loudly would have been improper, almost discourteous. It is one of those small mysteries of childhood psychology that perhaps needs no explanation.

Sometimes I would stay until the programme ended; at other times I would switch off the transistor halfway through and quietly return home.

The year 1966 was significant for me not merely because of the films released during that time, but because it marked another important stage in my growing relationship with the radio. We still did not own one at home. Listening to the radio therefore became a little journey in itself. Sometimes I would go to Anil Dubey's house, sometimes to Manik Rao Ji's, and whenever I had the opportunity to visit my maternal grandparents, the radio there would become my constant companion.

I can still vividly remember that, in those days, as evening descended, the attention of almost every member of a household fortunate enough to own a radio or a transistor would gradually turn towards it. First came a gentle crackle of static. Then someone would slowly turn the tuning knob in search of the right station. Suddenly, the clear, composed voice of an announcer-or the opening notes of a song-would fill the room. In that instant, it felt as though a doorway had quietly opened into another world.

Many a time I happened to be at Anil's house during those magical moments. I certainly enjoyed listening to the songs, but what delighted me even more was the announcer's familiar introduction: *"And now, a song from the film..."* The moment the title of the film was spoken, an entirely new world began to take shape in my imagination. I had not yet seen most of those films. To me, they existed first as music, then as imagination, and only much later as moving images on a cinema screen.

Around 1966, the songs most frequently heard on the radio came from films such as *Teesri Manzil*, *Phool Aur Patthar*, *Mera Saaya*, *Love in Tokyo*, *Do Badan*, *Aaye Din Bahar Ke*, *Sawan Ki Ghata*, *Pyar Kiye Jaa*, *Das Lakh*, *Anupama*, *Mamta*, *Amrapali*, *Teesri Kasam*, and *Suraj*. At that time, I had seen very few of these films, yet their titles and songs were quietly sinking deep into my consciousness.

Whenever a song from *Teesri Manzil* was played, I sensed an irrepressible vitality in R. D. Burman's music. The songs of *Phool Aur Patthar* and *Mera Saaya* carried a tenderness and melancholy that I was too young to understand, yet they touched my heart all the same. While listening to the songs from *Love in Tokyo*, I had no idea where Tokyo actually was, but I imagined it to be a beautiful place somewhere unimaginably far away. The songs from *Do Badan* and *Mamta* possessed a quiet sadness that stirred a faint ache within me, even in childhood.

At first, I scarcely understood the meanings of the lyrics. I must have been no more than ten or eleven years old. During request

programmes, the announcers would play one song after another- *"Jhumka Gira Re Bareilly Ke Bazaar Mein," "Nainon Mein Badra Chhaye," "Tu Jahan Jahan Chalega, Mera Saaya Saath Hoga," "Aap Ke Pehlu Mein Aakar Ro Diye," "Deewana Mujhsa Nahin Is Zamane Mein," "Tumne Mujhe Dekha Hokar Meherbaan," "Rahein Na Rahein Hum, Mehka Karenge," "Chhupa Lo Yun Dil Mein Pyar Mera," "Meri Jaan Tum Pe Sadke," "Baharon Phool Barsao, Mera Mehboob Aaya Hai," "Mile Na Phool To Kaanton Se Mohabbat Kar Li," "Sajanwa Bairi Ho Gaye Hamar,"* and *"Sajan Re Jhooth Mat Bolo."*

What did I know then of the love, longing, devotion, or philosophy of life hidden within those songs?

Some words I understood; many I did not.

Yet their melodies, the voices of the singers, and the mysterious enchantment of the music continued to settle quietly within me. At times it seemed that these songs had been written not for me, but for people belonging to some other world.

And yet, for reasons I could never explain, they somehow felt deeply my own.

Perhaps music does not travel through meaning at all. Perhaps it finds its way directly to the heart.

Looking back today, I realise that time has transformed not only me, but also the meanings of those songs.

"Tumne Mujhe Dekha Hokar Meherbaan" no longer feels like a simple love song. It reminds me instead of those rare moments in life when someone has offered affection or kindness without asking anything in return.

"Rahein Na Rahein Hum, Mehka Karenge" now speaks of the fragrance of memories that outlive us-a fragrance that has not faded with time but has grown richer and deeper.

"Chhupa Lo Yun Dil Mein Pyar Mera" is no longer merely about romantic love; it has become a longing to preserve those we cherish safely within our memories.

The moment I hear *"Baharon Phool Barsao, Mera Mehboob Aaya Hai,"* my mind no longer welcomes a beloved person alone. Instead, it celebrates those rare, luminous moments in life whose arrival we sometimes await for years.

"Sajanwa Bairi Ho Gaye Hamar" has become a song of separation and all the partings that life inevitably brings.

And *"Sajan Re Jhooth Mat Bolo"*-that song has gradually ceased to be merely a song at all. It has become a quiet lesson in how to live. As a child, I loved its melody; today, it is the words that enter my heart.

Time does not merely add years to our lives. It also changes the meanings of the songs we carry within us. The melodies that once simply pleased our ears gradually become our most intimate companions, enriched by everything we have lived through.

□

In those days, radio did more than play songs-it taught us how to imagine.

Before our eyes stood nothing more than a wooden radio cabinet or a small transistor set, yet within our minds entire worlds came alive. The announcer would announce the title of a film, the music would begin, and scenes would effortlessly unfold in my imagination. I pictured the hero and heroine, imagined where they stood, what they looked like, and how they smiled. My imagination directed every scene. Years later, when I finally watched many of those films, I was often astonished by how different the real images were from those I had created in my childhood.

I also remember that during the request programmes, the announcers would read aloud the names of listeners and the towns from which they had written. Whenever one of these songs followed a request

from some distant little town, it felt as though the song no longer belonged only to that unseen listener-it belonged to all of us.

Perhaps that was why radio listeners, though strangers to one another, felt like members of one invisible family.

For me, listening to the radio was never merely entertainment. It was also an excuse to step out of my own home and spend time in someone else's. The songs I heard while sitting in Anil Dubey's house evoke one set of memories; the quiet afternoons spent before the radio in Manik Rao Ji's home evoke another. And the radio at my maternal grandparents' house became almost inseparable from my childhood itself. The radio was the same everywhere, yet each home possessed its own atmosphere, and so the very same songs became entirely new experiences each time I heard them.

Looking back now, I realise that I first encountered the films of 1966 not in a cinema hall but through the voice of the radio. They reached my ears before they reached the screen. They settled first in my imagination and eventually became part of my memory.

Perhaps that is why, even today, whenever I hear a song from one of those films, the first image that rises before me is not the silver screen. Instead, I see Anil's house, the courtyard of Manik Rao Ji's home, or that familiar room in my maternal grandparents' house where the radio stood-and around it, all of us, quite unknowingly, weaving together some of the sweetest memories of our time.

The years between 1967 and 1970 live in my memory not merely as a succession of memorable films, but as one of the most beautiful chapters in my growing relationship with the radio. In those days, opportunities to watch films in the cinema were few and far between. Yet their stories, songs, and stars reached our home effortlessly, carried upon invisible radio waves. Indeed, I often feel that I first *heard* far more films on the radio than I ever *saw* on the screen.

As evening descended, an unspoken excitement would quietly fill the house. The transistor-or sometimes the large valve radio-would occupy

its familiar place, while we waited eagerly for the request programme of film songs to begin. The moment the announcer's warm, reassuring voice declared, *"Our next request comes from..."* my imagination would instantly travel elsewhere. Even before the music began, merely hearing the title of a film would set my mind spinning stories of its characters, its world, and everything I imagined it might contain.

Throughout 1967, songs from *Upkar* seemed to appear in almost every other programme. *"Mere Desh Ki Dharti"* was much more than a patriotic song; it carried within it the fragrance of India's soil and the quiet confidence of a young nation. Manoj Kumar came to represent, in our minds, a hero who did not merely perform on screen but awakened a genuine sense of love for the country.

That same year, the magic of *Ram Aur Shyam* was everywhere. Long before I actually watched the film, Dilip Kumar's double role had become so familiar through its songs and discussions on the radio that it seemed as though I already knew both brothers personally. The songs of *Jewel Thief* introduced us to the irresistible charm of Dev Anand and the enchanting music of S. D. Burman. Films such as *Hamraaz*, *Farz*, and *Milan* lent their own distinctive colours to countless evenings of request programmes.

Then came 1968, and somehow the world of radio itself seemed to smile a little more brightly.

Whenever a song from *Padosan* was played, the entire atmosphere at home changed. The moment *"Mere Samne Wali Khidki Mein"* began, smiles appeared almost instinctively on every face. Through nothing more than sound, Kishore Kumar's playful exuberance, Sunil Dutt's gentle innocence, and Saira Banu's lively charm came vividly alive in our imagination. The songs of *Brahmachari* carried Shammi Kapoor's unmistakable energy-an exuberance that not even radio could contain.

That year also brought us the unforgettable songs of *Aankhen*, *Neel Kamal*, *Do Kaliyan*, *Kanyadaan*, *Shikar*, and *Haseena Maan Jayegi*.

Within a single programme, one could experience mystery, romance, laughter, tenderness, and the warmth of family life.

Then came 1969, bringing with it the rise of a new phenomenon in Hindi cinema.

The songs of *Aradhana* swept across the country like a gentle storm. Whenever the announcer declared, *"Our next request is from the film Aradhana..."* an almost reverential silence descended upon us. For the next few minutes, everyone simply listened.

"Mere Sapnon Ki Rani" and *"Roop Tera Mastana"* were not merely popular songs; they had become the heartbeat of an entire generation. It seemed as though Rajesh Khanna's famous smile could somehow be seen even through the radio.

That same year, the songs of *Do Raaste* carried the emotions of the Indian joint family into countless homes. The melodies of *Ek Phool Do Mali*, *Inteqam*, *Prince*, *Jeene Ki Raah*, and *Aaya Sawan Jhoom Ke* were equally frequent companions in request programmes.

Slowly but unmistakably, it became evident that Hindi cinema was welcoming a new superstar.

By the time 1970 arrived, the atmosphere had begun to change in subtle but unmistakable ways. It felt as though Hindi cinema itself was opening the doors to a new decade.

The songs of *Johnny Mera Naam* retained Dev Anand's familiar elegance, yet their music and presentation possessed a fresh energy that reflected changing times. At the other end of the emotional spectrum stood films such as *Safar*, whose songs explored life's deeper sorrows and quiet sensitivities with unusual maturity.

At the time, we probably did not realise the significance of what was happening. Looking back today, however, it seems clear that this was the turning point from which another golden chapter of Hindi cinema began to unfold.

Around those days, conversations about a forthcoming film called *Anand* had also begun to circulate. Although it was released the following year, one could already sense that the mood of Hindi cinema was changing. Later, when its songs were played repeatedly on the radio, they seemed like the most natural continuation of that golden era.

Today, whenever I revisit those years in memory, I realise that we were not merely listening to songs-we were listening to our own times.

The fragrance of India's soil in *Upkar*, the playful spirit of *Ram Aur Shyam*, the joyous laughter of *Padosan*, the romance of *Aradhana*, the familial warmth of *Do Raaste*, and the excitement of *Johnny Mera Naam*-all these became part of our lives because the radio brought them into our homes.

In those days, the radio was far more than a machine.

It was the most vibrant member of the household.

It connected us with the nation and the wider world. It introduced us to new films, new music, and new dreams. Above all, it filled our evenings with melody.

Even today, whenever I happen to hear a song from those years, the first image that comes to mind is not a cinema screen. It is that old radio-the faint crackle before the station settled into tune, the announcer's warm and familiar voice, and the sentence for which we waited with such eager anticipation:

"And now, here is the next song, requested by..."

The moment those words are spoken, the entire sky of memory fills once again with music.

□

And no account of radio can ever be complete without speaking of '*Vividh Bharati*'.

Bound together by nothing more than the human voice and invisible waves of sound, it united an entire nation. As a cherished service of All India Radio-today known as Akashvani under Prasar Bharati-Vividh Bharati became one of the most beloved institutions in modern India's cultural life.

If someone were to ask me which sound feels most intimately woven into my childhood and youth, I would answer without the slightest hesitation: *Vividh Bharati*.

For me, and for millions of Indians of my generation, it was never merely a radio service. It was an inseparable companion in everyday life.

Those were the years when television remained beyond the imagination of ordinary families. Indeed, the infrastructure necessary for television broadcasting scarcely existed. Opportunities for entertainment were few. Across the country, people were quietly engaged in the great task of nation-building, each contributing in their own way.

At the end of a long day's labour, when the radio was switched on, it felt as though a beloved member of the family had just come home and taken a seat among us.

Through its film songs, its graceful announcers, and its wonderfully engaging programmes, Vividh Bharati enriched the memories of several generations. Even today, its melodies continue to resonate in the quietest corners of my heart, carrying with them not merely music, but the very sound of an age.

Vividh Bharati has long been the most popular, engaging, and entertaining service of All India Radio. It was inaugurated in Bombay on 3 October 1957. In its earliest days, it was broadcast only from the Bombay and Madras (now Chennai) stations. Its popularity, however, grew with remarkable speed, and before long numerous All India Radio stations across the country became part of the network. In 2007, Vividh Bharati celebrated its Golden Jubilee. Even today it reaches

listeners in every corner of India and continues to serve as the principal platform for commercial broadcasting on All India Radio.



As I have already mentioned, regular radio broadcasting in India began on 23 July 1927. After Independence, All India Radio expanded rapidly, extending its reach to most of the country's major cities. At that time, its principal channels focused largely on news, classical music, folk music, educational programmes, and other cultural broadcasts. For a period, owing to official policy, the broadcast of Hindi film songs was severely restricted.

Ironically, this happened during what is now remembered as the golden age of Hindi film music. Composers such as C. Ramchandra, Anil Biswas, Hemant Kumar, Naushad, Sachin Dev Burman, Shankar–Jaikishan, Madan Mohan, and O. P. Nayyar were creating melodies that would become timeless classics.

The greatest beneficiary of this policy was Radio Ceylon.

The overseas service of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation devoted generous airtime to Hindi film songs, and its popularity in India grew so rapidly that millions of listeners gradually turned away from All India Radio in favour of Radio Ceylon.

Recognising the situation, the then Director-General of All India Radio, Dr. Girija Kumar Mathur, together with the eminent poet Pandit Narendra Sharma and his colleagues, conceived the idea of creating a nationwide entertainment channel that would draw listeners back to All India Radio.

That new service was christened '*Vividh Bharati*'.

The name itself beautifully expressed its purpose. Pandit Narendra Sharma suggested *Vividh*-meaning "varied" or "diverse"-as the Hindi equivalent of the English word *miscellaneous*. *Bharati* symbolised the cultural spirit of India. Together, the two words evoked the rich diversity of the nation's artistic and cultural life.

On 3 October 1957, Vividh Bharati formally went on the air from Bombay.

The very first announcement was made by the announcer Sheel Kumar.

The inaugural signature song, written by Pandit Narendra Sharma, was set to music by Anil Biswas and sung by the incomparable Manna Dey. It began with the evocative words:

"नाच रे मयूरा, नाच रे मयूरा
खोलकर सहस्र नयन, देख सघन गगन मगन
देख सरस स्वपन जो के आज हुआ पूरा
नाच रे मयूरा, नाच रे मयूरा

गूँजे दिशी-दिशी मृदंग प्रति पल नव राग रंग
रिमझिम के सरगम पर, रिमझिम के सरगम पर

छिड़े तान पूरा
नाच रे मयूरा, नाच रे मयूरा"

"Dance, O peacock, dance!
Spread your thousand eyes and behold the joyous sky.
See the beautiful dream that today has come true.
Dance, O peacock, dance!
Let the drums resound in every direction,
Let every moment bloom with new melodies and colours.
To the rhythm of the falling rain,
Let the full symphony arise.
Dance, O peacock, dance"!

Vividh Bharati soon came to be described as All India Radio's *"five-coloured service"- "panch-rangee krykram"*, for it brought together the five major streams of cultural broadcasting-music, drama, literature, talks, and entertainment.

Many of the country's finest announcers, producers, writers, musicians, and performers were invited to Bombay to ensure that the new service would begin with the highest possible standards. Within only a few years, Vividh Bharati had become the most beloved radio channel in the everyday life of India.



No account of Vividh Bharati would be complete without speaking of the programmes that became such an important part of my own life. To leave them out would leave this story incomplete.

Among them, none touched me more deeply than '*Jaimala*'.

To me, it was the most emotional programme ever broadcast by Vividh Bharati-a warm, affectionate voice reaching out to India's soldiers standing guard along the nation's borders.

The programme had been created especially for the men serving in the armed forces, those who risked their lives every day in defence of the country.

From Monday to Friday, it featured film songs requested by soldiers themselves.

On Saturdays, a celebrated film actor or actress would host the programme in a remarkably personal and intimate manner.

On Sundays, *Jaimala Sandesh* allowed soldiers to send messages home to their families, while their loved ones could send messages back to them.

It was much more than a radio programme.

It was an emotional bridge spanning distances that letters alone could never cross.

Even during the Kargil War, many soldiers reassured their families of their safety through the special programme *Hello Jaimala*.

In later years, numerous broadcasting networks introduced programmes of a similar kind, but the honour of pioneering the idea rightly belongs to Vividh Bharati.

The very first edition of *Jaimala* was presented by the legendary actress Nargis.

With a little effort I could probably discover the exact date of that broadcast, but I do not have it before me at the moment. So let me move on.

Over the years, Dev Anand, Dharmendra, Raj Kumar, Shashi Kapoor, Amitabh Bachchan, Asha Parekh, Waheeda Rehman, Mala Sinha, Hema Malini, and countless other actors and actresses-great stars and lesser-known artists alike-became part of the programme.

One song that I remember hearing on *Jaimala* more than once has remained with me ever since.

It was "O Pavan Veg Se Udne Wale Ghode..." from the film '*Jai Chittor*'.

The lyrics were written by Bharat Vyas, set to music in *Raga Malkauns* by S. N. Tripathi, and sung by the Nightingale of India, Bharat Ratna Lata Mangeshkar.

Even today, I cannot listen to it without being deeply moved.

I find it impossible to mention the song without sharing at least a few of its unforgettable lines:

"ओ पवन वेग से उड़ने वाले घोड़े
तुझ पे सवार है जो, मेरा सुहाग है वो
रखियो रे आज उनकी लाज हो, ओ पवन ...

तेरे कंधों पर आज भार है मेवाड़ का
करना पड़ेगा तुझको सामना पहाड़ का
हल्दी घाटी नहीं है काम कोई खिलवाड़ का
देना जवाब वहाँ शेरों की दहाड़ का

घड़ियां तूफ़ान की हैं
तेरे इम्तहान की हैं
रखियो रे आज उनकी लाज हो, ओ पवन ...

छक्के छुड़ाना देना तू दुश्मनों की चाल के
उनकी छाती पे चढ़ना पाँव तू उछाल के
लाना सुहाग मेरा वापस तू सम्भाल के
तेरे इतिहास में अक्षर होंगे गुलाल के
चेतक महान है तू
बिजली की बान है तू
रखियो रे आज उनकी लाज हो, ओ पवन . . . "

"O swift horse, riding upon the wings of the wind,
The one seated upon your back carries my life's honour.
Protect him today; safeguard his dignity.
O rider of the wind...
Upon your shoulders rests the burden of Mewar.
You must now confront the mountains themselves.
Haldighati is no place for games.
There you must answer the roar of lions.
These are the moments of the storm,
The hours that will test your courage.
Protect his honour today...
Break the enemy's every move,
Leap upon their ranks with fearless stride.
Bring my beloved safely home.
Your name shall forever be written in history.
Great Chetak,
You are an arrow of lightning.
Protect his honour today..."

Whenever I heard this song, I was overwhelmed with emotion. Even now, after so many years, it still carries the same power. It reminds me that *Jaimala* was never merely about entertainment. It honoured

sacrifice, celebrated courage, and, through music, gently united those guarding the nation's frontiers with the families waiting anxiously for them at home.

One detail, however, I almost forgot to mention. It was *Ameen Sayani*, with his magical voice and unmistakable style, who elevated this programme to the very pinnacle of popularity.

Binaca Geetmala was one of the most celebrated and historically significant film-music programmes in the history of Indian radio. Broadcast over *Radio Ceylon*, it was a weekly countdown show in which songs were ranked according to listeners' requests and record sales. Ameen Sayani affectionately referred to these rankings as the *paidaans*-the steps of a musical staircase.

Whenever a song managed to hold on to the coveted Number One position for several consecutive weeks-or remained at the top for a prescribed period-it was declared a *"Sartaj Geet"* (The Crowned Song). To receive this honour meant that the song had become the undisputed musical sensation of its time. Once a song attained the status of *Sartaj*, it was gracefully retired from the weekly countdown, making way for newer songs to compete for the top spot.

Whenever Ameen Sayani announced a song as the new *Sartaj Geet*, a bugle call or a distinctive musical flourish would accompany the declaration, adding a thrilling sense of ceremony that listeners eagerly anticipated. At the end of every year, an annual hit parade was compiled, and the song that had dominated the charts throughout the year earned the coveted distinction of *"Annual Sartaj Geet."*

The very first Annual Sartaj Geet was *"Tu Ganga Ki Mauj"* from the 1952 film *Baiju Bawra*, which received this honour in 1953. In those days, becoming a *Sartaj Geet* was regarded as one of the greatest accolades a composer, lyricist, singer, or filmmaker could receive.

There is, however, a common misconception regarding the rules governing the title of *Sartaj*. A song did not have to remain in the countdown for sixteen consecutive weeks. In the programme's early

years, a song generally earned the title by remaining at the Number One position-or very close to it-for a specified period, usually around twelve or thirteen consecutive weeks. Once it had demonstrated such extraordinary popularity, it was respectfully retired to prevent a single blockbuster from monopolising the charts indefinitely and to give newer songs an opportunity to shine.

As time passed, another situation began to emerge. Some songs, though unable to reach Number One, continued to occupy the second, third, or fifth positions for months on end. To address this, Binaca Geetmala revised its rules in 1966. Under the new system, a song could remain in the weekly countdown for a maximum of eighteen appearances. After completing those eighteen weeks, it was awarded *Sartaj* status and withdrawn from the competition. This limit was later extended to twenty-five weeks. During the first eighteen weeks, the complete song was played; during the remaining seven weeks, only a brief excerpt was broadcast before the song was finally retired as a *Sartaj*.

In short, the oft-quoted figures of sixteen or eighteen weeks referred to the maximum duration a song could remain in the programme-not to the rank it occupied. During the early years, sustained supremacy at the Number One position was the key to becoming a *Sartaj*. In later years, the honour came to be awarded to songs that had maintained their place in the countdown for the prescribed number of weeks.

□

Binaca Geetmala belonged, in its original form and throughout its golden age, to Radio Ceylon. While writing this chapter, however, I repeatedly came across references describing it as a programme of Vividh Bharati. Curious about this apparent contradiction, I decided to investigate further. The history behind this confusion, I felt, deserved to be mentioned.

The most reliable information available today confirms that Binaca Geetmala was launched on Radio Ceylon in 1952, with the evergreen Ameen Sayani as its host.

During the early 1950s, All India Radio (Akashvani) had imposed restrictions on the broadcast of Hindi film songs. Radio Ceylon seized this opportunity by introducing Binaca Geetmala, which soon became a nationwide phenomenon. Every Wednesday evening, millions of listeners across India tuned their radios to Radio Ceylon, eagerly awaiting Ameen Sayani's familiar greeting.

The programme's phenomenal success eventually prompted the Government of India to launch Vividh Bharati in 1957, primarily to provide listeners with film music and to counter Radio Ceylon's growing dominance.

Many years later, during the closing years of the 1980s, Binaca Geetmala moved from Radio Ceylon to the Vividh Bharati network of All India Radio. In the 1990s, it was renamed Cibaca Geetmala. It is therefore accurate to say that while the programme was born on Radio Ceylon and achieved its legendary stature there, it was only in its later years that it came to be broadcast on Vividh Bharati.

For most listeners, however, the identity and golden era of Binaca Geetmala will forever remain inseparable from Ameen Sayani's unforgettable salutation:

"Behno aur Bhaiyo..."
("Sisters and Brothers...")

□

I was an almost regular listener of Binaca Geetmala from around 1966 onward for several years. As I entered my teenage years, these melodies became an inseparable part of my growing up. It therefore seems only fitting to recall some of the Annual Sartaj Geet of those memorable years between 1966 and 1969.

The Annual Sartaj Geet of 1966 was *"Baharon Phool Barsao, Mera Mehboob Aaya Hai"* from the film *Suraj*, sung by Mohammed Rafi. Ranked second that year was *"Gaata Rahe Mera Dil, Tu Hi Meri Manzil"* from *Guide*, beautifully rendered by Kishore Kumar and Lata Mangeshkar. The third position went to *"Huzoor-e-Wala Jo Ho Ijazat"* from *Yeh Raat Phir Na Aayegi*, sung by Asha Bhosle and Meenu Purushottam.

In 1967, the Annual Sartaj Geet was *"Sawan Ka Mahina, Pawan Kare Sor"* from *Milan*, sung by Mukesh and Lata Mangeshkar. The second place was claimed by *"O Mere Sona Re Sona Re"* from *Teesri Manzil*, sung by Mohammed Rafi and Asha Bhosle, while the third position went to *"Baharon, Mera Jeevan Bhi Sanwaro"* from *Aakhri Khat*, sung by Lata Mangeshkar.

The following year, 1968, saw *"Dil Vil Pyar Vyar Main Kya Jaanu Re"* from *Shagird*, sung by Lata Mangeshkar, crowned as the Annual Sartaj Geet. At Number Two was Kishore Kumar's immensely popular *"Mere Saamne Wali Khidki Mein Ek Chaand Ka Tukda Rehta Hai"* from *Padosan*. Occupying the third place was *"Neele Gagan Ke Tale, Dharti Ka Pyar Pale"* from *Hamraaz*, sung by Mahendra Kapoor-another unforgettable melody that continues to echo through the corridors of Hindi film music.

In the 1969 Annual Binaca Geetmala Hit Parade, the top three songs were as follows. The Number One position was occupied by *"Kaise Rahoon Chup Ki Maine Pee Hi Kya Hai"* from the film *Intaqam*, sung by Lata Mangeshkar. At Number Two was *"O Re Taal Mile Nadi Ke Jal Mein"* from *Anokhi Raat*, rendered by Mukesh. The third place went to *"Parai Hoon Parai, Meri Aarzoo Na Kar"* from *Kanyadaan*, once again in the enchanting voice of Lata Mangeshkar.

□

By 1970, I had completed my first year as a teenager. I had crossed the threshold from thirteen to fourteen, and adolescence had quietly become my travelling companion. New thoughts, unfamiliar

emotions, and strange longings had begun to enter my mind like invisible visitors. At almost the same time, destiny, too, seemed to weave an entirely new web around me.

It was during the rainy season of that very year that I first heard someone singing:

"Jhilmil Sitaron Ka Aangan Hoga, Rimjhim Barasta Saawan Hoga..."

The voice came from behind a curtain, from an inner room hidden from sight. The sweetness and purity of that voice seemed to reveal the beauty of the unseen face behind it. It was not love at first sight-it was love at first sound. That voice cast a spell over me, and I surrendered to it without resistance.

The famous Hindi film Jeevan Mrityu, starring Dharmendra and Rakhee, was released in 1970, in different regions between January and June. In Jabalpur, as elsewhere, this song was immensely popular, and it echoed endlessly over the radio. In that year's Binaca Geetmala Annual Hit Parade, it secured the eighth position among thirty-three selected songs. This unforgettable melody was sung by Lata Mangeshkar and Mohammed Rafi, while Laxmikant-Pyarelal enriched it with one of their most melodious compositions.

(The 1970 Annual Binaca Geetmala Hit Parade featured thirty-three songs. According to the historical rankings available online, the complete list included the following:

Ranks 1–5: "Bindiya Chamkegi" (Do Raaste), "Meri Pyari Behaniya," "Rangeela Re," "Woh Pari Kahan Se Laoon," and "Khilona Jaan Kar."

Ranks 6–10: "Roop Tera Mastana," "Chhup Gaye Saare Nazare," "Jhilmil Sitaron Ka Aangan Hoga," "Karle Pyar Karle," and "Je Hum Tum Chori Se Bandhe Ek Dori Se."

Ranks 11–15: "Bas Yahi Apradh," "Sa Re Ga Ma Pa," "Ramchandra Keh Gaye," "Kaun Hai Jo Sapnon Mein Aaya," and "Kanchi Re Kanchi Re."

Ranks 16–20: "Aaj Mausam Bada Beimaan," "Tum Pukar Lo," "Humko To Jaan Se," "Aise To Na Dekho," and "Ni Sultana Re."

Ranks 21–25: "Khidki Mein Anarkali," "Jaane Kahan Gaye," "Jeena Yahan Marna Yahan," "Aa Ja Piya," and "Yeh Shaam Mastani."

Ranks 26–30: "Pyar Deewana Hota Hai," "Babuji Dheere Chalna," "Kajra Mohabbat Wala," "Likhe Jo Khat Tujhe," and "Mere Sapnon Ki Rani."

Ranks 31–33: "Kora Kagaz Tha," "Achha to Hum Chalte Hain," and "O Majhi Re."

-Compiled from information available online.)



The extraordinary spell cast by Binaca Geetmala can perhaps best be understood from one small but revealing detail. Many of my classmates would sit every Wednesday evening with a notebook and pen, carefully recording every aspect of the broadcast. They noted the rankings, the songs, the singers, and every interesting detail with astonishing precision. Their classroom notes might have been incomplete or untidy, but their Binaca Geetmala notebooks were immaculate.

One name I remember particularly well is Sukumar Das. His Binaca Geetmala notebook was always meticulously updated. He even brought it to school. Since he sat beside me in class, I had the privilege of leafing through it regularly. That was only my classroom; across our generation there must have been countless young enthusiasts just like him, each faithfully preserving the weekly history of their favourite programme.

Now that I have spoken so much about Binaca Geetmala, how could I possibly fail to mention the extraordinary personality who carried it to such dizzying heights of popularity? To omit his name would be an act of unforgivable neglect.

That legendary broadcaster was Ameen Sayani.

He was truly one of a kind. Revered as the "Magician of the Voice," he remains one of the most celebrated radio announcers India has ever produced. Beginning his broadcasting career in 1951–52, he remained associated with Binaca Geetmala for more than forty-two years. During

his remarkable career, he lent his unforgettable voice to nearly 54,000 radio programmes and over 19,000 advertisements and jingles.

His unique style of presentation-especially his affectionate greeting, "Behno aur Bhaiyo..." ("Sisters and Brothers...")-became instantly recognizable across the Indian subcontinent.

His greatest claim to immortality was, of course, his role as the host of Binaca Geetmala, the legendary countdown show that first aired on Radio Ceylon, later moved to Vividh Bharati, and eventually came to be known as Cibaca Geetmala. It was India's very first film-song countdown programme and went on to break every conceivable record of popularity.

His elder brother, Hamid Sayani, was himself a broadcaster with All India Radio and inspired Ameen Sayani to enter the profession.

Ameen Sayani passed away in Mumbai on 20 February 2024, at the age of ninety-one.

In recognition of his immeasurable contribution to broadcasting and the arts, the Government of India honoured him with the Padma Shri in 2009. Over the years he also received numerous prestigious distinctions, including the Living Legend Award, honours from FICCI, and the Lifetime Achievement Award presented by Radio Mirchi.

□

The original journey of Binaca Geetmala has now come to an end.

Known over the years by different names-Binaca Geetmala, Cibaca Geetmala, and later Colgate Cibaca Sangeetmala-the programme was officially discontinued in April 1994. From its birth in 1952 until its conclusion in 1994, it enjoyed an uninterrupted run of forty-two years.

From 1952 until 1988, it was broadcast on Radio Ceylon. In 1989 it shifted to Vividh Bharati, the network of All India Radio, where its final episode was aired in 1994.

By the early 1990s, television had begun to reshape India's entertainment landscape. Cable television had arrived, and music countdown programmes such as Antakshari and Philips Top 10 on Zee TV were rapidly capturing public imagination. As the age of sound gradually gave way to the age of images, and entertainment habits evolved, this historic radio programme quietly reached the end of its remarkable journey.

Yet, for people of my generation, Binaca Geetmala was far more than a radio programme. It walked beside us through our childhood, our adolescence, and into our youth. The songs it played were the very same songs broadcast on many other programmes. And yet, when they were heard on Binaca Geetmala, something almost magical seemed to happen. They acquired an inexplicable enchantment. They sounded sweeter, came closer, and somehow found their way into the heart.

One wonders how many love stories blossomed around those songs. How many found fulfilment, and how many remained unfinished-perhaps only God knows.



Another programme that arrived during those years of my adolescence was 'HMV Ke Sitare', a sponsored radio show that was both distinctive and immensely popular in its day. According to information available online, it was hosted by Ameen Sayani, joined by Sarita Sethi.

It was far more than a programme of film songs. It was presented as though the hosts had invited the listeners to an informal tea party. With effortless warmth and infectious good humour, they conversed with one another while sharing fascinating anecdotes about newly released songs, singers, composers, and films.

The programme was sponsored by HMV (His Master's Voice), India's largest music label of that era. Its primary purpose was to introduce listeners to the latest film songs released on HMV records and, at the same time, promote those albums.

As far as I remember, the programme was broadcast every Tuesday evening at eight o'clock.

Yet my own memories differ slightly from the information I have found. When I listened to the programme around 1968–69, it was not Ameen Sayani who presented it. I distinctly remember another announcer, although his name has long faded from my memory. One thing, however, I am certain of-it was not Ameen Sayani. The voice belonged to someone else. Despite all my searching, I have never been able to discover who that announcer was.

One particular episode has remained with me ever since. It was devoted entirely to promoting the songs of the 1968 film Saathi. Composed by Naushad, the soundtrack possessed a freshness that was strikingly different from his earlier musical creations. If memory serves me correctly, there may even have been another programme in the same series devoted exclusively to Naushad's background score for the film. Oddly enough, I found those orchestral compositions even more captivating than the songs themselves.

How much of my memory is accurate, and how much of the information I have gathered from the Internet and artificial intelligence is correct, I cannot honestly say. Perhaps both are true. It is entirely possible that on the occasions when I happened to listen, someone else was presenting the programme in place of Ameen Sayani for one reason or another.

There is, however, one detail I remember with remarkable clarity. At the end of every broadcast, the presenter would invariably say:

"We shall meet again next Tuesday, in this very programme, at the same time..."

That closing line has remained etched in my memory.

Of course, it is equally possible that my mind has quietly woven together fragments from two different programmes into a single recollection.

□

Memory is a curious companion.

Sometimes it refuses to reveal itself, even when we search for it with all our heart. At other times, it changes its shape, as though testing us. And then there are moments when it appears with such astonishing clarity that everything seems to be unfolding once again in the present.

Whatever else may be said about memories, they never truly leave us. They remain beside us like a childhood friend-a friend who quarrels with us, sulks for a while, eventually forgives us of his own accord, and never once considers abandoning us.

I often wonder how much of ourselves would remain if our memories were taken away. Perhaps we would be little more than machines or robots-capable of performing tasks according to a programme, but incapable of possessing a single memory of having lived them.

A machine, when it is not at work, is merely an inert object.

We, on the other hand, are perhaps at our most alive precisely when we sit in silence, apparently doing nothing at all. Without moving from where we are, we travel unimaginable distances. Within a single moment we wander across decades, revisit forgotten places, meet people long gone, and relive lives that seem to exist nowhere except within ourselves.

All because memory quietly carries us there.

□

As I continue to write about the radio, I find myself repeatedly struck by a simple yet profound truth: a human being lives in many worlds at once.

From the outside, our life appears to be a single, uninterrupted story. Yet within us exist countless distinct worlds, each vibrant and complete in its own right. They intermingle and overlap, yet each retains its own unmistakable identity.

When I look back upon my own life, I realise that within me there is a world of colours and brushes-a place where colours speak in place of words. There is the world of books, which silently transformed the way I think. There is the world of writing, where memories return again and again until they find expression in words. There is the world of relationships, where some faces have gradually faded with time, while others remain as luminous today as they were decades ago.

There is the world of school, whose morning prayers, classrooms, teachers, and mischievous adventures remain carefully preserved somewhere within me. There is the world of engineering college, where my dreams first unfolded their wings.

And threading through all these worlds is the world of the radio and Hindi film songs-a world that served as an invisible bridge between every other part of my life. It seems as though, at every turning point of my journey, the radio was quietly there beside me-sometimes in the background, sometimes occupying the very centre of my attention.

What amazes me most is that all these worlds together have shaped me and fashioned the person I have become. Yet whenever the occasion arises, each of them somehow separates itself from the whole and stands before me as an independent universe.

The opening line of an old song instantly transports me from the present into my teenage years. A single sentence in a book brings the colours of an old painting floating before my eyes. Sometimes, the moment I pick up a paintbrush, a melody once heard on the radio begins to resonate within me. At other times, hearing the voice of an old friend is enough to bring my entire college campus back to life with all its youthful bustle and laughter.

It is then that I realise memories are not neatly arranged objects stored away in some mental cupboard.

They are living beings.

They sleep and awaken. They meet and part from one another. And when the time is right, they come to us of their own accord-sometimes

without invitation, and sometimes precisely when the heart needs them most.

Perhaps that is why a life cannot be understood merely as a sequence of events.

A human personality is not simply the sum of its memories; it is the result of the invisible relationships between those memories. Life is woven not from isolated incidents but from hidden threads that connect a song to a painting, a painting to a book, a book to a person, and that person to a forgotten afternoon of childhood.

Those unseen connections form the true fabric of memory. They are the delicate strands from which our temperament, our sensitivities, our tastes, and ultimately our way of seeing the world are fashioned.

In the end, they make us the people we are.

That is why, whenever I speak of the radio, I am never speaking merely of a medium of broadcasting.

Along with it, all the many worlds that live within me awaken once more.

The radio does not simply play songs.

It opens the doors to those inner worlds where I lived some of the most beautiful, most innocent, and most meaningful moments of my life.

□

During the period I am writing about in this chapter, it was not as though I spent every waking hour glued to the radio. For one thing, that would not even have been possible, because in those early years we did not own a radio at home.

Whenever I wished to listen, I would go to Anil's house, to Manik Rao Ji's place, to Shibbu's barbershop, or to the home of another close friend of mine, Suresh Vishwakarma.

Suresh's father owned a small flour mill just a short distance from our house. Their home stood beside the road. The front portion of the building housed the flour mill, while the family lived in the three rooms behind it, along with a covered veranda and a spacious courtyard.

A large radio occupied a place of honour in a cupboard inside the room behind the mill. The electric motor that powered the grinding stones was installed in the same room, close to the rear wall. Its pulley was connected to the mill's larger wheel by a broad leather belt. The entire mechanism was covered with smooth, wide wooden planks, transforming it into what looked like a long bench or table.

That wooden platform became our little concert hall.

Suresh and I would often sit there together, listening to *Binaca Geetmala* and many other radio programmes. It was on that very bench that I first heard the soundtracks of several memorable films. Among those I can still recall are *Ganga Jamuna*, *Phool Aur Patthar*, and *Mujhe Jeene Do*. Those melodies remain inseparable from the smell of freshly ground grain, the gentle hum of the motor, and that modest room behind the flour mill.

Since I have mentioned Suresh, another incident comes flooding back to me. Let me tell you that story as well.

Our little lives are made to dance to circumstances in ways we can scarcely imagine. They test us more often than we realize.

Suresh's father, who spent his days operating the flour mill, was known for his short temper and irritable nature. He had a sturdy build and a fair wheatish complexion. He usually wore a simple white cotton dhoti reaching down to his knees, with a thick white-or sometimes very light-coloured-vest. His hair was cropped extremely short and had turned completely white. He shaved only once a week, so there was almost always a light stubble on his face.

He had three sons. The eldest was married and worked at the Khamaria factory. The second was studying in either the ninth or

tenth standard. Suresh was the youngest. The eldest son's wife and their two children also lived in the same house.

The flour mill was the family's principal source of income. How much financial help came from the eldest son, I never really knew. But it was unmistakably a lower middle-class household, where financial pressures frequently gave rise to tension. Small disagreements could easily grow into loud arguments. Whether such quarrels were a daily occurrence or happened only occasionally, I cannot say. But I witnessed enough to know that harmony was often fragile there.

Moreover, the eldest son's wife and his mother regularly visited my aunt, and through conversations between them I occasionally came to know fragments of what was happening in that household.

A simple recollection has already become rather long.

The incident itself is brief.

One day, after a prolonged quarrel between Suresh's parents, bathing water was heating over a wood-fired stove in the courtyard inside a large metal vessel. Driven beyond endurance by the argument, Suresh's father suddenly lifted the vessel in a fit of uncontrollable anger and poured the scalding water over his own body.

By then the water had become dangerously hot.

It did what boiling water inevitably does.

His entire body turned crimson. Painful blisters appeared everywhere.

Where his anger disappeared after that, perhaps even he himself never discovered.

But he certainly found his way to the hospital.

I did not witness this incident personally. What I have written is pieced together from what Suresh, Anil, and my aunt later told me.

One memory leads naturally to another, and this one leaves behind a bitter truth:

How helpless we human beings often are before the circumstances of our own lives.

□

The atmosphere has become rather sombre.

Let us walk somewhere else.

"आ चल के तुझे मैं ले के चलूँ एक ऐसे गगन के तले
जहाँ ग़म भी ना हो, आँसू भी ना हो, बस प्यार ही प्यार पले. . .
सूरज की पहली किरण से आशा का सवेरा जागे
चंदा की किरण से धुलकर घनघोर अंधेरा भागे
कभी धूप खिले, कभी छाँव मिले, लंबी सी डगर ना खले. . .
जहाँ दूर नज़र दौड़ाएँ, आज़ाद गगन लहराये
जहाँ रंगबिरंगे पंछी आशा का संदेसा लाएँ
सपनों में पली, हँसती हो कली, जहाँ शाम सुहानी ढले. . .
सपनों के ऐसे जहां में, जहाँ प्यार ही प्यार खिला हो
हम जा के वहाँ खो जाये, शिकवा ना कोई गिला हो
कही बैर ना हो, कोई गैर ना हो, सब मिल के यूँ चलते चलें"।

"Come, let me take you beneath a sky
Where sorrow does not exist,
Where tears have no place,
And only love is allowed to flourish..."

Whenever I hear those immortal lines, they seem less like the opening of a song and more like the beginning of a prayer.

The first rays of the sun awaken a dawn filled with hope.

Moonlight washes away the deepest darkness.

Sometimes there is sunshine, sometimes there is shade, yet the long road never feels burdensome.

It is a place where the horizon stretches endlessly beneath an open sky, where colourful birds arrive carrying messages of hope.

It is a world where dreams blossom into smiling flowers and every evening descends with quiet beauty.

It is a land where love alone is allowed to bloom.

A place where we might lose ourselves without complaint or resentment.

Where there is no hatred, no stranger, and everyone walks together.

Is Kishore Kumar's *"Aa Chal Ke Tujhe"* merely a song?

To me, it is far more than that.

It is a dream.

It is hope.

It is a prayer.

Can there be a nobler prayer for humanity than this?

□

Genius of Kishore Kumar's kind is born only once in a great while.

To my mind, he was infinitely greater than many of the self-proclaimed spiritual gurus who spent their lives preaching how others ought to live. Kishore Kumar never instructed anyone to imitate him. He simply lived life on his own terms. Whether others learned anything from him was entirely their choice.

The golden age of his career began with the film '*Aradhana'*. From that moment onward, he never looked back. One unforgettable song followed another in an astonishing stream.

-*"Zindagi Ek Safar Hai Suhana..."*

-*"Jeevan Se Bhari Teri Aankhen..."*

-*"Yeh Jeevan Hai..."*

-*"Zindagi Ka Safar..."*

-*"Kahan Tak Yeh Man Ke Andhere..."*

-*"O Saathi Re..."*

-*"Humein Tumse Pyar Kitna..."*

-*"Zindagi Ke Safar Mein Guzar Jaate Hain Jo Maqaam..."*

-*"Tune Humein Kya Diya Ri Zindagi..."*

These are only a handful of pearls selected from the thousands of songs he sang. My heart wishes to extend this list much further, but practical limitations eventually intervene.

What more can one say?

There is one more song that, to me, seems to have risen from the deepest chambers of his own heart:

"मेरे महबूब क़यामत होगी
आज रुसवा तेरी गलियों में मुहब्बत होगी

नाम निकलेगा तेरे ही लब से
जान जब इस दिल-ए-नादान से रुखसत होगी
मेरे महबूब. . .

तेरी गली मैं आता सनम
नग़मे वफ़ा के गाता सनम
तुझ से सुना ना जाता सनम
अब आ पहुंचा आया हूँ मगर
ये कह कर मैं दीवाना
ख़त्म अब आज ये वहशत होगी
आज रुसवा. . .
मेरे सनम के दर से अगर
बद-ए-सबा हो तेरा गुज़र
कहना सितमगर कुछ है खबर
तेरा नाम लिया
जब तक भी जिया

ऐ शम्मा तेरा परवाना
जिससे अब तक तुझे नफ़रत होगी
आज रुसवा. . .

मेरे महबूब क़यामत होगी
आज रुसवा तेरी गलियों में मुहब्बत होगी"

"Mere Mehboob Qayamat Hogi..."

Whenever Kishore Kumar sings it, one feels that he is no longer merely lending his voice to a lyric. He seems to be living every word, every sigh, every unspoken wound hidden within it. The pain in his voice is so intimate, so profoundly human, that it transcends the story of the film and becomes the sorrow of anyone who has ever loved, waited, lost, or remembered.

Some songs entertain us.

Others remain with us.

This one enters the heart and quietly takes up permanent residence there.

How deeply the words of this song will penetrate your heart, I cannot say. But I do believe that the sorrow, longing, and quiet ache of broken love woven into its melody will find their way, almost unnoticed, into some hidden corner of your soul and remain there.

This is not merely a song to be heard-it is a song to be felt.

Its melody gently takes you by the hand and leads you into a world of memories, unfulfilled desires, and unspoken grief, where time itself seems to stand still.

"Mere Mehboob Qayamat Hogi, Aaj Ruswa Teri Galiyon Mein Mohabbat Hogi" is not simply the lament of a disappointed lover. It is the poignant cry of a love that retains its dignity even in defeat. Kishore Kumar's voice, steeped in sorrow, Laxmikant–Pyarelal's deeply moving composition, and Anand Bakshi's evocative lyrics come together to

create an emotional landscape so compelling that long after the song has ended, its echo continues to resonate within us.

Sometimes I feel that this is a song heard less with the ears than with the soul.

□

I know very well that among us are people who live almost entirely in the world of the intellect. They listen to the mind far more readily than to the heart. Some even consider themselves connoisseurs of "serious" literature. To them, my affection for Hindi film songs may appear rather ordinary-even embarrassingly popular or commercial.

They may search for grammatical imperfections in the lyrics, and no doubt they will find them. They may object to the choice of words or wrinkle their noses at the liberties taken with language. They may find countless reasons to dismiss these songs.

But at this stage of my life, none of that concerns me in the slightest.

"कुछ तो लोग कहेंगे
लोगों का काम है कहना।
छोड़ो बेकार की बातों को
कहीं बीत न जाए रैना॥"

"People will always have something to say.
That is what people do.
Let idle words drift away,
Lest the night pass us by."

In fact, I would gladly invite such people to spend some time with me. Perhaps I could show them how one enters the world of the heart, how one learns to live there, and how one eventually makes it one's permanent home.

Even medical science acknowledges a simple truth. When the brain ceases to function, the heart may continue beating for a while. But when the heart stops, the brain survives only for a few more minutes.

So, what is there to argue about?

And with whom?

For what purpose?

These songs have rescued me not once, but countless times.

Whenever life left me exhausted or broken, they somehow found a way to gather together the scattered fragments of my spirit and make me strong enough to face another day.

Let others say whatever they wish.

These songs are my friends.

And they will remain so until my final breath.

Indeed, I sometimes feel that when the last breath of my life departs-never to return-one of these songs will be there, holding me gently in its embrace. And as that final breath slips away, it will quietly bid me farewell.

"गुज़रा हुआ ज़माना आता नहीं दुबारा
हाफ़िज़ खुदा तुम्हारा
गुज़रा हुआ ज़माना आता नहीं दुबारा
हाफ़िज़ खुदा तुम्हारा हाफ़िज़ खुदा तुम्हारा

खुशियाँ थीं चार पल की आँसू हैं उम्र भर के
तन्हाइयों में अक़्सर रोएंगे याद कर के
दो वक़्त जो कि हमने
दो वक़्त जो कि हमने इक साथ है गुज़ारा
हाफ़िज़ खुदा तुम्हारा हाफ़िज़ खुदा तुम्हारा

मेरी क़सम है मुझको तुम बेवफ़ा न कहना

मजबूर थी मुहब्बत सब कुछ पड़ा है सहना
तूफ़ाँ है ज़िन्दगी का

तूफ़ाँ है ज़िन्दगी का अब आखिरी सहारा
हाफ़िज़ खुदा तुम्हारा हाफ़िज़ खुदा तुम्हारा

मेरे लिये सहर भी आई है रात बन कर

निकला मेरा जनाज़ा मेरी बरात बन कर
अच्छा हुआ जो तुमने
अच्छा हुआ जो तुमने देखा न ये नज़ारा
हाफ़िज़ खुदा तुम्हारा हाफ़िज़ खुदा तुम्हारा

गुज़रा हुआ ज़माना आता नहीं दुबारा
हाफ़िज़ खुदा तुम्हारा हाफ़िज़ खुदा तुम्हारा।"

"The days gone by will come no more,
May God protect you evermore.
The days gone by will come no more,
May God protect you; evermore-
May God protect you, evermore."

□

Speaking of favourite radio programmes, there are a few more that deserve to be remembered.

Among them was the immensely popular morning broadcast on Radio Ceylon, aired from 7:30 to 8:00 a.m., called *"Purani Filmon Ka Sangeet"* (Music from Old Films).

The programme had a charming tradition. Every single broadcast concluded with one unforgettable song by the legendary K. L. Saigal. For countless music lovers across India and beyond, the day truly began only after hearing Saigal Sahib's incomparable voice.

Vividh Bharati soon introduced an almost parallel programme of its own, aptly titled "Bhule-Bisre Geet" (Forgotten Melodies).

Vividh Bharati was launched in 1957, and in response to Radio Ceylon's enormously successful Purani Filmon Ka Sangeet, it began broadcasting Bhule-Bisre Geet every morning from 7:00 to 7:30 a.m.

At the height of Radio Ceylon's popularity, these two programmes were aired almost side by side. Radio enthusiasts would often keep an eye on the clock and switch back and forth between the two stations so that they would not miss a favourite song on either one.

Together, Radio Ceylon's Purani Filmon Ka Sangeet and Vividh Bharati's Bhule-Bisre Geet kept the golden age of Indian film music alive for decades. They did much more than play old songs; they preserved an entire musical heritage and carried it lovingly from one generation of listeners to the next.



I have already spoken earlier in this chapter about "*Chhaya Gee*"t, one of the signature programmes of Vividh Bharati. It is widely regarded as one of the most graceful, refined, and enduring broadcasts in the history of Indian radio.

Chhaya Geet was launched either on 3 October 1957, alongside the inauguration of the Vividh Bharati Service, or very shortly thereafter. When All India Radio introduced Vividh Bharati to challenge the immense popularity of Radio Ceylon, Chhaya Geet was among its earliest and most cherished attractions.

The programme was usually broadcast late at night, either from 10:00 to 10:30 p.m. or, during certain periods, from 10:30 to 11:00 p.m. Even today, many stations continue to air it around the same time.

What distinguished Chhaya Geet was its quiet, reflective, almost poetic temperament. While other Vividh Bharati programmes such as *Chitralok* or *Aapki Farmaish* generally featured lighter, livelier, and more exuberant songs, Chhaya Geet was carefully curated around slow, romantic, wistful, and emotionally profound classics.

Its greatest strength lay not only in the songs it selected but also in the voices of its announcers. Their calm, velvety delivery, interwoven with a thoughtful reflection or a couplet of poetry before introducing each song, transformed the experience into something almost magical. In the stillness of the night, listening to Chhaya Geet became less a radio programme than an intimate conversation with one's own heart.

Even today, among lovers of vintage film music and old radio broadcasts, Chhaya Geet continues to enjoy a uniquely respected place.

If you wish, you can still tune in to Chhaya Geet on the radio and discover for yourself whether my memories have exaggerated its charm.



The decades of the 1960s and 1970s are rightly regarded as the Golden Age of Indian radio broadcasting. It was an era when the radio was not merely a source of entertainment but an inseparable part of everyday life for millions of Indians.

The warm, dignified, and deeply familiar voices that floated into homes from Radio Ceylon and Vividh Bharati became household companions. Listeners knew the announcers not by their faces but by the unmistakable character of their voices-their flawless pronunciation, refined language, and distinctive style of presentation. There was such warmth and intimacy in the way they spoke that one often felt a member of the family was introducing the next song.

Many programmes from that golden era remain vividly alive in my memory. Yet, when I think of the announcers themselves, only three names rise effortlessly to the surface after all these years:

Ameen Sayani.

Devki Nandan Pandey.

Manohar Mahajan.

Perhaps it is because each possessed a voice so distinctive that, once heard, it could never truly be forgotten.

The very mention of Ameen Sayani still brings back his immortal greeting:

"Behno aur Bhaiyo..."-"Sisters and Brothers..."

With those few words, it seemed as though the entire household instinctively gathered around the radio. There was such warmth in his voice that one never imagined him speaking from a distant broadcasting studio. Instead, it felt as though he were sitting comfortably in our own drawing room, chatting with us like an old friend. His unique way of introducing songs, the sweetness of his language, and the effortless rhythm of his speech transformed him from a mere announcer into a beloved companion of millions.

The atmosphere changed the moment it was time for the news.

As soon as the familiar announcement was heard-

"This is All India Radio. You will now hear the news, read by Devki Nandan Pandey..."

-an almost instinctive silence descended upon the house. Conversations stopped. Every ear turned towards the radio.

There were remarkable balance, clarity, and quiet authority in his voice. Listening to him, one felt as though the heartbeat of the nation itself had travelled directly into one's home. Even today, I remember the cadence and dignity with which he read the news.

The third name is ‘Manohar Mahajan’, with whom I share a more personal connection.

He had once been a student of my own alma mater, Model High School, Jabalpur, many years before I entered it. Learning this filled me with an added sense of affection and pride. Whenever I heard his commanding, resonant, and confident voice on the radio, I felt quietly pleased that someone from our own school had earned such distinction among listeners across the country. There were an

unmistakable dignity and firmness in his voice that naturally commanded attention.

Looking back today, I realise that in those years we were not merely listening to songs or news bulletins.

We were forming relationships through voices.

For us, these announcers were never merely names. They became part of the rhythm of our daily lives. Their voices blended so naturally into the atmosphere of our homes that they gradually came to feel like familiar members of the family.

Times have changed. Radio has surrendered much of its place to newer forms of media.

Yet the voices of those three master's still echo within my memory with undiminished freshness.

Sometimes I feel that if I were to switch on one of those old transistor radios again, those familiar voices might once more emerge from its speaker, as though the years between then and now had never passed.

□

The "*Urdu Service of All India Radio*" occupies a place of singular distinction in the history of Indian broadcasting. It was much more than a radio service; it was a living stage upon which the richness of the Urdu language, literature, poetry, music, and India's composite cultural heritage found graceful expression.

Its refined language, cultured presentation, and unmistakable sense of *tehzeeb*-courtesy, elegance, and civility-earned it devoted listeners not only throughout India but across much of South Asia.

The Urdu Service formed an important part of "*All India Radio's External Services Division*". Its purpose was to present Indian culture, literature, music, and contemporary affairs to a wide audience through the beauty and sophistication of the Urdu language. For many decades

it broadcast several hours each day and became one of All India Radio's most admired and beloved services.

Its greatest distinction lay in its language.

The impeccable pronunciation of its announcers, their elegance of expression, their careful choice of words, and their polished conversational style captivated listeners. Between programmes one could hear verses of Urdu poetry, literary quotations, and thoughtful commentaries, each delivered with remarkable grace. Even those who had only a modest understanding of Urdu tuned in simply to savour the sweetness and refinement of the language.

Many of its programmes achieved extraordinary popularity.

'Tabsira' was among its finest offerings-a thoughtful programme devoted to contemporary issues, distinguished by both the quality of its language and the depth of its analysis. Literary discussions, poetry recitals, special presentations of ghazals and qawwalis, and listeners' requests for film songs also enjoyed immense popularity.

Through these broadcasts, a rich world of classical music, Sufi poetry, ghazals, and Urdu literature entered countless homes. Even the news bulletins earned widespread respect for their balanced, lucid, and dignified presentation.

The relationship between the listeners and the announcers in those years possessed a warmth that is difficult to imagine today.

Letters poured in from every corner of India and from many parts of South and Southeast Asia. They carried song requests, comments on programmes, original verses of poetry, greetings, and affectionate messages addressed to favourite announcers.

Through these handwritten letters, radio forged an emotional bond with its audience-a relationship whose intimacy seems almost unimaginable in today's digital world.

Over time, the use of shortwave radio naturally declined. Yet the Urdu Service evolved with changing times and eventually embraced the internet and digital streaming platforms.

Its essential identity, however, remains unchanged.

It is still remembered for its cultured language, dignified presentation, exceptional music, literary excellence, and heartfelt dialogue with its listeners.

For these enduring contributions, the Urdu Service will always occupy a place of honour in the history of Indian broadcasting.

□

I could hardly speak so much about the radio and Hindi film songs without paying tribute to the singers whose magical voices transformed that entire chapter of my life into something so beautiful and deeply comforting. Under the shelter of the songs they sang, I never experienced life's events merely as outward happenings. I experienced them emotionally. Every joy, every disappointment, every hope and every loss acquired an inner meaning because somewhere, quietly, there was always a song accompanying it.

It is a subtle and delicate experience, perhaps not easy for everyone to understand. Yet, for me, it was as natural as breathing.

Whenever life confronted me with moments of confusion, disappointment, or quiet despair, something remarkable would happen. Without conscious effort, without my choosing it, a song would begin to play within me-as though my mind possessed its own invisible radio, permanently tuned to the soundtrack of my life.

The song did not solve my problems.

It did not make my sorrow disappear.

Nor did it lessen the complexity of the situation.

But it gave me the strength to live through it.

Looking back now, I often feel that at such moments an invisible meeting would take place within me-between my mind and my heart. They never argued. Instead, each quietly accepted its own responsibility.

The mind set itself to work, searching for solutions, analysing the problem, deciding what should be done and which path ought to be taken.

The heart, meanwhile, assumed a different role.

It took care of me.

It tended to my wounded emotions. If defeat seemed inevitable, it did not try to deny or conceal it. Instead, it gently taught me how to accept that defeat with dignity. If a cherished dream was falling apart, it never hurried to gather the broken pieces together. It simply stood beside me, making sure those sharp fragments did not wound me more deeply than they already had.



To speak of radio and film music without mentioning the singers whose voices enveloped that entire period of my life like an invisible symphony would leave this story incomplete.

They were far more than singers.

They became the silent witnesses to countless moments unfolding within me.

Their voices came from the radio, yet over time they built a permanent home somewhere inside my heart. Eventually I came to understand that we do not live only through our memories. We also live through the voices that become the music of those memories.

Nothing that happened in those years remained merely an event.

Someone departed. Someone arrived. A dream collapsed. A new hope was born.

Behind every experience there seemed to be a melody quietly playing.

I often felt that I was seeing life less with my eyes than through songs.

Those melodies translated my emotions for me.

Whenever words failed me, the voice of a singer somehow found them.

Perhaps that is why life never appeared to me as a simple succession of events. It became a continuous stream of music flowing through the landscape of human feeling.

This is not an experience that can easily be explained.

Someone observing from the outside may dismiss it as imagination.

Yet for me it was perfectly natural.

There were countless things I could never bring myself to say aloud. Yet those very feelings would suddenly recognize themselves in two or three lines of a song. It would seem as though the lyric had been written solely for me, and the singer had somehow discovered a sorrow or a joy hidden deep within me without my ever speaking of it.

Whenever life reached one of its bewildering crossroads-when confusion became so dense that no path could be seen-something extraordinary happened.

Without intention, without decision, a song would begin to play inside me.

As though an old transistor radio, forgotten in some quiet room of my mind, had suddenly switched itself on.

I never summoned those songs.

They always arrived on their own.

The song did not change my circumstances.

The sorrow remained what it was.

The confusion remained unresolved.

But something within me changed.

My capacity to endure.

It felt as though someone had silently placed a reassuring hand upon my shoulder.

And in that quiet gesture lay the certainty that this difficult season, too, would one day pass.

That is why I have never regarded the film songs of those years as mere entertainment.

They became a silent process of healing within me.

They did not save me from life's hardships.

They taught me how to live with them.

They did not erase sorrow.

They gave sorrow a language.

And perhaps, in the end, that is all a human being truly needs.

□

One programme I remember with particular affection was *"Yuv Vani"*, which was broadcast every evening at 5:30 p.m. and usually lasted for about half an hour. It was one of All India Radio's most significant and successful experiments, and remarkably, it continues to be broadcast even today.

In the history of Indian broadcasting, Yuv Vani represented something entirely new. Radio was no longer confined to film songs and news bulletins. It became a platform where the voices of young people themselves could be heard.

Sometimes the programme was produced locally at the Jabalpur station, while on other occasions it was relayed from Bhopal.

The service was inaugurated on 21 July 1969 from the Delhi station of All India Radio and was subsequently extended to many other broadcasting centres across the country.

Its purpose was to provide India's youth with a platform where their aspirations, ideas, creativity, and concerns could find expression. During the tenure of "Indira Gandhi" as Minister for Information and Broadcasting, considerable encouragement was given to such initiatives so that young people might participate more actively in nation-building and creative expression.

The most remarkable feature of Yuv Vani was that it was not merely a programme *for* young people; it was a programme *created by* young people.

Debates, radio plays, music, interviews, literary discussions, and candid conversations on social issues all found a place within its broadcasts.

In many ways, Yuv Vani became more than a radio programme.

It evolved into a cultural movement-the authentic voice of a generation.

I enjoyed listening to it whenever circumstances allowed. Quite often I discovered entirely new ideas and perspectives through its broadcasts. Performances by promising local singers and musicians, conversations with distinguished educators, successful young professionals, sports personalities, and experts on careers and social issues, poetry recitals by emerging poets, and short radio dramas regularly enriched the programme.

One of my favourite segments was titled "Aapke Khat, Hamare Jawaab" ("Your Letters, Our Replies"). Listening to the presenters read letters sent by young listeners, respond thoughtfully to them, and include their favourite song requests created the delightful illusion that I myself was participating in the programme.

Although I could not listen to it regularly, I never willingly missed an opportunity whenever one presented itself.

□

If there was one kind of broadcast for which I was an absolute enthusiast, it was the folk music programmes produced by the Jabalpur and Bhopal stations of All India Radio.

One such programme was broadcast every afternoon from 1:30 to 2:00 p.m. During those thirty minutes, listeners were treated to folk songs and devotional music specially recorded by the radio stations.

Among all of them, the folk songs of Bundelkhand held a special place in my heart.

They still do.

In Jabalpur, the Bundeli language is spoken with its own distinctive local flavour. Everyday conversation in the city may generally be conducted in standard Hindi, but in the older neighbourhoods of Jabalpur and throughout the surrounding villages, pure Bundeli still lives and breathes.

To my ears, no other language possesses quite the same beauty or warmth.

When I say that Bundeli has a unique charm, I mean something difficult to define.

Its rhythm.

Its flexibility.

Its earthy humour.

Its playful sharpness.

There is in it the graceful edge of a finely crafted blade.

Just as a mischievous glance can wound without causing pain, Bundeli carries within its words a delightful sharpness that accomplishes its work almost unnoticed.

Such is our beloved Bundeli.

It tells you everything, and yet somehow leaves you longing to hear more.

No matter how long I listen to it, my heart is never satisfied.

I never tire of Bundeli.

The programmes also featured folk songs in Bagheli, Malvi, Chhattisgarhi, Gondi, and Nimadi-languages spoken across different regions of what was then the undivided state of Madhya Pradesh, before Chhattisgarh became a separate state.

The years between 1968 and 1976 may well be regarded as a golden age for Bundeli folk music.

Around 1969, with the launch of Yuv Vani, local stations such as Jabalpur, Bhopal, Chhatarpur, and Gwalior began recording and broadcasting Bundeli folk songs on a regular basis.

Until then, these songs had belonged largely to village gatherings and open-air community spaces.

Radio carried them into homes across the region.

The richness of Bundeli folk music is astonishing.

The songs traditionally sung during the festival of Holi are known as Phag and Khayal. During those years, the *Phags* composed by the celebrated folk poet Isuri were among the favourite choices of radio singers.

Even today, one of his celebrated quatrains continues to echo in my memory:

"सैयां तोरे दरस बिना व्याकुल प्रान हमारे,
निसदिन रस्ता जोत-जोत के, नैन भये अति कारे।"

"Without a glimpse of you, my beloved, my soul grows restless;
Watching the road for you day and night, my eyes have darkened with waiting."

Among the best-known folk-dance songs of Bundelkhand are Rai and Saira, traditionally sung during festivals and at the time of the harvest. Equally stirring are the heroic ballads known as Alha, whose powerful

strains would reverberate across the radio waves throughout the rainy month of Sawan.

A few lines from an Alha ballad convey its fearless spirit:

जाके बैरी सम्मुख ठाढ़ो, ताको जीवन है धिक्कार।
बारह बरस लौं कूकर जीवै, और तेरह लौं जियै सियार,
बरस अठारह छत्री जीवै, आगे जीवन को धिक्कार।"

"Shame upon the life of the man who turns away from his enemy.
A dog may live for twelve years, a jackal for thirteen;
But a true warrior should live only eighteen years-
Beyond that, a life without honour is no life at all."

Alongside these heroic epics, the programmes also featured traditional devotional and festive songs sung by the young women of Bundelkhand.

One such wedding song celebrated the divine marriage of Lord Rama and Sita, lovingly imagining the celestial bridegroom and bride, the joyous court of King Janaka, the blessings of priests, the playful rituals of the bride's companions, and the festive splendour that surrounded the sacred wedding. Rich in devotion and simplicity, these songs carried the warmth of village life into countless homes through the radio.

"बने दूल्हा छवि देखो भगवान की,
दुल्हन बनी सिया जानकी।
जैसे दूल्हा अवधबिहारी,
तैसी दुल्हन जनक दुलारी,
जाऊ तन मन से बलिहारी।
मनसा पूरन भई सबके अरमान की। दुल्हन बनी. . .
ठांड़े राजा जनक के द्वार,
संग में चारउ राजकुमार,
दर्शन करते सब नर-नार
धूम छायी है डंका निशान की। दुल्हन बनी. . .

सिर पर कीट मुकुट को धारें,
बागो बारम्बार संभारे, हो रही फूलन की बौछारें।
शोभा बरनी न जाए धनुष बाण की। दुल्हन बनी. . .
पण्डित ठांड़े शगुन विचारें,
कोऊ-कोऊ मुख से वेद उचारें।
सखियां करती हैं न्यौछारें,
माया लुट गई है हीरा के खान की। दुल्हन बनी. . .
कह रहे जनक दोई कर जोर,
सुनियो-सुनियो अवधकिशोर,
कृपा करो हमारी ओर।
हमसे खातिर न बनी जलपान की। दुल्हन बनी. . .

"Behold-Rama, made godlike groom;
Sita, Janaki, now the bride.
If the groom is Avadhbihari,
Then the bride, Janak's cherished child;
I give my body, heart, my all in tribute.
All longings of hearts were fulfilled.
The bride is made..."

Or

Behold the groom, a godly sight,
Sita, Janaki, bride this night.
If Rama roams as Avadh's light,
Then she, Janak's pride so bright.
My body, mind - I give, I bind,
All hearts' wishes granted find.
The bride is made, the bride is made.

The broadcasts also frequently included Banna-Banni songs-the playful songs sung during weddings in honour of the bride and groom-and Gaari, the affectionate, teasing songs traditionally exchanged between the two families during marriage ceremonies.

The sweetness of these songs is beyond description.

Even today, a wedding in Bundelkhand feels somehow incomplete unless the melodies of Banna-Banni and Gaari echo through the household.

Perhaps it is simply my boundless affection for Bundeli folk music that has made me dwell on it for so long.

Let me pause here-but not before mentioning one more treasure.

A "Bagheli Sohar".

The '*Sohar*' is one of the most beautiful genres of North Indian folk music, sung to celebrate the birth of a child. The Bagheli–Awadhi *Sohar* I have quoted here belongs to the ancient oral tradition and appears to weave together elements of folklore and royal legend. Its story unfolds gently through song.

"बिछुवा तो बाजइ रून झुन
बसिया कहां रे बाजईं बसिया कहां रे बाजईं हो
राजा कउने ननंद जी के भइया
तौ बसिया बजावईं बसिया बजावईं हो
पंसवा तौ खेलई राजा बेल तरी
अउर बमुर तरी अउर बमुर तरी हो
राजा तुम्हरी धना वेदन बिआकुल
तौ तुम्मही बोलाइनि तुम्मही बोलाइनि हो
पंसवा तौ मिचकिन राजा बेल तरी अउर बमुर तरी हो
राजा पेलि पैठि गज ओबरी
कहा धन बेदन- कहा धन बेदन हो
बायें अंग राजा मोर कसकै
दहिन अंग मसकै- दहिन अंग मसकई हो
राजा मरतिउं पंजरिया के पीर
तौ धकरिन बोलावा- तौ धकरिन बोलाय लावा हो
अगिला के घोड़वा कउन सिंह पिछे के कउन सिंह
पीछे के कउन सिंह हो

भइया चला हो बुन्देलनी के देश
जहां बसे धकरिन- जहां बसै धकरित
जहां बसई धकरिन हो
पूंछे अटयिन बटयिन कुंययां पनिहारिन
कुइंयां पनिहारिन हो
राजा पूछें शहरवा के लोग
कहां बसै धकरिन- कहां बसै धकरिन हो
ऊंच नगरपुर पाटन आले बांस छाये हैं हो
आले बांस छाये हैं हो
राजा द्वारे चन्दन बड़ा रूखवा जहां बसे धकरिन
जहां बसै धकरिन हो
को मोरे टटिया उघारिस-बेड़ खरकाइसि
बेड़ खरकाइसि हो
राजा कउन रजनि केर पूत एतनी बैरि आइसि
एतनी बैरि आइसि हो
हम तोरे टटिया उघारेन बेड़ खरकायन
बेड़ खरकायन हो
लोनी मह तौ कउन सिंह के पूत
यतनी रात आयेन एतनी दूरि आयन हो
जो तुम्हारे व्हइहैं होररिलवा
तौ काह लुटइहा तौ काह लुटइया हो
जो तुम्हरे व्हइहैं घेरिया कउन रंग चूनरि
कउन रंग चूनरि हो
जो हमरे व्हइहैं होरलवा
तौ सोनवा लुटइबै रूपवा लुटइबै हो
जो हमरे व्हइहै धोरिया
अवध रंग चूनरि अवध रंग चूनरि हो
अंगिले के घोड़वा कउन सिंह पिछे के कउन सिंह हो
लोनी बीच के डड़िया सुघर लोनी
चंवर चलत आवै पसिनवा ढुरत आवै हो
जो मैं जनतिउं सुघर लोनी"

(The tinkling of a woman's anklets raises the opening question: Where is the flute playing, and who is playing it? The answer comes that it is the king himself, the brother of the young bride's sister-in-law, filling the air with music.

The king is absorbed in a game of dice beneath the shade of the banyan and cluster fig trees when urgent news arrives: his queen is in the throes of childbirth and calls for him at once.

Leaving the game unfinished, he rushes to the palace and anxiously asks what troubles her.

She replies that unbearable pain has seized her body and begs him to summon the village midwife.

The king immediately dispatches horsemen towards Bundelkhand, where the midwife lives. They ride from village to village, asking women drawing water from wells and the people they meet along the way, until at last they reach her home, marked by bamboo groves and a great sandalwood tree standing before the doorway.

When they knock late in the night, the startled midwife asks who has come at such an unusual hour and why they have travelled so far.

As the conversation unfolds, they discuss the gifts that will be bestowed if a son is born, and the coloured veil that will be presented should a daughter arrive instead.

Finally, the midwife mounts her horse and sets out for the palace. The closing verses lovingly describe her graceful journey, the rhythm of her horse's gait, and the sweat glistening upon her brow as she rides through the night toward the waiting queen.

The song breaks off before the story reaches its conclusion.)

Yet that is often the nature of oral folk traditions. They do not always seek a complete ending; they leave the listener suspended within the music itself.

This Sohar is far more than a celebration of childbirth. It is a miniature folk epic, told through dialogue, vivid imagery, and the

cadence of everyday speech. Because it belongs to a living oral tradition in which 'Awadh'i and 'Bagheli' intermingle, many of its words carry meanings that shift from one locality to another, making each performance subtly different from the last.

One more beautiful sohar comes to mind-one that **Pandit Chhannulal Mishra** has sung with such profound feeling and abandon. Whenever I listen to it, I seem to slip quietly into another dimension altogether, as though the familiar world recedes for a while and something deeper, more intimate, opens up before me.

Listen to it yourself.

"सखी सब गावैं सोहर, रतियाँ मनोहर।

यशोदा के भइलेन किशोर जी, मुरली मनोहर हो
ललना, जुग-जुग जियें नंदलाल;आशीष सब देवैं हो।

पंडित आएं दुअरिया, बिचारैं सगुनिया।
ललना, जुग-जुग जियें नंदलाल;आशीष सब देवैं हो।

कोई लुटावैं धेनू, गैया ; कोई रुपैया।
ललना कोई लुटावैं मोहर -रतियाँ मनोहर…..हो।
नंद लुटावैं धेनू, गैया; त मैया रुपैया।
ललना गोतनी लुटावैं मोहर - रतियाँ मनोहर…..हो।

अंगना में गावैं गोतनिया, नाचैं पउनिया।
रामा गुनि जन गावैं सोहर - रतियाँ मनोहर…..हो।

यशोदा के भइलेन किशोर जी, मुरली मनोहर हो
ललना, जुग-जुग जियें नंदलाल;आशीष सब देवैं हो।"

(Friends, let us all sing the sohar,
What a beautiful, enchanting night!
A young Krishna has been born to Yashoda,
The flute-playing, beautiful Lord.

O dear one, may Nandalal live for ages and ages;
May everyone bless him with their loving prayers.

The learned priests have come to the doorway,
Consulting the auspicious signs.

O dear one, may Nandalal live for ages and ages;
May everyone shower him with their blessings.

Some give away cows, herds of cattle,
Some scatter coins and silver;
And some, dear one, shower gold coins-
Ah, what a beautiful, enchanting night!

Nanda gives away cows and cattle,
And Mother Yashoda gives away her wealth;
The sisters-in-law shower gold coins-
What a beautiful, blessed night!

In the courtyard, the womenfolk sing,
And the dancers sway and dance;
Those devoted to Rama sing songs of joy-
A sohar fills the beautiful night.

A young Krishna has been born to Yashoda,
The flute-playing, beautiful Lord.

O dear one, may Nandalal live for ages and ages;
May everyone bless him with their loving prayers).

Could there be a more tender and evocative portrayal of Krishna's birth anywhere than in this *sohar*?

I am not certain that the folk songs I have quoted here were ever actually broadcast on the radio. That, however, is not really the point. My purpose is simply to acquaint you with the popular forms of folk music that were commonly heard on the regional radio station in our part of the country. Their sweetness, their unaffected simplicity, and their rhythm-all three coming together-would completely enchant me.

What captivated me most was the rise and fall of the *sohar*, and the sinuous, almost serpentine movement of its Awadhi/Bagheli language.

Even today, whenever something hurts me deeply, I instinctively begin humming whatever comes to mind in the tune of a *sohar*. After a while, I find that I have quietly forgotten what troubled me and have returned to my normal rhythm, as though nothing had happened. That is how deeply I love the melody of the *sohar*.

A *sohar* is, at its heart, an auspicious song sung to celebrate the birth of a child.

A *sohar* is a song of life stirring into being.

A *sohar* is a song of life.

□

I cannot say with certainty that the particular folk songs I have quoted here were ever broadcast on the radio.

That is not really the point.

My purpose has simply been to introduce you to the kinds of folk music that filled the airwaves in those years. It was their sweetness, their unaffected simplicity, and their effortless rhythm that captivated me.

Above all, I was enchanted by the 'Sohar'-its rising and falling melodic phrases, and the sinuous movement of the Bagheli language itself, gliding with the supple grace of a serpent.

Even today, whenever something hurts me deeply or unsettles my mind, I find myself unconsciously humming whatever words come to me in the tune of a Sohar.

I do not even have to think about it.

A few moments later, my burdens seem to dissolve, and somehow, I find myself back on life's track again.

Such is the healing power that the melody of a 'Sohar' still holds over me.

□

Perhaps the radio has been playing for far too long.

And so...

Let me untie one last velvet bundle of memories. Whatever emerges from it, I shall weave into words and share with you before bringing this chapter to its close.

There is a magnificent song sung by **"Kundan Lal Saigal"** in the film "*Shah Jahan*". Saigal himself played the title role in that film. When I first heard the song, however, I knew none of this. In fact, I was listening to it for the very first time. I had paid little attention to whatever the announcer had said before introducing it.

The song was being broadcast during the late-night "Aap Ki Farmaish" programme on "All India Radio's Urdu Service".

It was a cold winter night.

Wrapped snugly in a quilt, I was reading a book while the radio played softly in the background. Within moments, the melody and the magic of Saigal Sahib's voice drew me away from the printed page. I put the book aside and surrendered myself completely to the song.

Long after it had ended, it continued to echo through my mind.

That echo has never faded.

Even today, it remains within me exactly as it was on that winter night.

Whenever I feel something breaking inside me, whenever sadness settles over my heart or life simply seems to lose its colour, I return to this song. By now it has been sung by countless artists, and I can listen to almost any version and somehow find myself restored to emotional equilibrium.

Yet Saigal Sahib remains incomparable.

Who could ever dislodge him from that exalted place?

To this day, among all the songs I have loved, this remains the undisputed sovereign-the song that occupies the very first place in my heart.

The unforgettable composition was created by *Naushad*, and its immortal words were written by *Majrooh Sultanpuri*.The song begins:

"ग़म दिये मुस्तक़िल, कितना नाज़ुक है दिल,
ये न जाना
हाये हाये ये ज़ालिम ज़माना
दे उठे दाग लो उनसे ऐ महलों
कह सुनाना
हाये हाये ये ज़ालिम ज़माना।

दिल के हाथों से दामन छुड़ाकर
ग़म की नज़रों से नज़रें बचाकर
दिल के हाथों से दामन छुड़ाकर
ग़म की नज़रों से नज़रें बचाकर
उठके वो चल दिये,
कहते ही रह गये हम फ़साना
हाये हाये ये ज़ालिम ज़माना।

कोई मेरी ये रूदाद देखे,
ये मोहब्बत की बेदाद देखे
कोई मेरी ये रूदाद देखे,
ये मोहब्बत की बेदाद देखे
फूक रहा है जिगर,
पड़ रहा है मगर मुस्कुराना
हाये हाये ये ज़ालिम ज़माना।

ग़म दिये मुस्तक़िल, कितना नाज़ुक है दिल,
ये न जाना. . . हाये हाये ये ज़ालिम ज़माना।"

Every time I hear it, I feel as though sorrow itself has discovered music.

Its melody possesses a strange gentleness. It does not intensify grief; rather, it teaches one how to live with it. Instead of asking sorrow to leave, it quietly persuades us to make peace with its presence.

There is another song that, in my heart, stands beside it with equal dignity-

"Nigahen Mila Kar Badal Jane Wale..."

The enchanting voice of **"Noor Jehan"**, the *Malika-e-Tarannum*-the Queen of Melody-breathes life into Qateel Shifai's words with such extraordinary feeling that, even today, I find myself unable to escape the spell she cast.

To tell the truth, I have never wanted to.

There is a shimmering resonance in her voice, yet it carries an equally profound sadness. Together they create an emotional intensity almost beyond description. One feels the heart tremble. There is a delicate quiver in every phrase that reaches far deeper than mere sound.

Whenever she sings,

"Nigahen Mila Kar Badal Jane Wale..."

it no longer feels like a film song.

It becomes the voice of wounded affection itself.

Its quiet resignation, its dignity in heartbreak, and its refusal to descend into bitterness have always moved me deeply.

"निगाहें मिला कर बदल जाने वाले
मुझे तुझ से कोई शिकायत नहीं है
ये दुनिया बड़ी संगदिल है यहां पर
किसी को किसी से मुहब्बत नहीं है

जफ़ाओं से तूने मेरे दिल को तोड़ा
मुझे तूने ज़ालिम कहीं का न छोड़ा

हुआ मुझ को मालूम सब कुछ लुटा कर
वफ़ा की यहां कोई कीमत नहीं है
निगाहें मिला कर बदल जाने वाले
मुझे तुझ से कोई शिकायत नहीं है

न पहले से दिन है न पहली सी रातें
भुला दी वो तूने मुहब्बत की बातें
सुनाये थे तूने जो झूठे फ़साने
जरा सी भी उन में हकीक़त नहीं है
निगाहें मिला कर बदल जाने वाले
मुझे तुझ से कोई शिकायत नहीं है

करूं मैं जो फ़रियाद अपनी ज़ुबाँ से
गिरें टूट कर बिजलियाँ आसमाँ से
मैं अश्कों में सारे जहाँ को बहा दूँ
मगर मुझ को रोने की आदत नहीं है
निगाहें मिला कर बदल जाने वाले
मुझे तुझ से कोई शिकायत नहीं है
ये दुनिया बड़ी संगदिल है यहां पर
किसी को किसी से मुहब्बत नहीं है"

You may find this rather strange.

I often listen to these two songs one after the other.

First comes Saigal Sahib's "**Gham Diye Mustaqil...**"

Then Noor Jehan's "**Nigahen Mila Kar Badal Jane Wale...**"

And when the second song comes to an end, something remarkable has usually happened within me.

I rise feeling lighter. Calmer.
As though some invisible knot inside me has quietly untied itself.
As though grief has passed through me, leaving behind not despair but

renewed strength.
Perhaps this is what great music does.
It does not erase pain.
It teaches us how to carry it with grace.

"If someone were to ask me to tell the story of my life in just two lines, I would do so without a moment's thought or the slightest hesitation, I return, once again, to those two unforgettable refrains-"

"Gham diye mustaqil kitna naazuk hai dil ye naa jaana..."

And then-

"Mujhe tujh se koi shikayat nahin hai..."

Somewhere between those two songs lies an entire philosophy of life.

-The first accepts that sorrow is inevitable.

-The second forgives life for bringing it.

Perhaps that is why, after listening to them, I always find myself ready to begin again.

□□□

6

Rang Aur Aakaar

(A Celebration of Expression)

My relationship with colours and forms perhaps does not belong merely to this lifetime.

At times, it seems they had already been dwelling within me long before I became aware of myself-so long ago that memory itself cannot travel that far back. It may be no more than a fancy, yet I have always felt that it was the colours that chose me, not I who chose them.

I cannot clearly recall the first day, the first moment, when I became aware of how deeply I loved colours.

Childhood memories are usually submerged in a dim light; what remains are not so much the events themselves as their shadows. Yet I do remember this much: ever since I acquired the faintest awareness of my own existence, colours were there around me, like an intimate presence.

They were not merely colours.

Each colour possessed its own fragrance, its own temperature, its own silence.

Whenever I remembered them, their scents returned with them. Powder colours, poster colours, oil paints-or any small object associated with painting-whenever I came near them, I felt as though I had approached not something unfamiliar, but an old companion.

The faintly intoxicating smell rising from them filled me with a strange enchantment. It was as if a shuttered window somewhere within me had suddenly opened, revealing another world beyond it-a world

quieter, deeper, and somehow truer. In those moments, I experienced an inexplicable exhilaration, a surge of energy that seemed to arise from no external cause.

The curious thing is that even after all these years, that sensation remains unchanged.

I have now crossed the threshold of seventy.

Time has altered many things-the brightness of faces, the contours of memories, the pace of days-but the moment I come near colours, the same old vibration awakens within me. It is as though time itself pauses there. As though some ancient and profound conversation between colours and me continues silently even now.

□

But perhaps that was not the whole story. Or rather, to say that it was only that would not be entirely true.

The truth of what I have just said may become clearer in what follows.

My notion about a previous life may well be nothing more than my own imagination. It is possible that some impressions from an earlier existence have travelled with me into this one. Yet what of this life? Were my father and his world of colours not equally responsible for my fascination with colours, lines, forms, and images? Did genetics have no role to play? Perhaps all this came to me through inheritance. And then there is the fact that I happened to be born into a family where colours and brushes seemed almost to be waiting for me.

Whatever the explanation may be, it belongs to that mysterious, unspoken, and profoundly intricate manner in which existence works.

My father loved colours.

I have mentioned elsewhere that he used to paint the enormous backdrops for the Ramleela performances in Bankhedi. Those curtains were not merely stage decorations; they seemed to breathe with the collective memory of a people. At home, too, he painted small and

large pictures using powdered pigments-gods and goddesses, mountains, rivers, trees, twilight landscapes. It was as though the outer world gradually entered him and emerged again as colour.

Perhaps that is why colours never seemed like something external to me.

I became acquainted with them even before I became acquainted with letters.

I still remember those broad earthen bowls that resembled large lamps; the colours dissolving inside them; the smell of glue; the powdered pigments slowly opening themselves in water; the making of wooden frames; the stretching of thick cloth across them and fastening it with tiny nails; then preparing the first coating of chalk and glue and spreading it across the canvas.

I could watch all this for hours without speaking.

At times it felt as though another invisible painting was being created within me even before the visible one appeared on the canvas.

Whenever my father painted, a peculiar concentration descended upon his face. It was as though he was looking not at the canvas before him, but somewhere else entirely. Several of his paintings remain preserved in my memory with remarkable clarity, like a familiar fragrance lingering in clothes stored for years in an old trunk.

One of them was a painting of Lord Shiva in deep meditation.

Even today I remember it with almost the same clarity with which a forgotten scene may suddenly return as light behind closed eyes on an evening.

The painting was about three feet wide and five feet high and belonged to the Ramleela Committee of Bankhedi. My father was not merely a member of that committee; he was among the few people upon whom the entire event depended. By then he had been living in Jabalpur for many years, yet his ties with Bankhedi had never truly broken. Every year during Navratri he would return there. His factory job allowed

little leave, yet he somehow managed to go for two or three days, usually around the ninth day, when preparations for the Dussehra procession reached their peak. He especially enjoyed doing the makeup for the young men who appeared as tigers.

But that is another story.

The real story concerns that painting of Shiva.

Once my father had it brought from Bankhedi to Jabalpur. I never asked why. At that age, one observes things with wonder rather than questions them. Later, life scattered itself in such a way that many questions remained forever unasked. After college, I moved away. Cities kept changing. Even when I returned, it was more as a visitor than as someone who belonged.

By the time I retired and settled permanently in Jabalpur, my father had only ten months left to live.

In his final years, his memory had grown fragile. Speaking with him felt as though he were gradually drifting away from the world where words still carried meaning. Many of my questions disappeared silently along with him.

I no longer remember who brought the painting. Perhaps it was Shabbu Bhaiya. But instead of rolling it properly, it had been folded like a sheet of paper. Wherever the folds fell, the paint had cracked and peeled away.

I still remember that my father said nothing to Shabbu Bhaiya that day.

He simply fell silent.

At that age, I could not understand what that silence meant. Only now, looking back, can I imagine what he must have felt on seeing his work in that condition. More than anger, it must have been sorrow. Whatever purpose had prompted him to bring the painting to Jabalpur had, at that moment, become meaningless.

Later the painting was rolled up and stored away again.

Whenever the house was being cleaned, I would secretly unroll it and look at it. It was truly a beautiful work. Yet what fascinated me most were Shiva's eyes-half-open, half-immersed within themselves.

The faint whiteness visible beneath the drooping lids, the delicate eyelashes, the stillness of meditation spread across the face-even at that age I felt there was something in those eyes that I could not understand yet could not stop looking at.

Life moved on.

My job took me away from Jabalpur. Even when I returned, the house gradually became more a repository of memories than a place to live.

Like many other things, that painting too slipped behind me.

I do not know where it is now, or whether it survives at all.

Yet I often think that objects like these, even when abandoned somewhere unknown, even when lost to us or stripped of their physical existence, continue to endure upon some inner surface of memory. Time may erode many things, but it cannot entirely destroy them.

They remain there forever.

□

Now let us walk into another lane of memory.

Nagesh Painter.

His actual name was Ganesh Chitrakar-or perhaps Ganesh the Sculptor. He always used the surname Chitrakar. When I was in the second or third standard, he came to live in our lane with his family. At that time the family consisted only of him and his wife.

His wife's name was Manorama.

She was, by ordinary standards, an attractive woman. Yet her nose seemed somewhat larger than the proportions of her face. For some reason it always caught my attention. Whenever I looked at her, I

found myself imagining how her face would appear if the proportions were slightly different.

Why did I do that?

Looking back now, I think I understand.

It was probably an early manifestation of my perfectionist nature.

I have always preferred things to be exact, harmonious, and free of flaws. I expect the same of myself, and often of others as well. That particular trait has caused me more trouble than once.

At the time, I used to feel as though her nose had been created first, and the rest of her face had somehow grown around it.

But these are very old memories. Let us leave them behind and return to what I actually wish to say about Nagesh Painter.

He was an exceptionally skilled artist. Of that I never had the slightest doubt. His technical mastery was admirable.

Yet he was, in every sense, a commercial artist.

He painted shop signboards. They used to create full-colour portraits from tiny black-and-white photographs. Given a photograph-or sometimes merely a verbal description-they could reproduce it faithfully as a large painting. They also painted the advertising slides shown in cinema halls. In other words, by the standards of that time, they embodied almost the entire spectrum of commercial art.

I consider it not only necessary but also my duty to mention them in this narrative.

It was from them that I learned many of the essential techniques of commercial art.

Whenever they were at work, I would sit for hours watching them. Often, they themselves would ask me to observe carefully and would explain what they were doing. Not frequently, but every now and then, they would hand me a brush and ask me to try my hand at the work.

It was from them that I learned the method of enlarging an image accurately by drawing a grid over the original picture and then creating a proportionately larger grid on the canvas before sketching the image.

If I were to begin listing everything, I learned from them, the list would become endless, and this chapter would start resembling a textbook on painting. Yet it is important to mention some of the principal lessons they taught me.

For instance, the first oil-paint tubes I ever saw were in their studio.

The science of colour-hue, tint, shade, tone, the colour wheel, primary and secondary colours, and so on-I studied and understood much later on my own. Yet it was with them that I truly learned to recognize and understand colours. I learned how to mix different colours to create new ones, and how to achieve precisely the tint, tone, or shade required. Watching them work, I gradually absorbed the art of handling a brush as well.

(A small incident comes to mind.

My third guru in the world of colours and art was Shri Kamatasagar. He taught me art at the school level and was the art teacher at Model High School. Even outside regular classes, he was always teaching me something. I shall speak about him in greater detail later. For now, the incident.

Once, representing Model High School, I participated in a painting competition organized by the Y.W.C.A. (Young Women's Christian Association, Jabalpur). I must have been in the tenth grade at the time. I won the second prize.

Kamatasagar Sir was deeply displeased by this result.

Before that, I had consistently won first prizes in competitions. Since no theme had been assigned in this particular competition, all participants in my group were free to paint whatever they wished. I spent far too much time deciding what to paint. Even after deciding, I changed my concept two or three times midway through. Consequently, the painting became heavily overworked.

The first prize went to an eleventh-grade girl from St. Aloysius School. I caught only a distant glimpse of her painting while she was receiving the award. I remember that she had used vivid orange and cobalt blue colours-nothing more. Meanwhile, my colours had become increasingly muddy through repeated mixing. Altogether, the painting had turned out rather awkward and ungainly.

After the competition, all the students and Kamatasagar Sir were walking back from the Y.W.C.A. Club on the Sadar–Gora Bazaar Road. My father was with us as well. It was a Sunday, a holiday. Along the way, Kamatasagar Sir scolded me quite severely. My father listened quietly. There was nothing he ought to have said, and he wisely remained silent.

Among the many things Sir told me that day, one lesson was about choosing a subject carefully. Another was that it is not necessary to use every colour in the paint box in a single painting. Most importantly, one must avoid overworking a picture.

Then, at the very end, he said:

'They gave you this second prize only because you have learned to handle a brush well. Otherwise, your painting was not worth two pennies.'

I recount this incident to illustrate how important brushwork is, and also because of the valuable lesson he taught me while scolding me on that walk.

As I write this, I find myself becoming a little emotional. A teacher may be angry with you, may scold you, rebuke you, even punish you-but it is always for your own good. It is always meant to teach you something.)

Nagesh Painter had changed his name from Ganesh to Nagesh so that his commercial art activities would not be associated with his government job. He worked as an Assistant Draftsman at the Gun Carriage Factory. He was originally from Damoh, a district near Jabalpur. His wife, Manorama, as I recall, was from Khandwa district.

He had three younger brothers-Govind, Lalji, and Ashok. Their mother had passed away, but their father was alive. The brothers and their father frequently came to stay with him in Jabalpur. On one occasion, Ashok and Lalji remained there for quite a long time while

Ashok underwent treatment for a stomach ailment. During that period, I became quite close friends with both of them. After a few months, however, they returned to Damoh.

□

Once, in my presence, Nagesh Painter's father made a remarkably beautiful clay idol of Lord Ganesha. I learned a great deal from that experience as well.

He began by shaping a thick oval slab of smooth clay, about an inch and a half thick, eight or ten inches long, and roughly six to six and a half inches wide. Then, using nothing more than a kitchen knife, he carved away the clay and gradually brought forth the image of Ganesha in relief. Finally, dipping his fingers in water, he gave the sculpture its finishing touches. I remember him using a kitchen spoon as well.

While working, he told me that back in Damoh he possessed many different types and sizes of carving tools, with which he could create sculptures more quickly and beautifully. What he demonstrated that day was merely the simplest method.

Watching such an easy technique, I felt inspired to make sculptures myself. Yet the most difficult part was preparing the fine clay required for the work. At that stage of my life, balancing such an endeavour alongside my studies was not easy.

Besides, my interests were always inclined more toward two-dimensional creation than three-dimensional forms.

Have you ever noticed that in two-dimensional art, the third dimension is only suggested upon a flat surface? It is, in essence, an illusion. Through the interplay of light and shadow-through careful control of hue, tone, shade, and colour-the artist creates the impression of depth. In representational painting, one must employ the laws of nature almost as rigorously as mathematical principles.

I am speaking here of pure fine art. In abstract art and many other artistic traditions, whether such rules are followed or ignored remains entirely at the artist's discretion.

□

Yet another truth is equally undeniable: in moments of creation, no rule remains final.

There is neither the rigid insistence of discipline nor the guilt of disobedience.

What unfolds is a secret equilibrium, formed slowly between your will and your imagination-like a gentle breeze settling upon the surface of a quiet lake without the slightest sound.

And the reward of that entire process lies nowhere outside you.

It returns instead to your own inner being-as a deeply private joy, as a kind of fulfilment that words can never fully touch.

Perhaps this is because, while creating, a human being is no longer entirely alone.

Something else awakens within.

A presence ancient beyond measure, radiant beyond description.

You may call it God, or the First Creator who once fashioned this entire universe as though from a dream.

There are rare moments when that presence chooses you-

as a medium,

as a quietly flowing river,

through which something seeks to pass from darkness into light.

□

Once, Nagesh Painter received a commission to create a large painting depicting the Battle of Kurukshetra from the Mahabharata. The scene

showed Arjuna standing upon his chariot in the midst of battle, while Lord Krishna, serving as his charioteer, held the reins that guided the powerful horses yoked to the chariot.

It was an enormous work-perhaps six or seven feet wide and four feet high.

At that time, Nagesh's younger brother Govind was staying with him. Govind was two or three years younger than Nagesh and, I suppose, fifteen or sixteen years older than me. He, too, was a remarkably skilled artist.

One day I saw Govind sketching the composition in pencil. As was my habit, I drifted over to their house. By then, Govind and I had become quite familiar with one another. The original reference picture was clipped to the canvas near the top, and Govind was reproducing it from there.

To my surprise, he invited me to join him.

He handed me another pencil and asked me to begin.

At first, I hesitated. The scale of the canvas intimidated me. But eventually I agreed.

Govind asked me to draw the banner at the upper left of Arjuna's chariot-the very banner upon which, according to the Mahabharata, Lord Hanuman was enthroned. At that age I knew nothing of its significance. Today, when I think back upon it, I sometimes feel that Hanuman had already taken my hand in childhood long before I became aware of it.

It was the first time I had worked on such a large canvas.

Gradually, my fear disappeared.

Along with the banner, I went on to sketch the canopy above the chariot and the pillars that supported it. Govind allowed me to continue. While working on his own portion of the drawing, he kept an eye on mine as well. Whenever he felt a correction was needed, he

would stop me, either making the adjustment himself or asking me to do it.

Before leaving for the factory each morning, Nagesh Painter would give instructions to Govind. At night, the two brothers would continue working on the painting together. I could not visit them in the evenings, but during the day I went whenever I found the opportunity.

At Govind's direction, I also helped lay in some of the first coat of colour. He would mix the paints and then tell me exactly where to apply the flat base colours. In this way, I painted portions of Arjuna's banner, his arms, parts of the sky, and sections of the chariot.

Later, Govind added the clouds to the sky, the intricate ornamental carvings on the chariot, and all the subtleties of light and shadow.

Within about a week, the painting was finished.

And then it departed for whatever place it had been commissioned for.

□

After all these years, where might that painting be now?

The thought brings with it a strange sadness.

Who knows? Perhaps it still hangs upon some forgotten wall, quietly breathing beneath layers of dust and neglect. Or perhaps it lies abandoned in a dark corner, slowly surrendering its colours to time.

It is equally possible that it no longer exists at all-that the merciless fingers of time have erased it without leaving a trace.

I have no way of knowing.

But memories...

Memories are perhaps more enduring than the objects themselves.

The recollections attached to that painting remain alive within me even today, like the lingering golden glow of a melancholy evening that stays in one's eyes long after night has fallen.

Hidden within those memories are tiny threads of meaning-so subtle, so ordinary, that at the time their significance escaped me entirely. Yet now it seems that the most appropriate directions in life are often shaped by such inconspicuous signs.

Even today, in moments of weariness, those threads sometimes take hold of my hand. They guide me. And at times it truly feels as though they have carried me away to distant and peaceful valleys where memory, compassion, and a deep human serenity dwell together.

□

Meanwhile, a new member arrived in Nagesh Painter's family.

A son was born.

I believe his name was Rajesh, though I can no longer say with certainty. At home, however, everyone called him Raju.

It is rather amusing to think about now. For such a long time I had been going to their house-or perhaps "going" is not even the right word. Whenever I happened to see them painting, I would simply wander in and remain there for hours, silently watching them work until either they finished or someone from my own home came to summon me back.

Yet during all that time I had never settled upon any proper form of address for them.

I would simply ask questions without using a name or title.

"What is this colour called?"

"Which colours did you mix to make this one?"

Sometimes, if something seemed lacking to me, I would say so. In response, they would either agree or explain their reasoning. In this way, an unspoken understanding developed between us.

After Raju was born and everyone began calling him by that name, I devised a rather foolish solution to my dilemma.

I began addressing Nagesh Painter as "Raju's Father."

Today the memory fills me with equal measures of amusement, embarrassment, and wonder.

Those were innocent and somewhat naïve times.

At home, whenever anyone spoke of him, my mother, father, and aunt-and even our neighbours-simply called him "Ganesh." The elders addressed him that way directly as well. But I could never bring myself to call him "Ganesh" to his face.

So, I had long relied on the safest method of all: speaking without any form of address whatsoever.

Then, after Raju's birth, my youthful ingenuity produced what now seems an absurd solution. I began calling him "Raju's Father."

Whether he ever noticed this peculiarity or not, I never discovered. Nor does memory offer the slightest clue.

One thing I do remember clearly, however, is that from the very beginning he called me ‘Munna’-just as my aunt did, and as Meera Bhabhi, who lived in the house opposite ours, and her husband Manik Rao Bhaiya did as well.

□

Once, Nagesh Painter received an order to prepare two large sheets for a seminar. On drawing paper, he was required to write a series of points, rules, or instructions-whatever they may have been. Each sheet needed a decorative border and a title at the top. Everything was to be written in Hindi, using the Devanagari script.

The work had to be completed quickly. The seminar-or whatever event it was-was scheduled for a Monday. Nagesh thought he would finish the job on Sunday and deliver it by evening.

(This was long before the age of flex printing. Having a single sheet printed at a press would have been prohibitively expensive. Most likely, the organizers decided it would be more practical to have a painter prepare the sheets by hand.)

He must have begun working early on Sunday morning, because when I reached his house around noon, he had already completed nearly three-quarters of the first sheet. The border was finished, and he was busy lettering the text. Each letter was painstakingly painted with a fine brush. Only after completing an entire word would, he draw the headline above it. The work progressed slowly, but with extraordinary care and concentration.

To enhance the beauty of the sheet, he was using different watercolours. Two or three lines would be written in one colour, the next few lines in another.

At that time, his wife's elder sister was visiting. She resembled her younger sister quite closely, though she was somewhat heavier and her complexion slightly darker. If memory serves me right, her name was Maya.

Nagesh Painter owned several small porcelain bowls. Maya would prepare a fresh colour in one bowl and hand it to him. By the time he had written two or three lines with that colour, she would have another shade ready. She would take away the used bowl and replace it with the new one. Thus, the work continued.

For quite some time, I had secretly wished to mix colours of my own choosing and hand them to him. Yet I was too shy to do so. I sat quietly and watched.

Then something happened that was utterly unexpected-and wholly unwelcome.

Maya took the bowl of used colour from his hand and simultaneously offered him a fresh one. Everything was perfectly normal until she drew back her left hand, still holding the old bowl. A few drops of colour remaining in it spilled out and fell across the nearly completed sheet.

The result was a diagonal streak of deep red droplets stretching nearly a foot across the surface.

Time-which until then had seemed to be moving all too quickly-suddenly stopped.

A stunned silence filled the room.

The two of them stared at one another with wide eyes, filled with disbelief, fear, and dismay. I, the third witness present, looked alternately at them and at the crimson trail of droplets running across the sheet.

What exactly I felt at that moment I no longer remember. But I do recall my mind racing, desperately searching for some way to repair the damage.

We all knew it was impossible.

Even if some form of correction could be attempted, it would never be acceptable to the people who had commissioned the work.

For several painfully long moments, time remained suspended.

But time cannot remain still forever.

Eventually it resumed its course.

A brief conversation followed between them-a mixture of irritation, regret, embarrassment, consideration, restraint, and frustration. Maya, on the verge of tears, quietly left the room.

Nagesh Painter continued staring at the sheet upon which, quite literally, colour had been poured over all his hard work.

"How am I ever going to finish this now?" he murmured. "More than half the day is already gone."

By then, an idea had occurred to me.

"Why don't you write with a bharru pen?" I suggested.

(*Bharru*-also known in some places as *baru* or *bansiya grass*-is a wild reed-like grass that grows in fields, open grounds, and damp areas. Its dried hollow stalk can be cut diagonally and fashioned into a traditional writing pen. Such pens were once commonly used with ink and are still favoured by some calligraphers today.)

"Bharru pen? What's that?" he asked.

"I'll bring one."

I ran home and returned with one of my father's reed pens. I soaked it briefly in water to soften it slightly, thinned the colour with a little water, and then demonstrated its use on a spare sheet of paper by writing a few letters and words.

Compared with the brush, the reed pen was remarkably fast.

For several moments, he stood watching the pen, my writing, and me with complete fascination.

Then he took the pen from my hand and examined it carefully, turning it over again and again. Finally, he tried writing with it himself.

He was satisfied.

He looked at me and smiled.

Then he quietly removed the spoiled sheet and laid out a fresh one.

I did not stay any longer.

I simply returned home.

□

A deep and tranquil satisfaction settled within me that day-a satisfaction born not of achievement, but of affection and belonging.

On another occasion, I had watched him making election posters. He was writing large letters using a mixture of indigo, red ochre, and glue. Each word was beautifully formed, but the process was painfully slow. His hands possessed patience; his tools seemed to restrain his speed.

I watched silently for a while.

Then a small spark of inspiration flashed within me.

I had often seen my father write, and I myself had painted lettering on walls. Taking one of Nagesh's old brushes, I trimmed the bristles into a nib-like shape resembling that of a reed pen.

"Try writing with this," I suggested.

He did.

The letters emerged just as beautiful as before-steady, graceful, and alive. But now they appeared with a newfound speed, as though the words themselves had suddenly grown wings.

The delight that lit up his face remains bright in my memory even today.

Perhaps it was a very small thing.

Yet at that moment I felt I had finally given something back to him.

Very little.

Only a very little.

Looking back now, it seems to me that it was perhaps my own silent offering of *guru-dakshina*.

And yet, it is equally true that compared to all that I learned merely by watching him work, my small contribution was no more than a line drawn upon sand.

Still...

There are moments in life whose worth is measured not by their size, but by the love hidden within them.

And that moment remains such a lamp in my memory-small, steady, and still unextinguished.

□

When Nagesh Painter first arrived in our neighbourhood, he lived in the third house of a row of four houses facing our home. The first three stood parallel to the lane, while the fourth was built behind the third.

All four belonged to Kasturi Bai Srivastava, whom everyone called *Masterni* because she was a schoolteacher. Her husband, Sundarlal Srivastava, was also a headmaster. At that time, however, both were posted in Balaghat. They had once lived in Jabalpur, though that was before I was born. After retirement, they returned to Jabalpur and lived there for a short period before selling all four houses.

The details of how Nagesh moved from the third house into the one directly opposite ours, and how Manik Rao Bhaiya shifted into the third house, I have already recounted in detail in the chapter titled *Neighbours* in *The Beginning*.

In any case, Nagesh Painter did not remain there for very long.

While living in that house, his younger brother Govind was married. Although the wedding took place in Damoh, Govind later came to Jabalpur with his wife and lived with his elder brother. Their first son was born there. Around the same time, Nagesh's wife gave birth to their second son, who was named Kamlesh.

The small two-room house now accommodated two families.

For a while the brothers managed together, but not for long. Eventually, Govind moved away with his wife and child to another locality beyond Ghamapur.

A short while later, Nagesh Painter also shifted with his family to a lane near the Sheetla Mai Temple in a sub-neighbourhood of Ghamapur.

I must have been in the eighth or ninth standard then.

By that time, very little was said about his family at home, and I did not even know his exact address.

Still, I managed to find it.

By then, I had heard that he had taken to drinking.

His wife and children were not with him when I visited.

He was painting a large backdrop for a Ramlila committee. The cloth was so enormous that it covered almost two and a half walls of his small room, while the lower portion remained folded upon itself. He stood on a wooden stool, working high above the ground.

For some time, he did not notice me.

Then he climbed down to fetch another bowl of colour.

Our eyes met.

His beard had grown. He looked thinner than before.

The moment he saw me, he said sharply:

"What are you doing here? Go away."

There was anger in his voice, and something harsher too.

I had never heard him speak to me like that before.

By then, my visits had already become infrequent. Work had grown scarce for him. There always seemed to be tension within the household. Why he had moved into that house, I did not know.

His abrupt dismissal hurt me.

Yet I lacked the courage to ask any questions. The difference in our ages was too great.

So, I quietly turned around and went home.

I told no one.

In fact, after they had left our neighbourhood, no one seemed to mention them anymore. That realization came to me only after I had been sent away from his house so unceremoniously. But whom could I have asked?

Gradually, the incident faded from my thoughts.

Some years later I heard that, after retirement, he was living near the old motor stand, somewhere among the lanes lined with photo-framing shops. He had even helped his son Raju establish a framing business there.

Then a very long time passed.

Perhaps after my marriage, during one visit to Jabalpur, an unexpected desire arose within me to meet him again.

I inquired at nearly every photo-framing shop in the area.

No one could tell me anything about him or his son.

Since then-and even today-whenever I pass through that neighbourhood, which happens often because it lies along the busy commercial road running from Malviya Chowk through Lordganj to Bade Fuhara, Nagesh Painter invariably comes to mind.

Amidst the crowds, the noise, the glittering shopfronts, and the restless movement of the city, memory descends quietly like the fragrance of an old colour.

It feels as though our past never truly leaves us.

It hovers nearby, waiting patiently.

And the moment it senses an opening; it suddenly appears before us again.

Sometimes I think memories are much like shops.

Some close down with time.

Some change their names.

And some...

Though nowhere to be seen,

remain open within us forever.

□

Now that I myself stand upon the threshold of seventy years, a faint melancholy sometimes steals over me when I wonder where Nagesh Painter might be today.

Or perhaps even that question is futile.

Time separates some people from us so completely that they gradually cease to exist merely as individuals and become instead a dim light, a lingering fragrance, a distant voice.

Nagesh Painter has become something like that for me.

He exists somewhere amidst the streets of Ghamapur, in the faint scent of colours, in the tiny particles of dust floating through shafts of sunlight.

To this day, I never learned why he left Ghamapur.

Was it his own decision?

Or did circumstances slowly push him away?

Some questions in life remain forever unanswered, and with the passing of years, their remaining unanswered begins to seem their most natural state.

Yet one thing is certain: his memory comes to me without bitterness.

Whenever I think of him, or of the time I spent in his company, the feeling is much the same as opening a very old book that has lain undisturbed for years in a closed cupboard or trunk-a faint dampness, yellowed and stiffened pages, the sleepy stale scent of forgotten words, oneself searching through them for traces of one's own past, and the almost inaudible footsteps of time gone by.

Wherever he may be-

if existence, in some form, still remains-

may he be at peace.

May he be content.

Perhaps, somewhere in an unseen corner, he is still mixing colours, patiently, as though he never had any reason to hurry.

□

Let us pause here the story of Nagesh Painter-or, more accurately, that portion of my own story in which he was the principal character.

The truth is that much must still have been left untold. Some things I may have omitted deliberately; others have slipped away through forgetfulness. If any of them return to memory and find a suitable place in these pages, I shall certainly tell them.

□

Now let us return to those early days in my memory when I first formed a friendship with colours and brushes.

I have already described in detail the rented house in Ghamapur where we lived. Between our house and the vacant house belonging to the Dubey family next door there was a strip of open space about four feet wide. Our landlord had paved this twenty-foot-long stretch with cement and enclosed its far end with a brick wall. The entire area stood about two and a half feet above the level of the lane, as indeed did our whole house.

We called this narrow passage the *kuliya*, although no outsider ever passed through it. It belonged entirely to our household.

Along the wall of the house ran a drain covered by stone slabs that my father had placed over it. Opposite the drain was a raised strip of earth, about a foot wide and a foot and a half high, where flowerpots were arranged. At the end facing the street, my father had built a gate himself by fastening sheets of tin onto a wooden frame.

That little space was my studio.

I must have been six or seven years old when I began pursuing my passion there.

The most readily available colours were indigo, red ochre, yellow earth, lime, and chalk clay. The walls on either side of the *kuliya* served as my canvases.

Later, I acquired two old frames that had once contained landscape paintings made by my father. They had hung in our large room for years, but after their colours faded and cracks appeared across their surfaces, my father removed them and left them in the *kuliya*.

I interpreted this as his silent permission to use them.

I covered them with limewash, and they became my canvases.

I also appropriated a few of his old brushes.

Whenever my father happened to be working, I could even obtain real paints. Otherwise, my humble collection of colours was always available.

How many crooked and uneven pictures I painted upon those frames after repeatedly coating them with lime or chalk clay, only Time itself could tell.

I know only this: little by little, the shapes I drew became more graceful and proportionate. My handwriting slowly transformed into calligraphy.

Whenever I completed a picture, I would show it to my mother and father. Their praise encouraged me.

My mother would occasionally remind me, "And when will you study?"

No one ever forbade me from painting.

But my education, too, was conducted with complete discipline.

Whenever the walls of the *kuliya* filled up with drawings, I simply coated them again with lime or chalk clay. Instantly a fresh canvas appeared before me.

At that time, film posters fascinated me immensely, especially those posters that contained little more than the title of the film, the names of the actors, and other information rendered in elaborate lettering styles. The colours used in them were often the very colours I had at hand.

I copied them endlessly.

At that stage, my abilities were limited to landscapes, lettering, and simple object drawing. Yet within those boundaries I practised my art happily and contentedly.

I knew nothing of what art truly was.

I knew nothing of the vast world of painting-of the mysterious moments when artist and art become one, or when they stand apart and attempt to understand one another; whether a painting is an extension of the artist, or whether the artist is born again and again upon the expansive surface of the painting; of artistic technique, visual science, aesthetics, imagination, and reality, and the countless ways they intersect.

All those profound questions lay far beyond my understanding.

But dipping a brush into colour, shaping forms, filling them with life, and gazing at them for long stretches of time-those things gave me immense joy.

I could remain immersed in that world for hours.

Meanwhile, children my age played marbles, flew kites, played *gilli-danda*, hide-and-seek, ball games, or kabaddi.

That is why I never became proficient at such games.

If my friends insisted strongly enough, I would accompany them. I would even play for a while.

Yet none of it ever gave me the happiness I found among colours and brushes.

Soon enough, I would grow restless and return to my own world.

Not always directly to painting.

Sometimes I would sit quietly in a corner of our house or on the balcony of my uncle's two-storeyed home and watch the people and vehicles passing along the street below.

At other times I would lose myself in books-not my schoolbooks, but books of my own choosing.

□

Looking back now, after so many years, I understand that this was not merely the world of a child's interests.

It was the gradual formation of a distinctive inner landscape.

Painting was not present merely as a hobby. It was emerging as the natural language of the soul.

The child knew nothing of artistic theory, technique, aesthetics, or philosophical ideas about creativity. Yet his attraction to colours and forms was instinctive, profound, and almost innate.

Creative impulses are often born at an emotional level long before they are understood intellectually.

What I see clearly now is the making of an introverted, observant, and deeply sensitive personality.

While children of the same age sought excitement and energy in the external world, his heart found its home in solitude, colours, forms, and observation.

He was more comfortable in conversation with himself than in competition or collective noise.

Without realizing it, art for him was already extending far beyond the act of drawing.

Watching people on the street for long periods, sitting silently on a balcony, reading books unrelated to school-these too were expressions of the same creative consciousness.

He was learning how to see.

He was learning to absorb the emotions, rhythms, and hidden life concealed beneath outward appearances.

This memory portrays a child who, though surrounded by people, inhabited a private inner world.

There is no complaint in it.

No rebellion.

Only a quiet return to that realm where colours, thoughts, observation, and imagination came together to shape an identity uniquely his own.

□

To some-and perhaps to you as well-these reflections may seem like self-deception or self-absorption.

Yet whenever I attempt to step outside myself and observe my own life honestly, I realise that these are merely the steps by which one comes to know oneself.

As you descend deeper into your own being, you begin to see everything that has made you the person you have become.

There is, however, one condition.

Honesty.

You must see things exactly as they are, understand them as they are, and accept them as they are.

Then this is no longer self-deception or self-admiration.

It becomes a journey toward self-awareness.

But these thoughts have perhaps grown a little too philosophical.

Let us leave them here and wander instead into another lane of memory.



It was around this same age that I entered Model High School in the sixth standard.

Beyond the boundaries of Ghamapur, an entirely new world opened before me.

Everything was new-the experience of sitting at desks, studying different subjects in different periods, new friends, a new environment, new teachers, and a timetable that governed the rhythm of each day.

From the very first week, I found myself eagerly awaiting the drawing classes.

Two periods each week were devoted to drawing.

I no longer remember on which day the first class was scheduled, but on that morning, I left home filled with excitement.

I had already heard a great deal about Kamata Sagar Sir.

Students whose elder brothers had studied under him spoke of him often. From them I learned that he was a strict teacher, but an exceptional artist. They said that once he began drawing on the blackboard with chalk, he would not lift his hand until the entire picture was complete. He always wore a white kurta-pyjama, neither full-sleeved nor half-sleeved, but ending somewhere below the elbow. He chewed betel constantly. If angered by a student, he was known to administer a thorough beating.

I had never seen him.

The second period began.

He did not come.

After ten minutes or so, our mathematics teacher, P. K. Chaudhary Sir, entered the classroom. He informed us that Kamata Sagar Sir would not be coming that day. Taking a long wooden ruler, he drew the Indian tricolour on the blackboard and instructed us to copy it into our notebooks.

"Make no noise," he said, "and no talking."

Then he left.

We bent over our drawings.

The room filled with familiar sounds-the scratching of pencils across paper, the soft movement of desks, and the occasional subdued whisper.

Yet something quite different was happening within me.

Kamata Sagar Sir was absent, but his absence felt larger than mere absence.

It felt like a long-awaited meeting that had suddenly been postponed.

Perhaps I had expected too much.

For some reason I had imagined that he would arrive and open a door into a world of art I had never seen before-that colours, lines, and forms would suddenly reveal themselves as mysteries waiting to be discovered.

But none of that happened.

The day passed like any other school day.

Then, during the next drawing period, Kamata Sagar Sir finally arrived.

His face carried no special expression-no excitement, no suggestion of anything unusual.

He drew a simple sketch on the blackboard.

So simple, in fact, that one might have wondered what there was to learn from it.

Then he instructed us to copy it and quietly seated himself at the teacher's desk, as though this were the most ordinary thing in the world.

I drew the picture, yet a faint disappointment lingered within me.

Perhaps because the miracle I had been waiting for had arrived in such an ordinary form that I failed to recognize it.

Or perhaps that is how the world of art truly opens itself-

slowly,

without proclamation,

hidden within the simplest of moments.



My relationship with Kamata Sagar Sir, however, did not remain quite so straightforward in the years that followed.

Let me tell that story now.

During my school days, I learned a great deal from him.

There was, of course, what he taught in the classroom. But the real lessons often came during those moments when, on one pretext or another, I found my way to his room.

His room occupied one corner of the Drawing Hall.

The Drawing Hall was, in fact, the school's auditorium-an exceptionally well-designed and almost grand structure by the standards of its time. The entire school had been built on a quadrangular plan. Two long single-storeyed buildings stood at right angles to one another, housing the middle and high school classrooms. Along the third side were the principal's office, administrative rooms, the chemistry laboratory, and several other rooms. The fourth side was occupied by the Drawing Hall itself.

The auditorium possessed a world of its own-a stage, green rooms, backstage galleries, and an orchestra pit in front of the stage. Kamata

Sagar Sir had transformed the green room on the right side of the stage into a small personal studio.

Whenever I entered that room, I felt as though I had stepped out of the ordinary world of school into another realm altogether-a place where colours, lines, paper, wood, scents, and imagination seemed to breathe together.

I would usually find him absorbed in some work or another.

In those days he often prepared illustrations and, occasionally, linocut printing blocks for the newspaper *Nav Bharat*. It was in that room that I first encountered the technique of linocut. It was there, too, that I first discovered oil pastels.

He had created two extraordinarily beautiful portraits of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in oil pastels. Even today I can remember the colour harmonies and the luminous quality of those works. They were not merely pictures; they seemed like living presences woven out of colour itself.

How oil pastels should be handled, how colours should be blended into one another, how one could create luminosity, depth, and the softness of human skin-these were among the many things he taught me in that little room.

I should mention here that he had earned his Fine Arts degree from Sir J. J. School of Art.

The two portraits of Nehru that I mentioned earlier-I had the good fortune of seeing portions of them while they were still in the process of creation.

To watch an artist at work is, in itself, an education.

It is not merely the hands that are working; the inner vision is taking shape as well.

Perhaps it was then that I first began to understand that paintings are not simply made-they slowly reveal themselves from within.

□

I must have been in the ninth or tenth standard when, under Kamata Sagar Sir's guidance, a series of portraits of leading literary figures was commissioned for display in the Pandit Makhanlal Chaturvedi Hall.

When those works were being created, he specifically invited me to come and observe the process.

For me, there was no question of refusing.

Akhilesh and I went there together.

The hall had recently been built on the first floor above the municipal shops near the old bus stand in Jabalpur, beside what later became the Super Market complex. Besides the auditorium, there were several government offices in the building, though I knew little about them. The hall itself had not yet been formally inaugurated.

The artists were already at work.

Large canvas boards leaned against a long wall. Several painters were present. Some sat cross-legged on the floor, deeply absorbed in their work. Others worked at easels, seated on stools or chairs. Kamata Sagar Sir himself was busy painting a portrait.

When he saw us, he seemed genuinely pleased.

He introduced me to a senior artist whom he addressed as Gulab Babu.

Gulab Babu must have been somewhere between fifty-five and sixty years old. He wore an old-fashioned pair of gold-rimmed spectacles with thick lenses.

At that moment he was painting a portrait of the poet Maithili Sharan Gupt.

The face-or rather, almost the entire portrait-was already complete.

Until then, I had never seen anything so beautiful.

It appeared astonishingly alive, as though Maithili Sharan Gupt might at any moment begin speaking, and verses from *Panchavati* would echo in my ears.

I was also filled with wonder.

How could a man who wore such thick spectacles execute work of such extraordinary delicacy?

Yet the evidence stood before me.

When we arrived, Gulab Babu was seated in a chair. He held a brush lightly between his fingers while resting the heel of his hand upon a wooden mahl-stick positioned a short distance above the canvas. The canvas itself stood on a small table against the wall. Before him lay a wooden palette crowded with colours, along with scraps of cloth, thinner, gleaming oils, and every other material needed for painting.

When Kamata Sagar Sir brought us over, Gulab Babu was completely absorbed in his work.

"Gulab Babu," Sir called.

The artist looked up.

Sir introduced me and spoke of my interest in painting.

Gulab Babu peered at me through his thick spectacles.

Then he smiled.

For an instant I caught sight of teeth that reminded me of custard-apple seeds embedded in soft pulp.

"Look carefully," he said. "A great deal can be learned simply by looking."

Nodding slightly, he returned to his work.

Then, quite unexpectedly, he stopped again and turned toward me.

"And while you're looking," he said, "imagine that I am not doing this. Imagine that you yourself are painting everything you see."

That sentence-perhaps even that entire philosophy-has remained written upon the blackboard of my mind ever since.

That day I also learned how powdered pigments could be transformed into oil paints.

□

Another incident from those years comes to mind.

It was 1969.

I remember the year precisely because it was connected with the Gandhi Birth Centenary celebrations, observed from 1968 to 1969.

I was then in the ninth standard.

A year earlier, while I was in Class Eight, a boy named Subhash Godhane had joined our school. He was placed in Section A, while I belonged to Section B.

Even so, Kamata Sagar Sir introduced us.

Subhash shared my deep interest in art.

His father, Manohar Godhane, was one of the most celebrated wood sculptors in Madhya Pradesh. He had been transferred from Bhopal to Jabalpur and was employed at the Central Jail. Whether he actually served as the jail superintendent or held some other position, I cannot now say with certainty. At the time, however, everyone referred to his residence as "The Jailer's Bungalow."

The bungalow stood near Kalu Ram Oil Mill.

There was a large open ground nearby where my friends and I often played hockey.

What is certain is that Manohar Godhane was an exceptionally gifted wood sculptor.

I had seen some of his creations with my own eyes, and Subhash had shown me photographs of several others.

Only a year earlier, he had supervised the creation of the Madhya Pradesh tableau that had appeared in the Republic Day Parade in New Delhi.

Since Subhash and I had become friends, I had begun visiting his home as well.

□

But I was speaking of the Gandhi Centenary Year.

Let me return to that.

To commemorate Gandhi's birth centenary, numerous cultural programmes were organized throughout Jabalpur district.

One of the most ambitious projects was a visual chronicle of Gandhi's entire life, rendered through a series of handmade oil paintings.

One Sunday afternoon, Subhash invited me to his house.

The Jailer's Bungalow was not far from ours.

When I arrived, an extraordinary sight awaited me in the long verandah running along the left side of the house.

Large painting boards were propped against the wall, and many artists were working simultaneously.

Several distinguished painters associated with the Jabalpur Fine Arts College were present-Hari Bhatnagar, Shrenik Jain, O. P. Pandey, Vishnu Sharma, and Manohar Godhane himself. A number of senior students from the college were assisting them.

Each artist had a small reference picture before him and was enlarging it onto a canvas measuring roughly three by four feet or even larger.

The small reference images appeared to have been created in a comic-strip style, perhaps by a single artist, to ensure visual consistency throughout the series.

The figures were outlined in bold black lines and filled with flat colours. Even where light and shadow were suggested, they were rendered through carefully bounded shapes of related hues.

The entire verandah was crowded with canvases.

The artists sat before them with palettes, tubes of paint, brushes, rags, and other materials scattered around them, utterly engrossed in their work.

Subhash and I wandered from one painting to another.

For a long time, I did nothing but watch.

I watched colours being mixed, slowly acquiring new tones upon the palette before finding their way onto the canvas through the brush.

The movements of the artists' fingers, palms, and wrists fascinated me.

It seemed as though they were not painting at all but conducting a silent symphony of colours.

The rich fragrance of oil paint drifted through the air-a fragrance that remains vivid in my memory even today.

Outside the bungalow stood great mango, neem, jamun, and tamarind trees.

It was summer.

Though the heat was intense, the dense shade softened its harshness considerably.

Yet my attention was fixed less upon the outside world than upon the paintings coming to life before me.

Even so, I still remember the blazing open ground near the oil mill.

The sun beat mercilessly upon it. The earth shimmered with heat.

And beside that burning landscape stood the Jailer's Bungalow, where the shade of the trees seemed to lie upon the scorched air like a cool healing balm.

The contrast between the blistering world outside and the cool verandah filled with colours and creativity-the fragrance of oil paints, the concentration of the artists, and the slowly emerging images of Gandhi-felt to me like something out of a dream.

After spending a long time in the verandah, Subhash led me into a large room inside the bungalow.

The moment I entered, I felt as though I had stepped into yet another world.

Large wood carvings hung upon the walls; each deeply engraved into thick wooden panels. Most depicted scenes from ancient religious narratives-battles, meditations, divine figures, and moments of mythic stillness.

The marks of the chisel seemed alive.

I stood there gazing at them.

It was my first visit to that room.

Looking back now, I suspect it must have been Manohar Godhane's studio.

At the time, however, I felt only that every object in the room concealed some mysterious story of its own.

Nothing was out of place.

Everything rested quietly where it belonged, as though it had remained there for years.

There was an old sofa set, a few chairs, towering ceilings, clerestory windows, tiled colonial roofing, and massive wooden doors.

The entire bungalow stood like a weary memory from the British era-old, yet still dignified and strong.

Tall built-in cupboards lined the walls.

Some contained books; others had wooden doors concealing their contents.

Perhaps tools lay hidden inside-those tools with which wood learns to speak.

Today I realize that I was almost hypnotized by the atmosphere.

Perhaps that is why I asked Subhash so few questions.

I simply looked.

And within me, something was slowly changing.

Subhash had begun working in wood as well. He even showed me some of his own creations. In truth, given his background, that should have surprised no one.

In the room stood a beautiful wooden desk.

Subhash told me that his father had made it himself.

Against the wall, the desk featured glass-fronted shelves. Beneath them was a broad drawer that opened with a gentle pressure from above.

Even that mechanism seemed touched by artistry-as though some objects reveal their secrets without making any noise.

Exercise books and textbooks lay upon the desk. The drawer contained paints and brushes.

It was Subhash's study table.

There were also several blank white cards and a number of the small reference pictures from the Gandhi series that had not yet been enlarged onto canvas.

Suddenly, in the stillness of that room, an impulse arose within me.

"Let's each paint one of these," I said.

Subhash looked at me.

Then, without hesitation, he agreed.

We selected two of the small reference pictures.

We took out colours and brushes and sat down at the desk.

Only moments earlier everything in that room had seemed motionless.

Now life gradually began to flow through it.

Sketches appeared upon the small white cards.

Watercolours spread across them.

And then our paintings emerged.

They were copies, certainly.

Yet they were ours.

And every painting, knowingly or unknowingly, creates a new world of its own.

□

The picture I chose depicted Bapu's Salt March to Dandi.

After we had finished our paintings, Subhash showed them to the senior artists working in the verandah. I went along with him. Naturally, everyone had a few words of encouragement to offer. Yet my memory insists that some one of them made a particular remark.

Looking at my card, he said,

"You will become a very good copy artist."

Even at that age, I understood that this was not quite a compliment in the fullest sense.

And, truthfully, I still feel the same way today.

Whatever his intention may have been, the remark did not please me. He was a highly respected artist, and I said nothing in response. Perhaps I could not have responded even if I had wished to. The emotions rising within me had not yet acquired the words necessary for their expression.

Now, after so many years, I have finally been given an opportunity to lay that memory to rest.

For whenever this page of the book of memory unexpectedly opens before me, it still causes me a faint discomfort. It leaves me with the unmistakable feeling that I was somehow underestimated.

My understanding may not equal that of a scholar, a philosopher, or a learned critic. Yet if he were to say those words to me today, my reply would perhaps be something like this:

"Sir, it is certainly not my ambition to become a copy artist or an imitator. I wish to become an original painter. But no artist arrives at originality merely through desire. One must practise. One must undergo the long discipline of riyaz.

Riyaz means regular, patient, and repeated practice undertaken for the refinement of an art. It is not simply the repetition of technique. It is an ongoing relationship with colour, line, and form; a gradual coordination of hand, eye, and mind; a process of learning through observation and of refining one's inner sensitivity through continuous work.

In simple terms, drawing again and again, watching others work attentively, practising the mixing of colours, the movement of the brush, the construction of forms, and gradually developing one's own artistic language-all these belong to the realm of riyaz.

They are steps toward a destination, steps that must be taken if one wishes to move forward.

Riyaz is a silent discipline in which the artist repeatedly returns to himself and emerges each time a little clearer, a little deeper than before.

It is not merely the training of the hand. It is the slow maturation of perception, patience, and feeling.

Through constant companionship with colour, line, and form, art eventually rises beyond skill and becomes self-expression.

Riyaz is not simply practice; it is the gradual process of becoming acquainted with the artist hidden within oneself.

It is less a matter of manual dexterity than of awakening consciousness and deepening sensitivity.

It is the path along which skill slowly transforms into self-knowledge.

Repeated practice ultimately brings a human being face to face with the deeper regions of his own being.

In riyaz, the artist does not merely create paintings; he creates himself.

With every repetition, the form becomes more refined, and the silence within grows a little more luminous.

Where I stand today is no lofty summit.

No artist ever stops learning. One continues learning until the final breath.

I am still learning.

What I have learned is infinitely smaller than what remains to be learned.

I also know that learning everything is impossible.

To arrive even at this modest point, I must have copied countless drawings and paintings, produced innumerable studies and imitations, and created works inspired by artists whose styles I admired. And that process continues even now.

To bind one's expression within rigid rules seems to me not merely inappropriate but a kind of violence against oneself.

As I remember it - that remark still feels, even today, like some very old splinter lodged silently within me, touching the innermost recesses of my being again and again simply by making its presence felt.

At the time, I could not say anything. Perhaps because what had been wounded had not yet found its way into words; it had entered me only as a quiet, wordless ache.

Looking back now, I feel that I never answered that one sentence through any act of protest or rebuttal. Instead, its answer slowly ripened within my practice, my stubborn resolve, my solitude, and in the quiet heat of my discipline.

And so, today, as I bow to him with respect, I wish to say only this: what I have written above is not the product of a passing impulse. It is the flame of that slow, undying lamp that has continued to burn within me for years - a flame in which there is experience, there is pain, and also the quiet, hard-earned light of having finally discovered my own path.

Let us bury this matter here, once and for all.

And you, too, are now its witness.

□

There is yet another debt I owe to Kamta Sagar Sir-one that can never truly be repaid. Then again, whatever one receives from a guru is precious beyond measure.

We speak of *guru-dakshina* as part of our Indian cultural inheritance. I have come to feel that, although it may appear to be an offering of gratitude from the disciple to the guru, it is, in essence, the guru's final gift to the disciple. The guru accepts the *guru-dakshina* and, by doing so, sets the disciple free. He releases him from the debt of everything he has received. Without that release, the disciple cannot truly move forward. And so, the guru accepts the *guru-dakshina* symbolically, blessing the disciple to walk on, freely, upon his own path.

But I seem to have wandered into another subject altogether. Let me return to where I was.

Kamta Sagar Sir personally took me around and introduced me to almost all the senior artists then living in Jabalpur. Among them, I must make special mention of Amrit Lal Begad.

Begad ji had received his education in art at Shantiniketan. He had also taught at the Fine Arts School in Jabalpur. Yet he was known above all for his boundless love for Mother Narmada. More than once, he had undertaken the *Narmada Parikrama* on foot, carrying his journey forward like a wandering ascetic. Along the way, he would make sketches, then continue walking, as though the river herself were

his companion and his destination. As far as I understood, he had surrendered himself-and his art-completely to Maa Reva, the Narmada.

He had mastered the art of creating collages from scraps and fragments of paper. The Narmada was the central subject of most of his collages.

The first time I met him was in 1994, when, at Kamta Sagar Sir's suggestion, I went to his home. He spoke to me with the quiet generosity of a true guru, revealing, almost casually, a great deal about his art and his way of working. He showed me the room where he worked and the collage, he was then creating. He showed me the magazines with their fine-quality paper, the scraps and cuttings from his own paintings that he used in his work. He explained, in detail, how he cut, arranged and pasted the pieces.

Sitting there, I had the strange feeling that I was in the presence of a saint engaged in *sadhana*.

During that meeting, he said something to me that I still remember:

"Look, every art is nothing but sadhana. We remain engaged in it until our last breath, always learning, always practising. No one ever becomes complete. The only complete one is the One whose creation is all of us, and this entire existence. We are all travellers upon the path of sadhana. Those who came before us are simply farther ahead on the same path; those who came later are a little behind. There is no one greater or smaller. So never let yourself be troubled by such thoughts. Just remain devoted to your work, with complete sincerity and honesty."

I had shown him some of my own sketches. He praised them but also pointed out a few finer details and suggested certain improvements. Many of those sketches were later sent by me to *Hans* and other literary magazines, where they were eventually published.

Begad ji also inaugurated my solo exhibition of paintings in Jabalpur. I shall write about my later meetings with him, and about that exhibition, in the next part of this series. I will also recount there my

meetings with the other senior artists and teachers whom Kamta Sagar Sir introduced me to.

For now, I will bring this episode to a close with a quiet bow to the memory of Amrit Lal Begad ji.

□

Now, there is another memory which shines differently among all those memories of colour.

Or perhaps it does not shine at all. Perhaps it simply continues to breathe quietly, like an object preserved in a long-closed room.

I was very young then.

So young that my understanding of colour extended little beyond lime, red ochre, chalk clay, and indigo. My father's powdered pigments belonged to a distant world. Watercolour tubes seemed almost unimaginable.

It was during those days that I first saw a watercolour box.

It sat in a small stationery shop near my maternal grandparents' house.

The shop's counter had a glass front, and among the various items displayed behind it stood that precious box, pressed against the glass.

Its lid was white.

The name of the company printed upon it has long since faded from memory.

Only one image remains.

A thin little dog, painted in deep red, sitting upright on its haunches as though listening intently to some invisible sound.

I cannot count the number of times I stood before that shop.

Never with any purpose.

Only to look at that box.

It remained behind the glass.

I remained outside.

Between us lay only a transparent distance, yet crossing it seemed as impossible as stepping into a dream.

Strangely, my desire to possess it gradually transformed into something else.

Perhaps into a fragrance.

Perhaps into waiting.

Perhaps into that particular sadness which gathers within the heart when one continues gazing at something beautiful from afar.

Looking at it, I experienced a kind of pain suffused with deep pleasure.

As though deprivation itself had become a secret possession.

In the years that followed, colours gradually entered my life.

First coloured pencils.

Then coloured chalks.

Then cakes of watercolour, tubes, bottles of poster colours, pastels, oil paints, powdered pigments, acrylics-countless colours and countless mediums.

Kamata Sagar Sir opened the door to an entirely new world of colour.

What had once been rare slowly became commonplace.

And yet, strangely enough, that first watercolour box was never lost among all the colours that followed.

It is still there.

In the same shop.

Behind the same glass.

Displayed exactly as before.

Memory has altered neither the shop nor me.

Even time has not entirely separated me from that child standing before the counter.

Sometimes it seems that the watercolour box was never merely an object.

It was the first form taken by my love for colour.

Because I never possessed it, perhaps it never grew old.

Some things end when they are attained.

Others remain with us forever precisely because they never were.

That little watercolour box is one such absent presence in my life-

like a beloved who could never be held, yet whose fragrance lingers forever in some hidden corner of memory.

And perhaps it will remain there as long as breath remains.

Who knows?

Perhaps even after breath itself has ceased.

□

By then, the story of Nagesh Painter seemed to have come to an end.

At least, that is what I believed.

But there are some names which, once they enter memory, do not depart merely because we wish them to.

They remain within us like the lingering scent of ink upon an old letter-unseen, yet never truly absent.

Among Nagesh Painter's relatives by marriage was a man named D. C. Verma.

I no longer remember the exact branch of the relationship. Perhaps he belonged to that category of senior relatives who, in Indian families, acquire titles too intricate for memory to preserve. The relationship

itself survives in recollection; the proper form of address has long since vanished.

He owned a small photographic studio about a furlong or so from our house in Western Ghamapur, on the road leading toward Sheetla Mai Temple.

I would occasionally wander in there.

Some of the pictures displayed in the glass showcase invariably held me captive.

Nagesh Painter had told me that D. C. Verma had studied Fine Arts at Sir J. J. School of Art.

At that age, the information sounded almost legendary.

I had seen some of his pencil portraits, a few ink drawings, and a picture of Nataraja Shiva whose memory still survives like a dim light in the distance.

Those works were more than demonstrations of technical skill.

They possessed a kind of restraint.

I could not understand it then.

I only felt that they belonged to another world-a world governed by secret laws of line and colour.

Those were the days of black-and-white photography.

At least in our city, colour photographs still seemed a distant possibility.

D. C. Verma would hand-colour black-and-white photographs.

Special transparent watercolours were used for the purpose. Dissolved in water, they became almost completely translucent. As their delicate layers settled upon a photograph, a faint suggestion of life seemed to awaken in the faces.

Compared to today's dazzling colour photographs, those images would undoubtedly appear pale.

Yet they possessed a curious humility.

It was as though colour wished not to proclaim itself, but merely to hint at life.

I remember D. C. Verma here for two reasons.

The first and most important is that he took my very first photograph.

I retain no memory of that day.

I must have been too young for memory to record it.

Perhaps six months old.

I am seated in the photograph, holding a toy in my hand.

That framed picture hung for years on the wall of our rented house in Ghamapur. Beside it hung a photograph of Ramesh, the son of Mannu Chacha, with me beside him. In a third frame was a photograph of my younger brother Atul.

Where those photographs are now, I do not know.

Perhaps they lie in some old trunk, some forgotten box, or some invisible fold of time itself.

Yet their absence has never erased their existence.

The second reason is a small incident which still occasionally awakens a faint ache within me.

During Dussehra, a Durga idol was installed each year in our neighbourhood.

The year this incident occurred, I was painting the enormous backdrop curtains that would stand behind and beside the idol.

The work was still unfinished when D. C. Verma arrived.

He stood silently for a while, observing.

Then he left.

About an hour and a half later, he returned carrying a small painting no larger than four inches square.

It depicted the faint glow of a rising sun behind dark silhouettes of trees.

The colours were so restrained that at first glance they seemed almost colourless.

Handing it to me, he asked that I reproduce it on the backdrop behind the idol.

Then he departed.

For a long time, I studied the little painting.

At that age, my understanding of colour was very different.

To me, festivals belonged to bright colours-reds, yellows, blues, greens.

The painting seemed sombre, subdued, almost unfinished.

Moreover, I had already completed half my own design. Erasing it and starting again was no simple matter.

I must have been in the eighth or ninth standard.

I lacked the time, the assistance, and perhaps the understanding.

I did not paint it.

Or perhaps the truth is that I could not.

Not because I lacked the ability, but because I had too many reasons not to.

Yet the fact remains that a distinguished artist considered me capable of such a task.

That trust was a gift.

And I failed to honour it.

For years, that little painting remained with me.

Along with it lingered a faint sense of guilt.

As though someone had entrusted me with a lamp, and I had lacked the courage to light it.

Today, looking back, I understand that the painting was, in its own way, more truthful than anything I might have created then.

It possessed a quiet realism, restrained and inwardly luminous.

Yet I also realise that even if I had painted it, the committee members might not have liked it.

Perhaps they would have thought I had chosen an easy path simply to avoid effort.

Who can say?

After enough time has passed, events cease to be entirely right or wrong.

They become memories.

And memories do not judge.

They simply accompany us.

Perhaps that is why, even now, the incident leaves behind a faint ache.

The ache of not fulfilling the wish of a greater artist.

And alongside it, a quiet gratitude that he considered me worthy in the first place.

In those years I undertook many tasks simply for the joy of doing them, without expecting any payment.

Whether it was a Dussehra pavilion, a Holi decoration, or some other neighbourhood event, people would come and say,

"We'll pay for the paints. You just make the pictures."

And more often than not, I could not refuse.

Perhaps because the request came from someone familiar.

Or perhaps because, at that age, I had not yet learned to draw a clear line between art and labour.

Once, Rajjan Mama took me to decorate a Holika-Dahan stage near Kamaniya Gate.

I still remember that night.

I painted until late.

Tea arrived from time to time.

That tea served both as food and as rest.

Now, when I look back, it seems to me that life never unfolded like a carefully structured narrative.

It was built instead from countless fragments-some straight, some crooked; some willingly embraced, others imposed by circumstance.

Those scattered moments slowly shaped me.

And today, when I remember those years, a quiet gratitude rises within me.

Whatever I received, however I received it, became part of what I am.

Incomplete.

Imperfect.

At places, even broken.

Yet alive.

And perhaps that is the greatest thing of all.

I did not stand at a distance and merely watch life.

I lived it as closely as I could.

Like someone holding a fruit rich with juice and determined to savour it to the final drop-

with all the sweetness and all the bitterness that memory carries within it.

□

Let us now move to another landscape altogether, far removed from this one.

To the Government Engineering College, Jabalpur, where I earned my degree in Mechanical Engineering.

In my time, the engineering curriculum lasted five years. I studied there from 1972 to 1977. Some of my most cherished memories connected with painting and art also belong to those years.

When I was in my first year, the college was celebrating its Silver Jubilee with great enthusiasm and ceremony. The atmosphere on campus was unlike anything seen during ordinary days. There were festivities everywhere-competitions, performances, gatherings, youthful energy, and a sense of excitement that seemed to animate every corner of the institution.

Among the many events was a painting competition.

I entered it.

By then, painting had ceased to be merely a hobby or an exercise for me. My relationship with colours and lines had already become deeply personal. Whenever I sat before a blank sheet, I was rarely attempting to reproduce a scene. More often, I was trying-without consciously knowing it-to give form to some feeling, some question, some half-formed thought moving quietly within me.

Something similar happened in that competition.

In the painting, I drew a snake-charmer's flute, a serpent, a winding road, and behind them laid down bold strokes of red and black.

At the time, I was not working from any fully developed philosophy. Yet when I look back now, it seems that the painting was an expression of my silent understanding of life at that age.

Even then, life did not appear to me as a straight line.

It contained attraction and fear.

Music and menace.

Direction and bewilderment.

The flute and the serpent were perhaps symbols of that duality.

The winding road represented the journey every human being must undertake-a journey whose turns can never be known in advance.

And those strokes of red and black were not merely colours.

They hinted at restlessness, struggle, passion, uncertainty, and some intense force hidden deep within.

I gave the painting the title:

When I Consider Life.

Today it seems to me that even the title was no accident.

Whenever we truly contemplate life, it never reveals itself through a single meaning. Instead, it appears as the coexistence of opposing elements.

As a riddle.

And a riddle with many possible answers.

We are compelled to choose one among them.

That, perhaps, is the hardest task of all.

Each answer possesses its own rhythm and its own discord.

Its own light and its own shadow.

Its own gleam of hope and its own deep, nameless doubt.

At that time, I chose one answer.

And perhaps that answer found its way into the painting without ever being spoken.

When that painting received the award for Best Painting, the moment was about far more than happiness.

It felt like a quiet affirmation arising from somewhere deep within.

As though the creator seated in some hidden corner of my being had, for the first time, received acknowledgement from the outer world.

A voice seemed to whisper:

You are not mistaken.

Some awards become important not because of their outward form but because they awaken a sleeping faith within us.

That award was such a moment for me.

Looking back now, I feel that the recognition was not merely for a single painting. It was perhaps an acknowledgement of the invisible journey that had been unfolding within me since childhood-a journey guided by colours, forms, and memories.

Many painters believe that they create paintings.

The truth, however, is that paintings slowly create them as well-

their vision,

their sensitivity,

and their way of seeing life.

□

When I reached my third year, one day I was summoned by N. K. Sharma Sir.

At that time, he was teaching in the Civil Engineering Department, probably as a Reader.

He had seen my painting '*When I Consider Life'*.

Two of my paintings had been exhibited during the Silver Jubilee exhibition. One had received the award.

The other was titled:

The Woman - 'Mother, Wife and Daughter'.

In that painting, too, I had worked primarily with reds and blacks.

The three aspects of womanhood were embodied within a single figure. The colour scheme moved through brilliant scarlets, deep maroons, blackened reds, and finally into pure black.

Even now, as I recall it, I feel that the combination carried a severe and almost ascetic purity. It transformed the subject from a merely visual image into something inward and deeply felt.

To be truthful, the painting could initially appear somewhat unsettling.

There was an intensity in it that refused to leave the viewer entirely at ease.

Yet that unease was softened by the gentleness of the figure, by its inner rhythm, and by the quiet tenderness of its femininity.

Gradually, what first seemed intimidating transformed itself into something else entirely-a feeling of profound serenity, fearlessness, and sacredness.

This, of course, is my interpretation today.

Naturally, one may wonder whether these meanings existed in my mind when I was actually painting it.

Perhaps they did.

But if so, they existed then in a different form-more instinctive, more immediate, less articulated.

Youth often knows its truths.

It simply lives them through feeling rather than language.

Today, after the long journey of a lifetime, those same intuitions return to me in a clearer, calmer, and more philosophical form.

At that age, my understanding of womanhood had come primarily through my mother.

Today life has allowed me to know all three forms-mother, wife, and daughter.

Yet experience has not altered the essence of what I felt then.

It has only deepened it.

I see more clearly now that the truth of womanhood cannot be confined to any single role.

It manifests through many forms while remaining, in essence, beyond them all.

She appears divided through relationships, yet remains one in her deepest nature-

pure,

luminous,

and silently sustaining the moral equilibrium of creation.

If that perception existed within me then as a simple faith, today it appears as a profound human-and almost spiritual-truth illuminated by decades of experience.

□

But I was speaking about N. K. Sharma Sir.

The conversation wandered.

You may perhaps find the digression unnecessary, though I do not.

Sharma Sir had seen both paintings and had also made inquiries about me.

He was either the chairman or the chief coordinator of the Annual Festival Committee that year. I no longer remember exactly which.

He told me that he wished to organize a solo exhibition of my paintings as part of the annual festival.

For me, it was a tremendous opportunity.

How could I refuse?

I had enough paintings.

Almost all of them were watercolours on paper and none had been framed.

"That doesn't matter," he said. "We'll pin them up."

A large hall in the Administrative Building was chosen for the exhibition.

Exactly how Sharma Sir arranged everything, I do not know.

At the time, my attention was occupied elsewhere-with my paintings, with the students and visitors who came to see them, with my curiosity about their reactions, and with the mixture of excitement and apprehension rising within me.

What I can say is that everything was organised beautifully.

So carefully.

So thoughtfully.

So warmly.

Not for a moment did I feel that anything was lacking.

Indeed, it seemed to me that the exhibition had been realised almost as perfectly as it could have been.

Large display panels had been erected across the hall, leaving roughly one-third of its length open at the rear. Against a background of deep khaki paper, my paintings were neatly mounted with drawing pins.

The arrangement was so balanced and elegant that every work emerged with its own distinct presence.

As I entered the hall, I could scarcely believe these were the same paintings that had lived for so long in my room, on my table, and in my solitude.

There they stood transformed.

No longer companions of a private world, they had become participants in a public conversation.

Among all the works, the one Sharma Sir loved most depicted a young Rajasthani woman.

The composition was simple and restrained.

She sat against a desert landscape, her eyes fixed upon some distant point, as though waiting for someone.

The colour scheme was built from glowing yellows, oranges, ochres, and earth tones. It conveyed both heat and an unspoken tenderness.

Upon her forehead I had placed a large, brilliant red bindi.

That became the focal point of the entire painting.

It was Sharma Sir who gave the work its title:

"The Red Bindi."

He placed it at the very beginning of the exhibition, and perhaps it was from that painting that the visual tone of the entire display took shape.

□

If I were to tell the story of what became of most of the paintings in that exhibition, an old sadness would descend upon me.

Some losses are best left untouched.

To describe them is to relive them.

It is kinder to let them remain buried beneath the dust of time.

Yet memory is not made only of sorrow.

There are also small bright things that survive, reminding us that time, however much it may take away, cannot destroy everything.

The Red Bindi was one of those survivors.

Along with three or four other paintings, it found its way back to me many years later.

Its condition was poor.

The corners were torn.

The edges damaged.

The paper had grown tired.

Time had left unmistakable marks upon it.

Yet as I looked at it, I realised that destruction does not merely destroy.

Sometimes what is broken comes closer to us and becomes more beloved.

I left the torn edges exactly as they were.

Just as deep wounds leave scars upon the body, reminding us of pain we should never entirely forget.

Life, too, never completely erases the marks of its injuries.

Those wounds continue to ache throughout our years, reminding us of mistakes made knowingly and unknowingly.

I simply flattened the painting carefully, mounted it onto fresh paper, and restored it as best I could.

Perhaps it was not merely the preservation of a painting.

Perhaps it was an attempt to comfort and heal some forgotten part of myself.

Today that painting remains with me-not as an object, but as a luminous and deeply cherished memory.

Whenever I look at it, I am reminded that the true home of art is not upon walls.

It resides in memory.

In the meanings that remain alive within human beings.

When I look at *The Red Bindi* now, I do not merely see an old painting.

I see a quiet and radiant fragment of my own past.

Again and again, it reminds me that we never entirely escape the forms we create.

Those forms return to us endlessly, like shapeshifters wearing slightly altered faces.

They remind us of who we once were.

And when necessary, they lean close and whisper forgotten stories into our ears.

Perhaps this is the deepest meaning of art:
that it flows both against the current of time and alongside it-
resisting it gently,
accepting it humbly,
and travelling with it all the same.

□□□

7

Jhil Mil Sitaaron Ka Aangan

(Dreams, Stars, and Unspoken Compulsions)

"One must keep the promises one makes..."

जो वादा किया वो निभाना पड़ेगा. . . .

True enough.

But no promise had ever been spoken between them.

...And yet, a promise was broken.

"There will be a courtyard shimmering with stars..."

झिल मिल सितारों का आँगन होगा. . . .

That song...

...was never sung together by two loving hearts.

And yet, each of them had silently believed it.

Deep within, in the hidden chambers of their own hearts, they had both felt the same unspoken certainty:

Yes... there would be a courtyard sparkling beneath a million stars; there would be monsoon showers falling in gentle rhythms;

झिल मिल सितारों का आँगन होगा
और रिम झिम बरसता सावन भी होगा

and life itself would become that

beautiful dream they had never dared to utter.

A little home would rise in the lane of love.
If flowers were denied to them, they would adorn it with thorns instead.
Even that wilderness would be lovelier than the finest garden.
The rains would still arrive, soft and musical...
and above them, the stars would continue to shimmer.

ऐसा सुंदर सपना अपना जीवन होगा
झिलमिल सितारों का आँगन होगा ...

प्रेम की गली में एक छोटा सा घर बनाएंगे
कलियाँ ना मिले ना सही काँटों से सजाएंगे
बगिया से सुंदर वो वन होगा
रिमझिम बरसता सावन होगा

There was a girl, barely thirteen or fourteen.

There was a boy, perhaps a year or so older than she was.

Days slipped into weeks, weeks into months, and months quietly dissolved into years.

Along that brief stretch of life's journey, they kept walking-never hand in hand, but always in each other's presence. They never reached for one another, never clasped hands, never pledged themselves with words. Yet, in the silence between them, something invisible continued to grow.

A bond.

A relationship.

Quietly.

Tenderly.

Almost unnoticed.

Like a seed taking root beneath the earth before anyone realizes that a tree has already begun to grow.

Everything I have narrated so far did indeed happen-but only upon that hidden terrain of the heart, on that invisible layer of existence which no eye can ever behold. None of it unfolded as outward events do.

What actually transpired around that quietly blossoming relationship-what people could see, what they could hear-I shall recount too, but at the proper moment.

For now, let me tell you the story of one afternoon.

An afternoon so deeply etched into my memory that, even today, whenever it returns-and it does, almost every day-I find myself wishing that the day might somehow have passed without a noon at all. If only that ill-fated, accursed afternoon had never arrived.

But destiny never strays from the script that Nature has already written. Not by the smallest fraction. Whatever it has resolved must come to pass; and somehow, by one means or another, it compels you to become its instrument.

By then, the boy and the girl had grown into a young man and a young woman.

And what happened on that dark, ill-starred afternoon was something that, I often feel, even God Himself would never have wished to happen. Sometimes it seems to me that no one is more helpless than God. Even He cannot go back on the covenant He has made with Nature. Nature performs its work with absolute fidelity and impeccable honesty. Not even God, perhaps, can intervene in its unfolding.

What tempest descended upon the young man's soul, no one knows. A storm rose within him that laid everything to waste.

No-that is not entirely true.

Nothing was destroyed by fate.

It was the young man himself who devastated that little woodland-the one that had once promised to be more beautiful than any garden.

Whether his reason abandoned him, or whether some unseen weight fell upon his mind and clouded his judgment, no one can say. Not even he, after all these years, has been able to understand what truly overtook him that afternoon.

Was it enchantment?

Some dark spell?

Sorcery?

The workings of an unseen force?

Whatever it was, as long as its shadow lingered over him, he remained incapable of seeing what he had done-not merely to himself, but to the one who, in complete silence, hidden from the world, hidden from him, and hidden even from herself, had softly hummed within her heart:

"In the lane of love, we shall build a little home..."

The melody, the words, and every tender meaning they carried continued to echo in some quiet chamber of the young woman's heart.

The young man could never hear that song.

Yet he felt it.

Not the sound of those pearl-like words, but their silent vibrations reached the deepest recesses of his own heart.

And yet, despite all this, some haunted spirit, some dark and possessive shadow, seemed to take hold of his heart and mind. On that unfortunate afternoon, instead of plainly confessing his love-the love that the young woman was perhaps waiting with all the longing of her soul to hear-he did something unimaginable.

He announced his retreat.

He declared that he was stepping away.

Worse still, with complete conviction, he laid out the reasons for his withdrawal, defended them passionately, and even succeeded in convincing himself that he was right.

A few weeks-or perhaps a few months-later, when that sinister shadow had finally accomplished its purpose and departed, leaving him to himself once again, the young man awoke to the terrible truth of what he had done.

Only then did he understand the meaning of the young woman's soundless weeping that afternoon.

Only then did he begin to feel, deep within the left side of his own chest where his heart still beat, the lingering dampness of those unending tears that had flowed without a single sob.

The young man regarded everything he had said and done that afternoon as the greatest mistake of his life. He was consumed by remorse and overwhelmed with shame.

With all the earnestness his heart could summon, he tried to reassure the young woman.

"Ask of me any promise you wish. Bind me with any oath you choose. Let this fool-this utter fool-for whom no punishment is too great, earn your forgiveness. I long for only one thing: that, somewhere in the deepest chambers of your heart, the melody of 'There will be a courtyard shimmering with stars...' may begin to echo once again."

But the monsoon clouds had already emptied themselves through the young woman's eyes. The garden of her heart had withered into an arid wasteland.

A promise that had never once been spoken aloud had nevertheless been trampled underfoot with astonishing cruelty.

From the courtyard of raw clay that was once her heart, she swept away every fragment of those unspoken dreams, every scrap of those silent conversations, and in their place laid cold slabs of stone.

Her heart had grown weary-not only of that unfortunate, faithless young man, but perhaps of the very word *love* itself.

Why would she ever choose to walk again upon a path where all she had found was humiliation, heartbreak, and the quiet burden of shame?



Perhaps I have never told you this before.

The brief story of this young man and this young woman unfolded, for the greater part, far from the gaze of the world. It existed almost entirely upon the hidden landscapes of their hearts.

Nothing was ever spoken of openly.

Nothing took visible form.

Whatever passed over the tender ground of the young woman's heart-whatever colour it took, whatever shape or form it assumed before her inner eye - was witnessed by no one except herself... and perhaps God.

The young man had nothing but her eyes to look into. In their quiet depths, and in all that their silence seemed at once to reveal and conceal, he tried to discern what was stirring within him. Whatever he glimpsed there, he took as t he reflection of what was quietly unfolding within his own heart. He believed it to be another expression of the same shared love.

Its colours were different.

Its language was different.

Yet the soul that breathed within it was one and the same.

Even so, there were events that unfolded upon the surface of this silent ocean.

I shall show you a few of those moments.

I shall tell you the small stories that belong to them-stories that no one has ever heard, no one has ever witnessed...

Perhaps not even the God who sits above the heavens.

For if He had truly seen them, how could He have treated two innocent hearts so mercilessly?

□

Now let us leave all that, for the moment, exactly where it belongs.

Let us speak of something else.

Perhaps I owe you an explanation.

Perhaps I am merely trying to explain it to myself.

In certain stories, the most essential chapters never come into existence at all.

They are not found at the beginning.

They never appear unexpectedly at some turning in the story.

Nor do they reveal themselves when the story approaches its end.

They are written nowhere.

And yet the entire narrative revolves around them in a silent orbit.

As one turns the pages of this book, an inexplicable rustle seems to linger in the air-as though someone had just passed across the page, only to halt after a few hesitant steps and quietly turn back.

There are moments that stop just before they arrive.

There are relationships that gather themselves into being, only to withdraw their own shadows a heartbeat before they can truly exist.

Some dreams never descend into our eyes. Instead, they remain forever as the moisture that gathers within them.

A story never speaks of such dreams directly, yet behind every word it utters, their silent presence continues to be felt.

Perhaps every great story conceals another story within it-a story that was never written, never spoken, never even allowed to happen. And

yet it is the shadow of that unwritten, unlived story that gives birth to the meaning of every page that does exist. What lies before us may not be nearly as important as what forever remained beyond our sight.

There are times when it seems to me that stories are shaped less by what actually happens than by what never comes to pass. The roads no one ever walked often leave marks upon our memory as deep as those travelled over an entire lifetime. Perhaps that is why certain unfulfilled possibilities, certain events that never took place, continue to inhabit our souls far longer than those that truly happened.

In the end, what remains is not the story itself. What lingers is its faint fragrance; a light that has long since gone out but somehow still glows; a silent expectancy that refuses to fade. Only then do we realize that the entire tale was, in truth, the search for a single story that was never granted permission to become complete.

Sometimes an even stranger thought overtakes me-that the very axis around which the entire narrative appears to revolve had disappeared long before it could ever come into being. Perhaps it was never meant to be fulfilled. Perhaps it was only a possibility-a dream that dissolved into a quiet mist before it could ever arrive at its own fulfilment.

And yet the story never abandons its course.

Time continues to flow in its unbroken rhythm.

Events arrive one by one, play out their allotted parts, and quietly recede into the past.

People meet.

They part.

They fall in love.

They nurture grievances.

They carry upon their faces the sunlight and shadows of passing years and move on.

Outwardly, everything unfolds exactly as it does in every story ever told.

But deep within-far beneath its visible surface-there remains an empty space, breathing patiently all the while.

That emptiness does not arrive like a calamity.

It seems to have been there from the very beginning.

No one ever sees it, and yet every relationship unknowingly measures its own distance around it. Beneath every happiness lies a delicate sediment of sorrow; within every separation flickers the recognition of something infinitely older. It begins to feel as though every presence is merely the margin surrounding a single, immeasurable absence.

The strangest thing is that absence itself can sometimes become a living presence.

It does not speak, yet its voice can be heard within every silence.

It cannot be seen, yet its shadow lingers behind every scene.

It never enters the story as one of its characters, yet every character lives beneath its invisible dominion.

Its silent presence grows so profound that even those who stand before us begin, at times, to resemble shadows themselves.

Perhaps that is why the true centre of certain stories is never what actually happened, but what could never happen at all.

What is attained eventually settles into memory.

But what remains forever unfinished continues to preserve its heartbeat within us for a lifetime.

Its ache does not diminish with the passing years.

Instead, it becomes ever more delicate.

Ever more intimate.

Ever deeper.

Until, one day, we discover that the unfinished story has outlived every story that was ever completed.

Then it begins to seem that the entire story has, in truth, been nothing more than the search for that lost axis-the one that Nature may well have brought into being but never granted the grace of fulfilment. Everything else-events, relationships, smiles, partings, even the story itself-is merely an orbit around that nameless, unfulfilled, unattainable centre.

Perhaps my own life, too, was touched by such a bond-or perhaps even the word *relationship* does it an injustice.

It passed through the courtyard of my life like a shadow: at times as a longing, at times as a half-remembered dream, and at times as a silent presence whose absence was always more palpable than its presence.

At the time, it was impossible to give it a name.

Some relationships lose the very freedom of their flight the moment they are named.

Perhaps this was one of them.

Whatever existed between us belonged to a realm that precedes language-a place where silence speaks more eloquently than introductions and waiting possesses greater certainty than assurance itself.

It was never merely a dream.

It breathed with the warmth of reality.

Within it pulsed the living possibility of a shared future.

And for as long as existence itself could sustain that possibility, it did.

Then, at some forgotten bend in the road, life quietly set fire to the settlement it had so patiently built with its own hands.

For a long time afterward, the smoke continued to rise.

Yet no one could ever tell which house had burned first, or who had witnessed the first spark.

Some catastrophes have no culprit.

They simply gather in the hidden folds of time until, one day, they unfold before our very eyes.

By the time we begin to understand what has happened, so much has already turned to ash.

And then we find ourselves gazing for a long while at the small warmth of ash still resting in our own palms, as though somewhere within it the final trace of a vanished light might yet remain.

When I look back now, it sometimes seems to me that the greatest tragedy is not the breaking of a relationship.

The greater tragedy is that we hear the sound of its breaking far too late.

By the time that sound finally reaches the depths of our being, we have already travelled a long stretch of life.

Every road that might have led us back has disappeared beneath the quiet dust of silence.

Perhaps it was for such a condition of the soul that a poet once wrote:

"सब कुछ लुटा के होश में आये तो क्या किया?"

"What use is coming to one's senses after everything has been lost?"

Yet the true anguish of that line lies not in the loss itself, but in the cruel lateness of awakening.

Some truths refuse to reveal themselves while there is still time to alter them.

They unveil themselves in all their devastating clarity only when they have passed forever beyond the reach of our choosing.

And then one comes to realize only this:

The lost axis around which one's entire life kept searching had perhaps never been far away at all.

It had always been astonishingly close-

so close that the one distance required to truly see it...

was the only distance that could never come into being.

□

To me, this seems the perfect moment to recall a song from the celebrated 1951 film *Sadhana*. Penned by the great Sahir Ludhianvi, given its unforgettable voice by the legendary Mohammed Rafi, and set to music by N. Dutta, it has always seemed to echo the quiet tragedies that remain hidden beneath the ordinary surface of life.

"करते रहे ख़िज़ाँ से हम सौदा बहार का
बदला दिया तो क्या ये दिया उनके प्यार का
हम बदनसीब प्यार की रुसवाई बन गये
ख़ुद ही लगा के आग तमाशाई बन गये,
दामन से अब ये शोले बुझाये तो क्या किया?
ले-ले के हार फूलों के आई तो थी बहार
नज़रें उठाके हमने ही देखा न एक बार
आँखों से अब ये परदे हटाये तो क्या किया?
दिन में अगर चराग़ जलाये तो क्या किया?
सब कुछ लुटा के होश में आये तो क्या किया?"

"Karte rahe khizan se hum sauda bahar ka,
Badla diya to kya ye diya unke pyar ka...
Hum bad-nasib pyar ki rusvai ban gaye,
Khud hi laga ke ag tamashai ban gaye...
Daman se ab ye shole bujhae to kya kiya?
Le-le ke har phūlon ke ai to thi bahar,
Nazrein uṭha ke humne hi dekha na ek bar...

Ankhon se ab ye parde haṭae to kya kiya?
Din mein agar chiragh jalae to kya kiya?
Sab kuchh luṭa ke hosh mein ae to kya kiya?"

□

I often find myself thinking that perhaps it was never we who failed, but existence itself that quietly arranged within us an unfinished design. As though each of us were assigned, from the very beginning, a project whose completion was never meant to belong to us. We are granted the dream of fulfilment, yet not always its fulfilment.

Without our noticing, life slowly gathers all the circumstances that shape us. There comes a day when we suddenly realise that a vast province within us has turned into barren ground-a silent landscape where no new voice is born and no sound from the outside can truly arrive. And yet, strangely enough, it is the most densely inhabited place within us. Perhaps that is where memories make their home. Perhaps unfinished loves, estranged relationships, sentences that were never spoken, and dreams that broke before they could awaken-all of them settle there for the rest of our lives.

When I look back upon the years that have slipped away, I am astonished to discover how many of my journeys were made along roads I never actually walked. Those whom destiny never allowed me to meet remained, in some unspoken way, my lifelong companions. Words that never found their way to my lips kept searching for meaning within me for decades. And the farewells that never took place turned out to be the ones that hurt the most.

Gradually I came to understand that life is never merely an account of what we have gained. It is equally the story of all that remained absent-those missing pieces without which our existence can never be complete. A human being is shaped less by what he possesses than by the voids he carries within. Sometimes it is precisely what we never had that defines us most profoundly.

There is such an absence in my own memories.

It would be wrong to say that time has blurred her face. It shines before me as clearly as ever. In truth, her absence is even more sharply defined than her presence once was. There was a time when I searched for her. I no longer do-not because I found her, but because I have finally understood that certain things are never meant to be possessed. Their purpose is simply to preserve within us the faintest vibration of tenderness, so that we do not harden entirely into stone.

Today I sometimes think that she herself was the axis of my life.

Fate did bring us together. That was no illusion. For a brief, almost miraculous moment, I truly believed that my life would forever revolve around that single centre. It felt as though a traveller, after wandering for years, had at last caught sight of the first signpost leading home.

But the moment departed as quietly as it had arrived.

The very next instant, everything vanished again, like a narrow footpath dissolving into dense winter fog before one has walked its full length. What remained with me afterwards was no longer the road itself, but only its memory. And memories, at times, outlive reality by an astonishing measure.

Now, when I look upon the whole of my life, it seems that my story has never revolved around an event, but around that one solitary memory. Outwardly, everything changed-time, cities, people, responsibilities, relationships, successes, failures. Yet somewhere within, that single centre remained motionless, like the unseen axle of a wheel around which everything else continued to turn.

Perhaps that is why some stories never really move forward.

Some narratives never actually happen. They remain hidden in the abandoned corners of the soul like a lost axis around which we spend an entire lifetime circling. We imagine that we are advancing, while in truth we are endlessly orbiting an absent centre-one that, perhaps, had once been destined to accompany us, but was never destined to remain.

Nor can I bring myself to complain against existence. It would be unfair to say that it deprived me of something. On the contrary, it placed its most delicate and most beautiful gift into my hands.

The fault, perhaps, was mine-I could not hold on to it.

Or perhaps some gifts are never meant to be held. They come only to reveal the direction in which our lives might have flowed. They do not grant us the destination; they merely allow us a fleeting glimpse of it before disappearing forever.Even now, after all these years, I feel that the greatest event of my life was not the one that actually happened, but the one that almost did.Perhaps every human being carries within them such a story-a story that is never written, and yet becomes the truest chapter of their autobiography

□

You must be growing weary of these philosophical wanderings of mine. And even if you are, I have no intention of letting you escape. Truth be told, I often feel that I spend less time among ideas than among their shadows. Come, then-lose yourself in those shadows with me, if only for a while.

So, let us move a little further.

There are stories whose beginnings are impossible to locate. Every tale has its visible part-the part that truly happened. But it also has another, far larger and far more silent part: the one that never happened at all, yet whose presence often feels deeper and more authentic than the events that actually came to pass.

And so, I remain uncertain where to begin. Should I begin with the incident that never occurred, yet whose absence my heart has never been able to accept? Or with those moments that did unfold, but have become so faint, so blurred, so uncertain in memory that they resemble the surviving fragments of a forgotten dream? Or perhaps they are like the marvels of a magician whose secret remains forever beyond our grasp.

Perhaps the truest stories of our lives are those in which what happened and what remained forever unfulfilled dissolve so completely into one another that no clear boundary survives between them. There, reality and imagination walk hand in hand, until it becomes impossible to decide which of the two shaped our lives more deeply which one sculpted the person the world eventually came to know. Was it what truly happened to us, or what remained suspended forever in the expectation of happening?

□

But let us leave this argument here. I know well enough that unless I deliberately wrench my thoughts away from it, it could keep me imprisoned in its riddles for who knows how long.

So let me return to the place where something did, in fact, happen.

Whatever unfolded in those days was witnessed, perhaps, only by that young man, that young woman, and God Himself.

And perhaps only He lived it in its entirety.

To the rest of the world, they would have seemed like a handful of ordinary moments, the kind that disappear unnoticed into the dust of time. Yet some moments choose the length of their own existence. They owe nothing to calendars or clocks.

It is of those moments that I now wish to speak-those priceless moments that remain preserved within my memory even today, like a pressed flower resting between the pages of an old book. Its fragrance may have long since faded, but its touch still lingers upon the fingertips.

Before I begin recounting these little episodes, however, I should make one thing clear. It would be almost impossible to arrange them in chronological order. Memories never settle obediently upon the pages of a calendar. They emerge instead from some forgotten cupboard of the mind, without warning, choosing their own moment of return. So,

I shall tell you each incident only when it comes back to me, and exactly as it chooses to arrive.

After all, how can one narrate in sequence the story of a journey that was never completed? A journey that I myself abandoned, with my own hands, long before it could ever reach its destination. When neither the beginning remains whole nor the ending was ever allowed to exist, it is the moments in between that become the real story.

So do not listen to these recollections as though they belong to a neat chronology. Listen to them instead as one strolls through an old garden, gathering flowers not from a single branch but from blossoms that appeared in different seasons, and then threading them together into a garland-not according to any rule, but simply according to the quiet consent of the heart.

My memories are much the same: scattered, unsystematic, and seemingly without order-yet still held together by an invisible thread that has never quite broken.

□

A thought has just flashed across my mind.

Why not show you some of the photographs taken during that unfinished journey? I still have the entire album with me. Behind every photograph lies an incident; behind every face, a silent story. I shall linger over each picture and tell you the tale it conceals. And if, at any moment, a question stirs within you, don't hesitate to ask.

After all, you're no longer a stranger.

Having travelled with me through so many bends of this road, you've become one of those rare people before whom nothing feels worth hiding anymore.

So, what are we waiting for?

Here is the album of that unfinished journey of my life. Some photographs are like gentle melodies; some taste faintly bitter like old

stories; some resemble mischievous little anecdotes; and some still conceal, beneath their surface, a fine, almost invisible thorn that continues to prick even today. The strange thing is that after all these years neither the colours of these photographs have faded nor has the temperament of the eyes that behold them changed.

Take a careful look at this first photograph.

A young man stands leaning against the doorframe that opens onto the balcony of a first-floor apartment. One footrests inside the threshold, the other outside-as though he cannot arrive at a decision. It is as if he has yet to determine whether he wishes to remain a part of the quietly unfolding drama within those walls or abandon it altogether and return to the world outside.

Life, at times, brings us to precisely such thresholds, where we can no longer tell on which side of the invisible line, we truly belong.

He is not wearing shoes. Only a pair of worn, ordinary sandals, as though even putting them on had not been an act of choice but merely a concession to necessity.

His hair has been left entirely to itself. Having grown long, it falls into unruly tangles, as though no comb has ventured near it for days. His beard is nearly a week old. It is not the deliberate roughness of fashion but the visible neglect of a sadness that has ceased to care about appearances.

He wears a pair of stubborn-looking grey bell-bottom trousers, a black-and-brown checked shirt, and over it a honey-coloured woollen jacket. There is nothing outwardly wrong with his clothes, yet they somehow suggest that for several days they, too, have been sharing the same state of mind as their owner. Clothes, sometimes, quietly begin to wear the silence of the person inside them.

It is a winter morning.

The hands of the clock seem to hover somewhere between a quarter past nine and half past nine. The sun has risen, yet it still carries the

chill left behind by the night. The breeze does not merely touch the face; it passes straight through to some hidden place within.

His arms are folded tightly across his chest.

At first glance, one assumes he is simply protecting himself against the cold. But after watching him for a while, it becomes clear that he is trying to hold together something far more fragile than warmth. He is struggling to contain a restless tide rising somewhere inside him.

The expression upon his face refuses to submit to a single word.

There is waiting-but not merely waiting.

There is irritation-but not quite irritation alone.

There is anger-but not the kind that bursts upon another.

There is longing-but the kind that restrains itself at every step.

Each emotion dissolves into the next so delicately that no single colour can be distinguished from the whole.

It seems as though every few breaths his entire being arrives at a new decision.

For one brief instant his body stiffens, as though he is about to do something irrevocable.

The next moment all strength leaves him again, as if some invisible hand has quietly withdrawn every resolve he possessed.

Then comes a long sigh, so faint it is almost inaudible.

A trace of quiet defeat settles into his eyes.

And everything dissolves once more into the cold winter air.

The strangest thing of all is this:

Even he does not know what he is waiting for.

Is it someone?

Is it for something to happen?

Or is he waiting to discover within himself a decision that feels more difficult than anything else life has ever asked of him?

There are waits in a human life that have no name.

They belong to no particular face.

They are tied to no appointed hour.

Some dim, almost invisible hope simply continues to breathe somewhere within us, and without realising it, we keep breathing in rhythm with it.

His eyes carry that very quality.

Now and then a sudden glimmer flickers across them, as though someone, somewhere in the distance, has just whispered his name.

The next instant the light dies away again, and they return to the same emptiness as the pale winter haze before noon.

Sometimes he turns toward the drawing room behind him.

His gaze lingers upon the sofa set, then wanders over the framed objects hanging on the walls, then into the quiet corners of the room, as though every object might finally offer the answer he has been searching for.

But everything remains as silent as his own heart.

After a while his eyes drift down to the black asphalt road below.

People come and go.

Some are hurrying somewhere.

Others seem to belong to no urgency at all.

Faces enter his field of vision only to disappear into the crowd a moment later.

He follows each one until it vanishes beyond the bend.

Then, inevitably, his gaze returns to the same doorway, the same room, the same silence.

This cannot have been going on for very long.

And yet, for reasons he himself cannot explain, it feels as though he has stood there forever.

For centuries.

For several lifetimes.

The photograph reveals him standing perfectly still, yet within him storms seem to rage without pause. Even his outward silence appears to breathe. But inside, time is no longer measured by the hands of a clock. It rises and falls instead with alternating waves of hope and disappointment.

Perhaps that is the greatest secret hidden within this photograph.

No one else appears in it.

And yet someone, precisely by being absent, is overwhelmingly present.

The entire image is filled with the presence of the one who cannot be seen.

Then, suddenly-

It is as though an enormous sheet of glass shatters into a thousand ringing fragments.

Or as though someone has hurled a stone into the stillness of a quiet lake-the sharp splash sending birds bursting from the surrounding trees in startled cries.

The silence breaks.

A faint sound-the gentle movement of the drawing-room door from within-shakes the young man to his core.

He looks up.

The young woman enters the room.

For the past week they have not exchanged a single word.

A trivial misunderstanding had driven them into silence.

Strictly speaking, it was she who had stopped speaking.

Yes, the young man had offended her. During the first day or two he had stubbornly ignored her himself. But after that, the responsibility for the silence had passed entirely into her hands.

And from then on, his punishment had truly begun.

He could hardly apologise openly in her house.

Nor could he explain himself.

No one in the family knew anything.

Why would they?

To everyone else, life appeared perfectly ordinary.

Only the young man, the young woman-and perhaps God Himself, watching from above with quiet amusement-knew that she was angry.

The moment he sees her enter the drawing room; he turns his face ever so slightly toward her.

She is getting ready to leave for college.

She is already dressed.

Standing before a mirror, she slowly runs a comb through her shoulder-length hair.

She glances sideways at him.

Still combing her hair with deliberate calm, she walks towards him.

For one brief instant their eyes meet.

Something flashes through him like lightning.

She smiles.

Then, almost unconsciously, she puckers her lips and flares her nostrils-a familiar little gesture that occupied one of the highest places

among all the expressions before which every trace of his intelligence and self-control simply surrendered.

Even so, he remains outwardly composed.

It is she who finally breaks the silence.

"What have you done to yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

She asks for no explanation.

She offers no complaint.

She merely delivers her verdict, as though bringing a long trial to its quiet conclusion.

"We'll meet this evening...

...but do tidy yourself up first."

With that, she turns and disappears into the inner rooms with quick, determined steps.

He remains standing there for a while.

He knows he has received exactly what he had come for.

Now there is only one thing left to wait for-

the evening.

Quietly, he walks downstairs.

He lifts his old Hercules bicycle, mounts it, and rides away.

□

Now look at this photograph.

At first glance, it appears to be nothing more than an ordinary picture- a boy and a girl sitting together, an open Physics textbook before them, a few notebooks, a scattering of formulae, and the stillness of an afternoon. But photographs often preserve within themselves things that even those present at the moment fail to recognise.

This belongs to the days when the girl's family had only recently moved into the house that became their first home in this city. Her father had been transferred from another town, and with that transfer the course of the entire family's life quietly changed. Her brothers and sisters found admission into different schools and colleges. She was in high school; the young man was already a student of engineering.

In time, a small ritual came into being.

Whenever a difficult problem in Mathematics or Physics refused to yield to her understanding, she would come to him. She had other choices, of course. There were professors living in the same apartment building who would gladly have helped her. Yet, for reasons neither of them ever questioned, the final destination of every difficult problem was always that young man.

They would sit together on the same sofa in the drawing room.

Sometimes the textbook rested in her lap; sometimes it lay open in his hands. With the sharpened tip of a pencil, he would sketch invisible diagrams in the air or fill the pages of her rough notebook with equations, diagrams, and patient explanations. She listened with complete attention. At times a faint crease of puzzlement appeared upon her forehead; then, the moment an idea suddenly became clear, a quiet radiance would descend into her eyes.

Perhaps it was for that single fleeting radiance that he tried so hard to ask every difficult question to seem easy.

For him, it carried a curious thrill.

As for the girl, perhaps she was simply studying. What else may have been passing through her mind, he could never have known.

Yet, if truth be told, Physics had long ceased to be merely Physics.

Something else always occupied the space between them.

An invisible silence sat beside them at every meeting. It could not be seen, but it lingered after every turned page, every solved equation, every accidental brush of their fingers.

For the young man, the experience remained strangely inexplicable.

Even he could not decide what gave him greater happiness: solving one of her impossible problems, making an intricate chapter suddenly transparent-or simply knowing that when she found herself at an impasse, she had chosen to come to him.

Long before he understood it himself, he had already given her a place very close to his heart.

So close, in fact, that the feeling itself seemed to require no name.

Yet that very intimacy demanded absolute silence.

He never allowed his voice to change.

He never permitted his gaze to linger longer than it should.

He never let even the faintest suggestion slip into his words.

Perhaps the girl herself remained entirely unaware of the secret he carried.

Who can say?

Some questions in life have no solutions.

They continue to breathe forever within the uncertain territory of *perhaps*.

There was, however, one thing he could not help sensing.

In her eyes there seemed to exist the faintest hint of distinction reserved only for him.

It was an exceedingly fragile feeling-like the first sunlight descending somewhere in the distance on a winter morning. One is certain it exists, yet it remains forever beyond one's reach.

But alongside that pale light walked another shadow.

The shadow of, *however*.

That single *however* became the greatest wall between them.

The social conventions of those days.

The quiet dignity observed within respectable homes.

The delicate boundaries that governed relationships.

The awkwardness of youth.

And above all, the fear that one careless word might destroy forever the closeness they already possessed.

Together, they buried the tiny seed that had taken root within his heart beneath layer upon layer of silence.

Each day the tender shoot longed to break through the earth.

Each day it hesitated...

...and quietly withdrew into the darkness again.

Their conversations would return to another difficult chapter of Physics.

The numerical problems found their answers.

The derivations reached their conclusions.

Every question in the textbook was eventually solved.

Only one question remained untouched after every meeting-

the one neither of them ever dared to speak aloud.

Looking back now, I sometimes think that love learns silence long before it learns language.

It wishes to speak only much later.

And sometimes...

it spends an entire lifetime without uttering a single word.

At moments like this, I am reminded of a beautiful couplet by Qaisar Khalid:

A lifetime passes, yet mysteries never fully reveal themselves;
Some people remain hidden, even while sitting before us.

What an astonishing truth.

Someone may sit across from you, smile at your words, spend countless hours in your company-and yet the true landscape of their heart may remain unimaginably distant.

Within every human being there exists a country to which another soul may never be granted entry.

In those days, the young man had never read this couplet.

Yet his soul had already begun living its meaning.

Kabir once wrote of the "two and a half letters" that spell *love*.

But it is equally true that these are the least spoken letters in the world.

They are never easy to utter.

Nor are they easy to forget.

Sometimes an entire lifetime revolves around those two and a half letters…

and they still remain forever unspoken.

So many incidents from those years now drift through memory-like figures emerging from mist.

Books changed.

Classes changed.

Seasons changed.

Homes changed.

Age changed.

Cities changed.

Almost everything that ordinarily and extraordinarily happens in a human life continued to happen.

Examinations came and went.

Results were announced.

Festivals returned.

There was laughter.

There were grievances.

There were meetings.

There were partings.

Only one thing never happened.

The one thing that lived silently within the young man's heart.

Perhaps that is because certain relationships are not born to find fulfilment. They are born to remain forever unfinished within us.

The moment they are fulfilled, the story ends.

If they remain incomplete, that very incompleteness walks beside us for the rest of our lives, becoming the most beautiful memory we shall ever possess.

Meanwhile, across the vast universe, countless great and insignificant events must have unfolded. Everything that ordinarily or extraordinarily fills a human lifetime undoubtedly came to pass somewhere.

Everything...

except the one thing that lived within the young man's heart.

□

This photograph, too, belongs to those same years.

Every year, the festival of *"Hartalika Teej"* was celebrated at the young man's home. From the ceiling of one room hung a beautifully decorated floral canopy, woven with lotus blossoms, leaves, and garlands of marigolds, jasmine, mogra, and night-blooming jasmine. Beneath it, upon a raised wooden platform, sat the divine images of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati.

As night descended, almost every married woman and young girl from the neighbourhood gathered there.

At the auspicious hour, the family priest solemnised the symbolic wedding of Shiva and Parvati. One after another, the women who had observed the day-long waterless fast offered their prayers with the ritual trays they had brought from home. Married women performed the worship for the long life and well-being of their husbands, while unmarried girls prayed for a husband endowed with the virtues of Shiva himself.

When the rituals ended, the night truly began.

No one slept.

The hours drifted quietly towards dawn as the gentle rhythm of the *dholak*, the ringing of hand-cymbals, and the collective voices of women merged into wedding songs, devotional hymns, traditional folk melodies, and every now and then, even a popular film song. The entire night remained awake like an old folktale refusing to end.

That year, the girl came too, accompanied by her mother and sisters.

The young man was outside the house, sitting on the narrow cement ledge with a few friends, chatting idly.

Then her voice suddenly rose above the others.

It was familiar, yet strangely new-he had never heard her sing like that before.

"मेरी छोटी सी है नाव, तेरे जादू भरे पाँव,
डर लागे मोहे राम, कैसे बिठाऊँ तुम्हें नाव में. . . .

जब पत्थर से बन गई नारी, ये तो लकड़ी की नाव हमारी,
करूँ यही रोजगार, या से पालूँ परिवार, सुनो सुनो जी दातार,
कैसे बिठाऊँ तुम्हें नाव में . . . ."

My little boat is so fragile, and your feet possess such magic.
I am afraid, O Lord-how shall I invite you into my boat?
If even stone can be transformed into a woman,
what hope is there for this frail wooden boat of mine?
How shall I earn my living? How shall I support my family?
Tell me, O Compassionate One,
how shall I dare seat you in my boat?

Whether anyone else paid attention or not, the young man listened as though the song had been sung for him alone.

In his imagination, the ancient image of Lord Rama preparing to cross the sacred river awakened countless dreams and impossible hopes.

For one fleeting moment, he even wondered whether the girl was sending him a secret message.

Was she, in her own quiet way, asking herself how she might one day make him the companion of her life's voyage?

People passing through the first bewilderments of love often begin to hear meanings that were never spoken.

If that was what the young man believed, perhaps he cannot be blamed.

To him, the song seemed to point toward a shared future.

Yet the present, unknown to either of them, was already weaving entirely different designs.

In the early days of love, the heart often hears what no one has actually said. It begins trusting suggestions more than words, silences more than conversations.

Looking back now, it seems to me that the song had quietly become a metaphor for everything that was yet to come. Neither of them could have guessed that life's greatest ironies often hide within its simplest songs.

Even today, every year, Hartalika Teej is celebrated.

Every year, Lord Shiva is once again united with Goddess Parvati.

And yet...

What can one possibly do about the fact that

that boy and that girl never found themselves in the same boat.

□

The next photograph tells an altogether different story.

The young woman is sitting upon the sofa.

Pain has drained the colour from her face. Moisture glistens at the corners of her eyes, as though her tears have paused just behind her eyelashes. She says nothing. Quietly, she stretches out her injured leg.

The young man is kneeling on the floor before her.

Beside him lie cotton wool, antiseptic ointment, and a bandage. The skin just below her knee has been badly scraped. He cleans the wound with extraordinary care, as though the slightest carelessness might deepen her pain.

She was still in high school then.

While climbing the stairs to her apartment after school, her foot had slipped. She had managed not to fall, but her knee had scraped hard against the sharp edge of a step.

When she reached home, the young man was already there. They had probably been discussing a lesson or a book.

Without saying a word, she came and sat beside him on the sofa.

Pain had already begun to write itself across her face.

The moment he saw the wound, he exclaimed with almost impatient concern,

"Wait... I'll be right back."

His own house was only a few steps away.

Within minutes he returned carrying a first-aid box, antiseptic ointment, cotton, and bandages.

The elders of the family were occupied in the inner rooms.

Out in the drawing room, an unusual silence had settled over everything.

The young woman closed her eyes.

Perhaps because of the pain.

Or perhaps because what unsettled her even more than the injury itself was the realization that someone was taking her suffering so seriously.

Without any trace of fuss or display, he carefully cleaned the wound.

When the antiseptic touched her skin, her brows drew together for a brief moment.

She flinched.

Yet not a single cry escaped her lips.

Then he wrapped the bandage around her knee with quiet patience.

His fingers possessed none of a doctor's professional skill.

But they carried something rarer-

the instinctive tenderness of someone who cared.

Even after the bandage was tied, he remained sitting on the floor for a few moments.

Then she slowly opened her eyes.

A faint tightening appeared around her lips, where pain and the beginnings of a smile seemed to meet.

A little shyly, she looked at him.

He did not allow that glance to linger.

Feigning annoyance, he scolded her,

"Next time you climb the stairs, try taking your brain with you... otherwise you'll spend the rest of your life limping."

She answered in exactly the same spirit.

She narrowed her eyes, stuck out her tongue to tease him, and limped lightly towards the inner room.

Her schoolbag remained forgotten beside the sofa.

For a few moments he watched her disappear.

Then he bent down, picked up the bag, brushed away the dust, and placed it gently to one side.

Perhaps he himself did not realise it then.

He was not merely lifting a schoolbag.

Without ever saying so, he had begun taking into his keeping every small thing that belonged to her.

To anyone watching from the outside, it would have seemed an utterly ordinary incident.

A schoolgirl slipped on the stairs.

A young man dressed her wound.

He bandaged her knee.

The matter ended there.

But some relationships are born not through grand declarations, but through moments like these.

Love often learns how to place a healing hand upon another's wound long before it ever learns to say,

"I love you."

That day, for the first time, the young man began to understand what it meant to feel another person's pain within oneself.

The wound was upon her knee.

The ache rose within his own heart.

Perhaps that feeling has no proper name.

Or perhaps, later, the world simply comes to call it love.

And the young woman?

That question remains as silent today as the photograph itself.

Was it no more than a bandage to her?

Or when she opened her eyes and saw him kneeling quietly on the floor before her, did some delicate, almost imperceptible ripple also pass through her own heart-a feeling she herself could not yet recognise?

Who can say?

Some emotions are born long before they discover their names.

Looking at this photograph today, it seems that the bandage was wrapped around her knee.

But perhaps, on that very day, another bond was quietly tied between two innocent hearts-

so fragile that no one ever saw it being knotted,

and no one ever witnessed it coming undone.

Nirmal Verma once wrote:

"Memories do not take us back to the past; they take us back to the person we once were."

Perhaps that is why, in this photograph, the wound itself healed decades ago.

Yet the young man still kneels beside it.

The young woman still sits there with her eyes closed, quietly enduring the pain.

Time has certainly passed through that room.

It simply seems to have forgotten to take either of them along.

□

The building where the young woman's family lived stood on one of the city's main roads. It housed twelve apartments altogether, with three shops opening directly onto the street below. From dawn until dusk, there was an endless stream of people passing by. It was a densely populated neighbourhood, and the road itself was among the busiest in the city. The ringing of bicycle bells, the creaking of cycle-rickshaws, the cries of vegetable vendors, and, every morning and evening, the long processions of employees cycling to and from the Ordnance Factories together composed the unmistakable rhythm of that street.

And yet, above all that bustle, there existed another world.

The rooftop.

The moment one climbed the stairs and stepped onto it, the clamour of the road seemed to fall away, as though it belonged to another life altogether.

The terrace was never an appointed meeting place for the two of them. There were no promises, no signals, no arrangements. Yet somehow it often happened that the young man would quietly climb the stairs, and before long the young woman, under one pretext or another, would also find her way there. At times the order was reversed. It was as though neither of them ever called the other, and yet an unspoken summons unfailingly reached them both.

Perhaps, at that age, certain relationships have no need of words.

In this photograph they are standing on the edge of the terrace overlooking the main road.

Below them, the world is absorbed in its daily noise.

Above, the air holds a silence so complete that the mere presence of two people becomes the loudest thing within it.

That day the young woman was wearing a new black top.

At least, according to the young man, it was far more than an ordinary top.

From the lower left corner rose a slender white branch, painted diagonally across the fabric towards the upper right. Along it grew large, graceful leaves rendered with so few lines that they seemed to have been shaped by the wind itself. And at the very top, precisely where her heart would have been, bloomed a large flower with many delicate petals.

The design was his.

When he had painted it, the garment had not yet been stitched. It had been nothing more than a length of cloth.

Smiling, she had spread it out before him and said,

"Only this part will be visible in front... paint something beautiful here."

Without giving it much thought, he drew the branch.

Then the leaves.

And for reasons he himself never understood, he added the flower last.

Now, seeing the finished garment upon her for the first time, his eyes came to rest upon that flower.

It was a curious coincidence.

Or perhaps not a coincidence at all.

The flower had blossomed exactly where her heart must have been beating.

For a fleeting instant he felt that it had not really been he who had painted it.

It was as though some unseen hand had guided his own.

As though a silent Artist-the greatest Painter of all, the One who had created the world and knew far more about the two of them than they

themselves ever could-had quietly placed that flower there on the very day it was painted, exactly where it had always belonged.

It was a Sunday.

The young woman had only recently bathed, and her hair was still damp. Whenever the breeze stirred, a few loose strands drifted across her face, and she would gently tuck them back behind her ear. The sunlight was soft. Her clothes still carried the freshness of soap, and the air itself seemed faintly scented with neem blossoms or perhaps the golden flowers of the amaltas.

After a while, almost as though following an invisible trail, the young man too found himself climbing to the terrace.

They stood facing one another.

It was the first time he had seen her wearing the top.

An inexplicable happiness stole over him.

Again, and again his eyes returned to the flower.

Within him, a small hope quietly awakened.

Perhaps she would say,

"Look... how does your design look now?"

That would have been enough.

It would have given their conversation somewhere to begin.

Perhaps they would have spoken about the branch.

Then the leaves.

Then that pure white colour.

And little by little-very little by very little-they might have arrived at the flower itself.

Who knows?

Perhaps, in speaking of the flower, they might even have crossed the far shorter distance that lay between the flower and the heart beneath it.

But life seldom begins where we wish it to.

She never mentioned the design even once.

Instead, she spoke of other things.

School.

Home.

A book she had been reading.

An amusing imitation of one of her teachers.

The families who lived in the building.

The neighbours.

And every now and then she would burst into laughter for no apparent reason.

She seemed genuinely happy.

The young man could see it plainly.

Yet he kept wondering why she never spoke about the reason for her happiness.

She continued asking one question after another.

He answered each of them.

He knew she did not speak this way with everyone.

With most people she would respond politely, in a few brief, straightforward sentences, and then retreat into silence.

Neither cold nor warm-

simply distant.

With him, however, it was different.

Her questions never seemed to end.

It was as though, behind every answer, she wished to discover a little more of the person he was.

Perhaps that was her way of expressing closeness.

Perhaps that was her confession.

Or perhaps she herself had no name for it.

And the young man?

Did he understand any better?

He merely kept waiting for the flower to be mentioned.

But the flower remained silent.

The design remained silent.

The heart remained silent.

They talked for a long while.

Down below, the flow of people on the street kept changing.

The sunlight slowly shifted across the rooftops.

Laundry fluttered on a neighbouring terrace.

Far away, an old song seemed to be drifting from someone's radio.

Then, as every meeting possesses its own unspoken hour of departure, the time for this one, too, quietly arrived.

Together they descended the staircase.

Nothing had been resolved.

No confession had been made.

No hint had been offered.

No mention of the flower.

No mention of the heart beneath it.

As he walked home, the young man remained entangled within himself.

He could not decide whether he was happy or disappointed.

For the first time he had seen his design become what it had been created to be.

That was no small joy.

Yet the little pathway he had hoped to discover through that very design had remained closed.

That disappointment was no less real.

Perhaps it was on that day that he first understood how life's most delicate emotions are born somewhere between happiness and sorrow.

Some joys conceal within their embrace the finest layers of sadness.

And some sorrows quietly cradle the hidden seed of a happiness yet to come.

That day he walked home carrying both.

Little did he know that years later, when memory brought him back to this afternoon, he would still remember the colour of the flower, the shape of every petal, and one more thing besides:

No one had spoken of the heart that day.

And yet...

was it possible that, in that very silence, the heart had already said everything it ever wished to say?

□

In the next photograph, the young woman is showing the young man a reproduction of a miniature painting.

The painting depicts an *Utka*-or, more precisely, an "*Utkanthita Nayika*"-standing beneath a tree. She leans gently against its trunk

while holding one of its flowering branches, laden with delicate leaves and pale yellow-white blossoms.

Take a moment to look at the picture.

Only then will I tell you who this *Utkanthita* heroine truly is.

In the classical aesthetics of India, among the celebrated *Ashta Nayikas*-the Eight Heroines of Love-there is one known as the *Utkanthita*, or *Virahotkanthita*. She waits at the appointed place of meeting, consumed by longing for her beloved. In the miniature paintings of the Pahari and Rajasthani schools she is often portrayed in a lonely grove or a secluded forest, beneath a flowering tree, standing beside a bed strewn with blossoms and leaves, repeatedly turning towards the winding path in the hope that he may finally appear. Sometimes she rests against a branch; sometimes the faintest sound startles her into expectation. Hope and disappointment, faith and uncertainty, rise and fall together within her heart. In Keshavdas's *Rasikapriya* and Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, this very yearning, this waiting, this exquisite pain of separation becomes one of love's most moving expressions.

If you find it interesting, let me tell you a little more about these Eight Heroines.

The great tradition of Indian miniature painting-especially the Pahari and Rajasthani schools-depicts the many emotional landscapes of love with astonishing delicacy. Much of its inspiration comes from Sanskrit and Braj poetry, where the different states of the heroine's heart are described with extraordinary sensitivity. Works such as Bhanudatta's *Rasamanjari*, Keshavdas's *Rasikapriya*, and Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* gave painters what seemed almost like the ability to compose poetry with colour instead of words.

Foremost among these are the Ashta Nayikas-the eight heroines, each embodying a distinct emotional condition of love.

There is the *Svadhinabhartrika*, whose beloved is wholly devoted to her; the *Utkanthita*, who waits restlessly at the place of union; the *Vasakasajja*, adorned and surrounded by flowers as she prepares for

her lover's arrival; the *Kalahantarita*, who repents after quarrelling with him; the *Vipralabdha*, deceived by the beloved who promised to come but never did; the *Proshitabhartrika*, whose beloved has gone to a distant land and who counts the days of separation; the fearless *Abhisarika*, who ventures out through darkness, rain, and danger to meet her lover-whether as the *Krishnabhisarika* or the *Shuklabhisarika*; and finally the *Khandita*, whose wounded pride burns when her lover returns after spending the night with another woman.

These are not merely eight women.

They are eight shades of love.

Eight different climates of the human heart.

The ancient painters immortalised them not through language, but through the silent eloquence of line and colour.

But let us return to our own story.

I never asked where she had found that painting.

In truth, I was too astonished even to think of asking.

She wanted me to paint a copy of it.

It is only fair to admit that all the details I have just told you about the *Ashta Nayikas* were far beyond my knowledge at that age. Yet the word *Nayika* was not unfamiliar to me. At home we owned a commentary on *Braj Madhuri Sar*, and through it-as well as a number of other books-I had acquired some understanding of classical aesthetics and the different kinds of heroines described in Indian poetry. My love for painting had also introduced me to miniature paintings through reproductions in magazines. Their world was not entirely unknown to me.

Even so, her request left my throat strangely dry.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Nothing..." I replied, stumbling slightly over the word.

"You'll be able to paint it, won't you?"

"Of course. Why not? I'll do it."

"But make it properly."

"'Properly'? What do you mean? Do you think I can't?"

"Oh no, that's not what I mean," she said quickly. "Just... don't make *this part* so... so large. Paint it properly."

As she spoke, she touched one particular place on the painting with the tip of her finger.

Then, blushing and suddenly embarrassed by her own words, she turned and hurried away.

I remained standing there, the picture still in my hands.

My eyes shifted again and again between the painting and the moment that had just unfolded before me.

Although it was already over, it remained suspended before my eyes like another painting.

I was utterly bewildered.

Not for a single instant did an impure thought cross my mind.

To tell the truth, it never did-not then, not at any point in that relationship.

What astonished me was something altogether different.

Even today I cannot fully understand what happened in that brief exchange.

Was it as simple as saying,

"Two plus two equals four..."

Or was it something else entirely?

Even now, after so many years, I cannot arrive at a single interpretation of that moment.

Sometimes I think it was nothing more than an innocent request.

She wanted a beautiful painting for her room, and she believed I could paint it.

Perhaps it was simply that.

At other times I remind myself that the meaning of what we say rarely resides in words alone.

Some meanings hide within hesitation.

Some within a smile.

Some within the light touch of a finger that rests for only a moment before withdrawing, as though nothing had happened at all.

That day, when she pointed to that particular part of the painting and said,

"Just don't make this part so large..."

I did not understand what she meant.

Perhaps I still do not.

She herself had grown embarrassed by her own remark, as though the words had escaped further than she intended, leaving her momentarily frightened of them.

What amazes me, looking back, is that I was almost exactly the same age as she was.

I too possessed a young body.

I too had curiosity.

Dreams.

Awakenings.

Yet not even for an instant did my mind wander towards anything vulgar or impure.

Indeed, throughout the whole of that relationship, I do not remember such a thought ever arising.

Whatever lived within me for her seemed to have been fashioned from altogether different clay-so transparent, so unblemished, that many people today might find it difficult even to believe such innocence possible.

And so, when I look back upon that scene now, I find myself unable to reduce it to any simple equation.

Some moments in life truly refuse to behave like *two plus two equals four*.

They are not three.

Nor are they five.

They simply become experiences that can never be understood through arithmetic, only through memory.

Perhaps it was trust.

Perhaps affection.

Perhaps it was the shy bewilderment of a young girl encountering, for the first time, the woman quietly awakening within herself.

Perhaps it was simply the first moment in which she became aware of some unfamiliar stirring in her own heart.

Or perhaps it is only I who, after all these years, continue making the futile attempt to assign meaning to a moment that never possessed one in the first place.

It may well be that there was no hidden meaning at all.

Only a perfectly innocent instant.

An instant that passed without saying anything yet remained forever preserved within memory.

Perhaps that is all it ever was-

a single moment that slipped out of time the instant it occurred and has remained there ever since.

Even today I do not wish to pronounce a final verdict upon it.

Some moments derive their deepest beauty precisely from the fact that they never reveal their own meaning.

They remain with us throughout life as quiet questions that refuse to be answered.

To me, this is one of the most delicate-and one of the truest-episodes in this entire chapter.

Its greatest strength lies in the fact that I have never imposed an interpretation upon it.

I have remembered it with the same innocence in which it originally unfolded.

Moments like these do not lead us towards conclusions.

They do not offer answers.

They leave behind only a long, lingering resonance within us.

That resonance, perhaps, is the strongest evidence for the honesty of my own self-examination.

I want you to become the witness not of an event, but of an honest memory.

□

It must have been sometime around 1972–73.

By then, the faint whispers of that one-sided love story had begun to drift quietly through the neighbourhood. It is one of life's curious ironies that the very secret a person buries in the deepest chamber of the heart is often the first thing the world somehow comes to know. A lingering glance, an unfinished smile, a half-spoken sentence, an inexplicable silence-perhaps all these conspire together to ensure that no secret remains a secret forever.

The young man had never confessed anything to anyone.

He had shared nothing of his heart with a friend, nor with a confidant. He had never even managed to tell the young woman herself, in clear words, what she truly meant to him. Yet somehow, the rumour began to circulate that if he were ever to marry, it would be to her.

Years later, when he came upon a celebrated couplet by Qamar Jalalvi, it seemed almost as though it had been written for him alone:

"I never spoke to anyone of my tale of you,
Yet somehow the whole world came to know."

Perhaps love possesses a language of its own, one that has no need of words. It reveals itself in the way someone's gaze lingers, in the habit of waiting, in walking down the same lane again and again, or in unconsciously slowing one's steps before a particular house. People notice things that often escape the lover himself.

Little by little, the whisper found its way into the young man's own home.

No one ever confronted him directly.

There were no declarations.

No questions.

Only small signs.

Sometimes his mother's eyes rested upon his face a little longer than usual.

Sometimes an elder in the family smiled without explanation.

It was as though everyone knew, and yet no one wished to say anything aloud.

In those days, such matters were rarely discussed openly.

A hint was conversation enough.

Whether the rumour ever reached the young woman...

Whether her family ever heard even the faintest whisper of it...

That remained a mystery forever.

The young man never found the courage to discover the answer.

He continued visiting their home exactly as before.

Outwardly, nothing had changed.

What was changing within him was something he himself could scarcely have measured.

One circumstance, however, deserves mention.

The girl's family had only recently settled in the neighbourhood. They knew very few of the long-time residents. Their social world remained largely confined to the apartment building itself, where almost every family had arrived only recently. Most of the residents held respectable professions and senior positions. They left for work each morning, returned in the evening, and quietly lived their own lives. The neighbourhood's gossip, idle curiosity, and habitual interference had not yet found firm footing there.

Perhaps that is why, if the rumour reached anyone at all, it travelled only like a passing breeze-one whose presence is felt without ever revealing the direction from which it came.

Meanwhile, time continued its indifferent journey.

The young man had begun studying engineering.

His days slowly filled with textbooks, drawing sheets, practical classes, new friendships, and vague dreams of the future.

Yet behind every new day there remained one familiar face, like an old light quietly illuminating everything that came after it.

The young woman was then in the tenth standard.

She inhabited a world of her own-school, friends, examinations, family, and the innocent dreams of an age that has not yet learned how difficult life's decisions can become.

And then, as though an entire chapter of a novel were to end without the slightest sound, came the news that her family had moved to Right Town.

There was no farewell.

No final meeting.

No one announced that this was a parting.

One day the apartment was still theirs.

The next day another name stood upon its door.

Sometimes life writes its greatest departures without allowing a single conversation.

All that remains behind are a few shuttered windows, an empty staircase, and the faint echo of voices preserved only within memory.

□

The year 1973–74 arrived like a strange season.

It was a time when the young man's life seemed suddenly to abandon the straight road it had been following and descend onto an unfamiliar, uneven path.

Everything around him appeared to be turning upside down.

Whether it was the invisible debt of deeds from another lifetime, or merely the consequence of mistakes made in this one, he could not have said.

He knew only this:

Some unseen force, some nameless design, seemed to be laying fresh obstacles before him at every turn.

Each road opened into another uncertainty.

Each hope quietly concealed a new disappointment waiting just beyond it.

When you eventually reach the chapter of this book titled "*Engineering*", many of the knots tied during those years will begin to loosen. There you will discover how one unforeseen event followed another with such relentless speed that the young man was scarcely given time to regain his footing. Every incident seemed mysteriously connected to the next. He could no longer distinguish where his own mistakes ended, where destiny began, and where simple chance had played its hand.

Little did he know that his story was already moving towards a bend from which much of life would one day survive only as memory-and much else only as absence.

Some relationships never truly break.

They simply lose their voices.

Outwardly they appear silent.

Within, they continue to echo for years.

At that time the young man could not yet hear those echoes.

He was merely living.

Or perhaps struggling.

Yet he never surrendered.

Whatever life scattered, he remained determined to gather together again.

After every collapse he tried to rebuild his own fragment of sky.

After every disappointment he believed the next step might finally lead somewhere better.

Perhaps this is humanity's greatest strength:

that it clings to hope until the very last moment, even after hoping itself seems to have drifted far beyond reach.

It was also an era when-at least in India, and even more so in the small provincial town where the young man and the young woman lived-the wishes of young people carried very little weight.

The most important decisions of their lives were usually made by others.

Family.

Community.

Social conventions.

Tradition.

Together they formed an invisible circle beyond which even looking was considered an act of defiance.

Young women, especially, seldom imagined they possessed the freedom to speak their hearts.

Their silence itself was mistaken for virtue.

Looking back now, I sometimes feel that the wounds my generation quietly carried remained so deep within us that we wished our own children would never have to inherit the same burden.

If the twenty-first century has accomplished anything, it has at least given the younger generation a measure of courage to make some of their own choices.

The freedom is far from complete.

Yet compared with those years, it resembles an open window through which fresh air finally enters a room that had remained closed for far too long.

In the days of which I speak, such freedom was rare indeed.

Those who dared to claim it often found themselves judged by the very people they loved.

Be that as it may, time has never paused for anyone's confusion, anyone's love, or anyone's dreams.

It flows according to laws entirely its own.

Sometimes its surface ripples gently.

Sometimes the same river suddenly becomes a whirlpool.

Hidden rocks beneath the water leave one's feet bloodied.

A sharp bend may carry a traveller so far that he scarcely recognises himself anymore.

And at times the river, without the slightest warning, plunges over a cliff as a waterfall.

In such a fall, it is not only the body that breaks.

Something far more fragile begins to fracture within-

one's faith in the world itself.

Time always chooses its own course.

It has never consulted our wishes.

It did not do so then.

The young man and the young woman simply continued drifting within its current.

Now, after so many years, it often seems that everything which happened between them had perhaps been written long before either of them arrived upon the scene.

Had those events unfolded differently, perhaps their story would never have become the story that still awakens, even today, the faintest ache in some quiet corner of the heart.

Sometimes I even feel that the universe possesses a knowledge forever beyond our understanding.

A script written long before we ourselves came into being.

We believe our decisions belong to us, while unseen hands may already be drawing the strings from somewhere far beyond our sight.

Perhaps, in those days, the young man and the young woman were simply two such figures-walking, smiling, dreaming-

never suspecting how little they knew of the destination towards which they were being led.

And then there comes a moment when every argument, every complaint, every certainty grows tired and falls silent.

From somewhere deep within, only one prayer remains:

"O Giver, only You know the wisdom of Your design... no one else ever can."

□

When the young man finally began to recover-when life, after a long spell of turbulence, showed him a little mercy-his visits to the young woman's new home in Right Town gradually became regular once again. It was during those quiet afternoons that he first noticed something he had never seen before.

Now and then, an inexplicable melancholy would descend upon her face.

She laughed as she always had.

She spoke as she always had.

Yet behind her smile there now lingered a silent shadow.

She was standing upon the threshold between girlhood and womanhood.

No doubt a similar transformation was unfolding within the young man as well, but a young woman's world changes in ways a young man's seldom does. For her, it is not only the mind that begins its long and bewildering journey, but the body as well. The body changes. Eyes that look upon her begin to change. Even the attitudes of those at home grow subtly different. And before she quite understands why, she finds

herself expected to move more cautiously within the very house in which she has always belonged.

Perhaps that is why a curious gravity settles into the eyes of young women long before their years would seem to justify it.

There comes, sometimes, a season in life when every beautiful certainty begins to cast a shadow. Things that only yesterday brought comfort and hope suddenly to become the source of fear and quiet despair. In truth, nothing outside has altered. The same courtyard remains. The same rooms. The same people. The same mornings and evenings.

Only the inner weather has changed.

By some mysterious alchemy known only to the Creator, the world itself appears transformed, though it is merely one's way of seeing it that has quietly shifted.

Perhaps there was another reason as well.

Both belonged to large families.

Four or five siblings each.

Every glance carried the invisible weight of responsibility.

Little by little, both began to understand that any step they might take-however pure or innocent it seemed within their own hearts-could easily be judged by their families as an unforgivable mistake.

It was no longer love itself that frightened them.

It was the consequences of loving.

And yet, strangely enough, neither withdrew.

It was as though some unseen hand had silently granted them permission to keep moving towards one another.

There were no promises.

No declarations.

No vows.

Still, they had already begun walking a road from which neither quite knew how to turn back.

Whenever the young man visited, the young woman would sometimes, almost furtively, place a record upon the turntable.

It was the song from the film *Hamraaz*:

"Who has arrived, that such light has awakened in my eyes?"

The moment the music began, the atmosphere of the room seemed to change.

Both tried, unsuccessfully, to appear perfectly ordinary.

One would pick up a book.

The other would look absently out of the window.

Yet every line of the song quietly settled between them like a third companion-one who gave voice to everything they themselves lacked the courage to say.

After a while, smiling almost to himself, the young man would respond by playing another record-the song from the film *Waqt*:

"These are the days of spring... the days of your and my unspoken confession."

It was his answer.

An answer spoken without words.

As though he wished to tell her that no matter how difficult the world became, within these few stolen moments spring still survived.

And so, the days passed, carried forward by these silent conversations of music.

Sometimes he would play Mohammed Rafi's immortal song:

"May no evil eye ever fall upon your beautiful face."

Whenever that melody filled the room, something remarkable appeared upon the young woman's face.

A strange radiance...

and fear...

both at once.

It was as though she already sensed some approaching sorrow.

As though she longed to shield their fragile bond from the gaze of the world-a bond that had not yet even found the shelter of a name.

Then she would quietly place another record upon the player.

Its first words would drift through the room:

"These tears are the language of my heart..."

That alone was enough.

At once, some old wound within the young man would reopen.

A quiet sadness would descend upon him.

Everything in the room remained exactly as before-the walls, the curtains, the table, the record player, the sunlight spilling through the window.

Only something inside him changed.

It seemed to him that it was not the young woman who was playing the song.

It was her silence.

Everything they had never found the courage to say seemed somehow to be born again in those melodies.

□

The real reason her family had moved into that house became known only much later.

At the time, the young man himself was struggling through such a turbulent period of his own life that many things happening around him passed before his eyes without ever finding a permanent place in memory.

The years 1973–74 were like a season of unending storms within him.

When one is struggling merely to find one's own path through darkness, little attention remains for the events unfolding around oneself.

Years afterwards, someone told him what had happened.

On the ground floor of the building, among the three shops facing the road, there had been a barber's salon.

The young man who ran it had become entangled in a romantic affair that eventually erupted into bitter conflict.

The quarrel escalated.

Voices were raised.

Fights broke out.

Some of the men even stormed the upper floors of the building.

That part of the neighbourhood already possessed an unfortunate reputation for such disturbances.

On the advice of colleagues from his office, the young woman's father decided to move his family elsewhere.

He rented another house in Right Town.

The new house bore little resemblance to the old one.

It was an older building.

Whether it contained four flats or eight, memory can no longer say with certainty.

Time has blurred that detail.

What remains clear is this:

Her family lived upstairs.

A staircase rose from the entrance and divided towards two apartments above.

In front of the flats on the ground floor lay small gardens.

Because of them, one had to walk along a narrow open pathway beneath the sky before reaching the staircase.

It was barely wide enough for two people to pass side by side.

Along the edge of that path, beside the garden wall, the young man would lean his old Hercules bicycle.

Looking back now, it seems that the bicycle was never merely a bicycle.

It stood there as a silent witness to those meetings.

That narrow path beneath the open sky gradually became the safest place for their conversations.

No appointments were ever made.

No clocks were consulted.

Sometimes the young woman happened to be coming downstairs just as he arrived.

Sometimes he found her waiting upon the staircase as he was leaving.

At times she would accompany him down, and before either realised it, they would both find themselves standing together upon that narrow path, unable to continue in either direction.

Occasionally someone upstairs would call her name.

She heard the first call...

and pretended not to.

The second call would come.

She would smile at him, almost asking with her eyes,

"Should I go now?"

By the third call she would softly say,

"All right... I'd better go."

Yet her feet somehow refused to move.

The conversation would wander into another direction.

Many times it was the young man who finally grew uneasy.

"You should go now," he would say quietly.

"They're calling you."

She would look at him for another lingering moment, as though trying to make even that tiny farewell last a little longer.

Then she would slowly climb the stairs.

Halfway up, she would sometimes turn back for one last glance.

He remained standing exactly where he was until she disappeared from sight.

There was one small habit of hers that never escaped his notice.

As they talked, she constantly shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

Then, after a while, she would shift it back again.

It was as though some invisible rhythm moved within her body, audible only to herself.

Sometimes her fingers played absently with the corner of her dupatta.

Sometimes they became entwined with one another.

Perhaps a psychologist could explain the meaning of such gestures.

The young man knew only this:

Whenever she became truly absorbed in what she was saying, these little movements simply happened of their own accord.

He scarcely noticed them.

He remained far more captivated by the questions swimming quietly within her eyes and by the faint tremor that sometimes entered her voice.

Evening would descend without either of them noticing.

The shadows of the trees slowly lengthened.

The blue of the sky gently faded.

One house lit its lamp.

Then another.

Then another.

The air filled with the first coolness of approaching night.

And still they remained standing there-

as though time itself had quietly found another path and flowed around them.

They talked endlessly.

So endlessly that almost none of the conversations themselves survive.

Which book they discussed.

Which teacher.

Which examination.

Which neighbour.

All of it has dissolved into mist.

Memory preserved none of the words.

Only the silences between them.

Looking back now, it seems that every conversation was merely a long circle woven around a single sentence-

the one sentence both longed to say,

yet from whose threshold both turned back each time.

Sometimes love is recognised not by its declaration...

but by its hesitation.

Both carried it within them.

It walked beside them.

It accompanied them home.

At night it sat quietly beside their pillows.

Yet whenever it rose towards their lips, some unseen hand gently sealed them shut.

Perhaps the young man's fear was different from hers.

Perhaps she feared her family, while he feared the future.

Perhaps one feared losing what already existed, while the other feared how completely everything might change if what remained unspoken were finally spoken aloud.

Or perhaps there was no reason at all.

Some relationships remain at their most beautiful precisely because they never hurry towards a final definition.

They continue to breathe quietly within that silent space between two heartbeats-

where words arrive...

but are never born.

Standing there, upon that narrow pathway beneath the open sky, those two young hearts knew none of this.

They knew only that some delicate thread existed between them-

invisible,

yet strong enough to draw them back to that very place, evening after evening.

It was woven equally from fear and hope.

From silence.

And from that unspoken love...

which perhaps would never have remained quite so beautiful had it ever been spoken aloud.

□

That young woman was an enigma.

So, complete an enigma that no single definition could ever contain her. Trying to understand her was like trying to catch one's own reflection in the clear current of a flowing river.

Once she had made up her mind, she never turned back.

Yet there was never any desire in her resolve to defeat another. Instead, she quietly sacrificed her own wishes. She absorbed her share of suffering into herself but never allowed pain to spill over into someone else's life. It was as though she had embraced a private creed in which victory meant willingly stepping aside.

She lived according to principles entirely her own.

They had not come from books.

Nor from sermons.

Perhaps her own soul had fashioned them.

There was no room in her world for deceit, manipulation, falsehood, or pretence.

She rarely grew angry without reason.

Indeed, anger seemed almost absent from her nature.

Yet she was equally careful not to become, herself, the needless object of another person's resentment, reproach, or criticism. Around herself she carried an invisible boundary of quiet dignity-a boundary no one could see, and yet one not easily crossed.

Sometimes the young man felt that she lived beneath the discipline of some unspoken vow.

A vow she had never confessed to anyone.

Perhaps not even to herself.

...

To this day he has never understood by what mysterious design existence brought their lives together.

Was it truly a relationship?

Or merely two life-lines travelling side by side for a little while?

Should it be called love?

Affection?

Friendship?

Reverence?

Compassion?

Or did it belong to some unnamed country lying between all these words-a place where language itself arrives only to acknowledge its own limitations?

Even after all these years, whenever he remembers that afternoon of *Dhuledi*, it is not the conversation that returns first.

It is the atmosphere of the room.

Sunlight filtered gently through the curtains.

The small vermilion mark upon the framed photograph of Indira Gandhi glowed like the flame of a tiny lamp.

Outside, children laughed noisily in the lane.

Somewhere far away, a *dholak* beat softly.

The air carried the mingled fragrance of damp earth and wet *gulal*.

And yet inside that room, time itself seemed to pause.

There was none of Holi's riotous colour there.

Only a strange and profound stillness.

Looking back now, he often wonders:

Did she really place *gulal* only upon a photograph?

Or was she bowing before an idea rather than a person?

Perhaps she was offering colour to an ideal, a loyalty, an invisible debt, or a private vow that belonged entirely to herself, and into which no one else had any right to inquire.

Then again, perhaps these are merely the inventions of his own mind.

The truth may have been infinitely simpler.

Or infinitely deeper.

That is the peculiar nature of memory.

It never returns whole.

Every recollection arrives carrying with it a little mist.

Perhaps because we do not remember events alone-

we continually recreate their meanings.

The same moment returns differently at every stage of life.

Many times, he has wished he could go back and ask that young woman-who now survives only in memory-

"Why did you stop me from putting gulal on you that day?"

But people who live only in memory never answer.

They simply smile.

Exactly as she smiled that afternoon.

Quietly.

Without explanation.

Without insistence.

How extraordinary that smile was.

It held neither acceptance nor refusal.

Neither an invitation to come closer nor a gesture asking him to go away.

It seemed to say:

Not every question deserves an answer.

Some things in life are meant to be lived, not understood.

And then he realises that perhaps she had always been more mature than he was.

Not merely in years-

but inwardly.

Some people carry within themselves a still lake long before life has had the chance to age them.

The winds may ripple its surface.

Its depths remain undisturbed.

She seemed to belong to that rare company.

She never made a spectacle of her desires.

Nor did she ever keep an account of her sacrifices.

Whatever she lost, she surrendered quietly.

Whatever she received, she accepted with equal silence.

Even today the young man sometimes feels that she belonged to another age altogether.

As though she had wandered accidentally into this one.

Amidst the noise of modern life, its endless competitions, its little deceits, its relationships that shift according to convenience, she stood

like an ancient tree whose roots reached farther into the earth than anyone could see.

Looking at her, one felt that truth itself could sometimes become a person's nature-

not merely one of their virtues.

Time passed.

They travelled far away from one another, each along separate roads.

Yet some relationships do not end with time.

They merely change their form.

They withdraw from the outer world and become part of the landscape within.

There they endure not like monuments, but like rivers-

always flowing.

Sometimes one hears their voice.

Sometimes one only feels their quiet moisture.

They remained alive within one another.

Even when, many years later, the young woman drew her final breath, the young man was still alive somewhere within her.

Whether he ever knew it or not...

I know.

And I shall tell you that story too.

How could I possibly leave it untold?

How else could such a burden ever be laid down?

Be patient.

Before I leave, I shall show you every hidden chamber and every forgotten corner of this tale.

Today, when the young man looks back, he feels that perhaps the young woman did not come into his life merely to teach him how to love.

She taught him something rarer.

She taught him the dignity of love.

She taught him that love is not always fulfilled by possession.

Sometimes its highest form lies in honouring another person's boundaries.

In accepting another's silence exactly as it is.

In placing one's deepest longing gently before another's decision-

and then, without complaint or drama,

quietly taking it back again.

Perhaps this is love's most difficult discipline.

Then once more he sees before him that invisible tetrahedron.

The heart.

The mind.

The young woman's way of seeing.

And a fourth corner-

one he has never been able to name.

Sometimes he thinks that fourth corner belongs to God.

Or perhaps to Existence itself.

A human being may reach three corners.

The fourth is never ours.

Yet it alone completes the shape.

And it remains the greatest mystery of all.

Perhaps that is why some questions in life are never solved.

They were never meant to be.

They exist only to keep us humble-

to remind us that, within this immeasurable universe, there is something infinitely greater than understanding.

Wonder.

And perhaps wonder is simply another name for love.

Standing now at such a great distance from the young man I once was, I have begun to glimpse one possible truth.

Perhaps not every relationship needs a name.

Some relationships come into being only to introduce us to the deepest regions of our own selves.

They do not remain in our lives for long.

Instead, they descend quietly into our being.

Their true gift is not companionship-

but self-discovery.

Perhaps that was the real meaning of the bond between that young man and that young woman.

Or perhaps...

this is only one of four possible answers.

Her answer will never be known now.

Unless, somewhere beyond this life, such a thing as rebirth truly exists...

and one day those two should happen to meet again.

Would the young man still remember his old question?

"Why did you stop me from putting gulal on you that day?"

And even if he did-

would she still remember that Dhuledi afternoon?

And if she remembered...

would she finally tell him the truth?

□

There is another Holi memory.

It must have been the spring of 1974.

I have already narrated the incident itself in detail in the opening chapter of this memoir. But just now another small, tender fragment of that story has returned to me. If I leave it unwritten, something essential will remain incomplete.

What can one possibly say about *Abhimaan* that has not already been said?

You know the film as well as I do.

Majrooh Sultanpuri did not merely write its lyrics; he seemed to have poured poetry straight from his heart onto the page. S. D. Burman's music gave those words a soul of their own, while the voices of Mohammed Rafi, Lata Mangeshkar, and Kishore Kumar carried them into immortality.

Among its songs was one that has never truly left me:

"हे नदिया किनारे हेराई, आई कंगना
ऐसे उलझ गए, अनाड़ी सजना
नदिया किनारे. . . .
काहे पनघट ऊपर, गई थी चलके अकेली
मारे हँस हँस ताना, सारी सखियाँ सहेली
गोरी और जाओ न मानो कहना
नदिया किनारे. . . .
अब खड़ी खड़ी सोचूँ
देखी है सास ननंदीया सब का करी है बहाना
अब तो सूनी कलाई लै के चोरी चोरी जाना

भारी पड़ा रे पिया से मिलना
नदिया किनारे. . . .”

"By the riverbank, my bracelet slipped away...
Such was the clumsiness of my innocent beloved...
Why did I go alone to the village well?
Now all my friends tease me with knowing smiles...
How heavy the price of meeting one's beloved has become..."

Composed by S. D. Burman, the melody rests largely upon *Raga Pilu*, whose gentle blend of sweetness and longing gives the song its unmistakable emotional colour. The use of soft notes lends it the ache of separation, while Majrooh Sultanpuri's lyrics and Lata Mangeshkar's voice bring it close to the world of the *thumri*. One also hears unmistakable echoes of the folk traditions of *Kajri*. Set in the six-beat *Dadra* rhythm, the song moves with a graceful, unhurried pulse that perfectly mirrors the heroine's quiet restlessness.

I do not know when, or how, or by what mysterious route this song became forever entwined with that young woman.

Some songs become another name for a face.

You hear the melody...

but someone else's image appears before your eyes.

That is exactly what happened to this song.

In those days there were no deafening DJs.

There were only enormous loudspeakers fixed to electric poles during festivals, perched upon tiled roofs, suspended from terraces, or, if nowhere else could be found, placed outside the very shops that rented them out. From morning until evening those speakers filled entire neighbourhoods with film songs.

Whenever this particular melody floated through the air, a curious transformation took place.

The face of Jaya Bhaduri disappeared.

In her place he saw only that girl.

Returning from the village well.

A water pot balanced upon her head.

The same shy eyes.

The same innocence.

The same unspoken warmth.

With every verse she seemed to come a little closer.

It no longer felt as though he were hearing a song.

It was her footsteps that had dissolved into the wind.

There is an episode connected with this very song that you have already read about in the opening chapter.

Let me remind you.

It was the night of *Holika Dahan*.

A full-moon night in the intoxicating month of *Phalguna*.

A few old friends from Model High School-now scattered among different colleges-had gathered near the house of one of them in Gangasagar Colony, in the Garha area. Around them stretched open fields covered with fresh green grass.

Like so many boys of that age, they organised a small festive gathering.

There was *bhang* mixed into sweetened milk.

There were sweets prepared with *bhang*.

For nearly everyone present it was the first such experience.

The more cautious among them consumed very little.

The adventurous ones rather more.

It did not take long before the intoxicating effects announced themselves.

Soon everyone realised that remaining there much longer would be unwise.

The young man left with two of his friends.

I have already described everything that followed in detail elsewhere.

He himself sat upon the carrier of one friend's bicycle while another friend rode beside them.

As they passed one of the neighbourhood bonfires, a loudspeaker suddenly began playing:

"By the riverbank, my bracelet slipped away..."

That was enough.

The *bhang* had already loosened every restraint within him.

Now the song knocked upon every hidden chamber of memory.

Instantly the young woman filled his thoughts.

Almost like a formal declaration, he announced that he had to see her-

immediately.

At once.

The plan had originally been quite different.

The friend whose bicycle he occupied was to leave him at his own house, after which the second friend-who also happened to be his neighbour-would escort him safely home.

But now the song kept repeating itself inside his head.

Again.

And again.

And again.

"By the riverbank..."

Each repetition summoned the same vision.

The young woman returning from the village well.

A water pot resting upon her head.

The faint fragrance of damp cloth.

As though she herself had stepped quietly out of an old dream.

At last, seeing no other choice, his friends changed direction.

Instead of taking him home, they rode towards her house.

The neighbour remained downstairs.

The other friend led the young man upstairs.

By chance, her parents were not at home.

The moment her brothers and sisters noticed the young man's unusual state, they quietly withdrew into the inner rooms.

A few moments later she came out.

She tried to understand what had happened.

The questions she asked were answered not by him, but by his friend.

She seemed mildly annoyed.

Then, quite unexpectedly, the young man asked for some betel nut.

Without a word she disappeared inside.

A moment later she returned carrying half a whole areca nut and the small cutter used for slicing it.

Placing them before him, she said,

"Very well... you cut it yourself... and you eat it yourself."

There was irritation in her voice.

There was affection too.

And perhaps, hidden beneath both, a touch of helplessness.

Then, turning towards his friend, she said quietly,

"Please... make sure he gets home safely."

The young man wished to remain.

Perhaps he wanted to say something.

Or perhaps nothing at all.

Perhaps he merely wished to continue looking at her.

But his friend gently took hold of him and almost forced him towards the staircase.

Even while descending he kept stopping, insisting upon turning back for one more glimpse.

His friend laughed.

"You wanted to see her, didn't you? You have seen her. Now come."

Everything that happened afterwards I have already told you.

Yet one image remains before me with extraordinary clarity.

As the two friends rode away on the bicycle, the young woman stood upon the balcony watching them leave.

Moonlight rested softly upon her face.

And whatever intoxication the *bhang* had given the young man had by then dissolved into an altogether different kind of enchantment.

Perhaps it was from that very night that this song found its permanent home within his memory.

Even today, if somewhere in the distance he hears the opening notes of

"By the riverbank, my bracelet slipped away..."

he no longer remembers Jaya Bhaduri.

Nor does he recall a single frame from the film.

Before his eyes appears only that young woman-

walking home from the village well,

the water pot balanced gracefully upon her head...

and then,

standing silently upon the balcony,

watching him disappear into the night.

Some songs never grow old.

Like the heartbeat,

they accompany us for an entire lifetime.

□

Look at this photograph.

The young man and his childhood friend are riding home on their bicycles.

The incident connected with this picture consists of nothing more than a single sentence-a passing remark, almost too ordinary to notice. Yet sometimes an entire lifetime can hide inside a single sentence. Let me tell you why.

But first, simply look at the photograph.

That afternoon was no different from countless others.

The sunlight held no extraordinary brilliance.

The breeze carried no omen that anything memorable was about to be spoken.

Nothing hinted that a few casual words would one day remain preserved in memory for decades, like an old letter pressed between the pages of a forgotten book-its paper yellowed with age, its ink faded almost beyond recognition, and yet its meaning as alive as ever.

The young man was returning from the girl's house with his childhood friend.

Each rode his own bicycle.

The girl's family had once lived in the same neighbourhood, so her home was as familiar to his friend as it was to him.

Their friendship belonged not to any single stage of life but had been tempered through years of shared streets, muddy monsoons, school bells, borrowed books, anxious nights before examinations, and endless summer afternoons.

People in the neighbourhood spoke of their friendship almost as one speaks of an old and trusted legend.

They knew each other's secrets.

Many things hidden even from their families had never remained hidden from one another.

And yet there was one remarkable exception.

The young man's love for that girl was the only secret he had never shared-even with his dearest friend.

To him, this love was never something to be proclaimed.

It resembled worship more than romance.

One does not make noise about worship.

Some relationships seem to lose a measure of their purity the moment they are translated into words.

He had always believed that the moment an emotion is given a name, it begins to shrink.

Left within silence, it remains as boundless as the sky.

Their bicycles rolled side by side along the road.

Sometimes one moved slightly ahead.

Then the other caught up.

Their conversation drifted just as freely-from college lectures to studies, from the curious habits of new classmates to hockey matches, old school memories, newly opened shops in the neighbourhood, and countless other ordinary things.

Then, without warning-

as suddenly as a stone falling into the still surface of a lake-

his friend said,

"You know... you and that girl would make a wonderful couple."

The young man's hands tightened instinctively around the handlebars.

It felt as though someone had somehow read the letter; he had never even written.

He was startled.

Disarmed.

Embarrassed.

A hundred questions rushed through his mind at once.

How could he possibly know?

I never told him.

I never told anyone.

I never even managed to tell her.

Then by what mysterious road had this knowledge reached him?

Perhaps love possesses its own language.

It speaks less through lips than through eyes.

The more carefully we build walls around our feelings, the more quietly our eyes open windows through those very walls.

At that very moment another voice seemed to rise from somewhere deep within him-the famous opening couplet of Mir Taqi Mir:

Every leaf and every blade of grass know the story of my heart. Only the flower remains unaware, while the whole garden already knows.

What a strange irony.

The entire world discovers the secret we strive hardest to conceal.

Only the one for whom the secret exists remains unaware of it.

The young man neither denied his friend's words...

nor accepted them.

He asked only one quiet question.

"Why?"

His friend laughed.

"Come on! You'll become an engineer... and she'll become a doctor. If an engineer and a doctor don't make the perfect pair, who will?"

It was such an ordinary sentence.

No poetry.

No philosophy.

No grand declaration.

Yet some sentences enter our lives with the quiet authority of destiny.

They sound insignificant when first spoken.

Only years later do we realise that an entire lifetime had been hidden within them.

For one brief moment the young man found himself transported into another world.

For the first time, he no longer imagined his future as belonging to himself alone.

There were now two figures within it.

A young woman in a white doctor's coat.

A young man as an engineer.

A small house.

Books lining the shelves.

Evening tea.

The fatigue of hospital wards.

Files carried home from the office.

The vision lasted only a few fleeting moments.

Then it dissolved like morning mist.

How curious the human mind is.

A single sentence allows it to travel decades into the future-

while remaining utterly ignorant of the very next bend in the road.

Perhaps that is what hope really is.

Hope is not the truth about the future.

It is the most beautiful creation of the present.

For a while they rode in silence.

Only the soft hiss of bicycle tyres upon the road and the quiet murmur of chains turning through their gears filled the stillness.

The road remained the same.

The trees remained the same.

Even the wind remained the same.

Only something within the young man had changed.

Now, with every turn of the pedals, it seemed less as though he were travelling along a road than across the landscape of his own imagination.

Home lay scarcely two kilometres away.

Perhaps they spoke of other things before arriving.

Perhaps they laughed.

Perhaps they discussed college, examinations, or the latest film.

Memory can be merciless.

It does not preserve an entire afternoon.

It saves only that one sentence which touched the soul.

Soon they reached their neighbourhood.

At the familiar turning they looked at one another, exactly as they always did.

Then each turned into his own lane.

Outwardly everything remained perfectly ordinary.

But that day the young man did not return home alone.

A sentence came home with him.

"You and that girl would make a wonderful couple."

Years later, after life had delivered its own irrevocable verdicts, he came to understand something.

Our most beautiful memories are not necessarily those that came true.

More often, they are the ones that never did-

yet continue glowing within us throughout our lives like a gentle, unwavering light.

Perhaps that is the philosophy of unfinished love.

It does not end because it remains unfulfilled.

Instead, it becomes fragrance.

And when that fragrance carries not only the sorrow of never having attained what one desired but also the untouched purity of the soul itself, it becomes love's most enduring form-

one that perhaps continues to beat even after the breath has ceased.

Neither the young man nor his childhood friend knew, on that ordinary afternoon, that the friend's casual remark would echo through the years like a prayer that had never been answered.

Some sentences enter the book of life almost carelessly.

Time alone reveals their meaning.

How strange it is that the future seldom announces its arrival.

It comes disguised as the most ordinary of moments.

That afternoon two boys were merely riding their bicycles home.

Little did they know that destiny was riding beside them-

silent,

unseen,

already occupied with its own inscrutable designs.

It was the first time the young man had heard the secret world of his own heart spoken aloud by someone else's voice.

He could not understand how his most carefully hidden wish-

one he had concealed even from himself in the deepest corner of his heart-

had somehow found its way into another person's words.

What he did not yet know was this:

A wish being recognised is no guarantee that it will ever be fulfilled.

Recognition and fulfilment travel by entirely different roads.

Perhaps it is here that life becomes most mysterious.

It grants us hope-

and hides within that very hope the first seed of our trial.

What happens to us is never merely a succession of events.

Sometimes it is precisely what never happens that becomes the greatest sculptor of our character.

Now, when the young man looks back upon that afternoon after so many years, his friend's effortless remark feels almost like a prophecy.

Only one thing was different.

Prophecies rarely come true in the way they first appear.

Destiny does not change the words.

It changes their meaning.

And once the meaning changes, the very sentence that once arrived as a smile may remain forever as a quiet ache.

Perhaps that is why the old and the wise have always said:

A person may choose his dreams-

but never their fulfilment.

The fulfilment always belongs to Time.

And Time has never shared its deepest secrets with anyone.

□

Come, let us look at this photograph -

This photograph was taken in the third house to which the girl's family moved in 1977. Their old house in Wright Town had become dangerously dilapidated with age. Little by little it had begun to crumble, and everyone feared that one day some accident might happen. So, they searched for another home and finally settled in the Madan Mahal area.

To reach that house one had to cross the iron footbridge built by the railway authorities over Madan Mahal railway station. It had stairways on either side, while the middle span was laid with thick steel chequered plates. Beneath them ran the railway tracks. Along both

staircases were narrow concrete ramps, built so that cyclists could push their bicycles up and down without having to carry them.

How many times the boy must have wheeled his faithful Hercules bicycle across that bridge on his way to her house!

That bridge is gone now. In its place there is an underpass connecting Damoh Naka with Tripuri Square-a route that probably existed even then, though it was of little use for someone approaching from the boy's side of town. Today a modern cable-stayed flyover rises there, making the crossing of Madan Mahal station effortless.

But I have wandered away from the photograph.

Let us return to it.

The girl is seated in the drawing room of their new house, quietly studying. Her younger sister is in the room as well. It is late evening. Today is the girl's birthday. The boy has brought a small gift for her, carefully hidden away. He is simply waiting for the younger sister to leave the room so that he can quietly place it in the girl's hands.

But the younger sister shows no sign of getting up. She studies, she chats, she lingers. The girl senses that the boy is waiting for something, yet nothing happens. Evening slowly deepens into night.

Then, as though God Himself had heard the boy's silent prayer, the younger sister finally rose and went inside.

Without wasting a moment, the boy took out the little keepsake he had hidden and placed it in the girl's hand.

She accepted it but looked startled.

"What is this?"

"It's your birthday today, isn't it?" the boy replied.

She looked at him with eyes full of disbelief.

"My birthday is next month."

The boy felt the ground shift beneath him.

He distinctly remembered reading her date of birth on one of her marksheets. The date had been unmistakable-the very day and month that had brought him there.

He could not understand why she was saying this. Nor could he understand why she wished to deny it.

A strange emptiness came over him.

He stood up quietly, said nothing, walked out, lifted his bicycle, and rode home.

He never looked back to see whether she had followed him to the door.

Nor did he ever ask what became of the little gift he had brought for her.

□

Let us step back a little.

Since we have been speaking of bicycles, look at this photograph now.

The boy is riding his Hercules bicycle, and the girl is seated on the carrier behind him.

This picture belongs to the days of the old house in Wright Town.

One afternoon the boy had to deliver a lunch box to his younger sister.

His sister and the girl studied at the same college. Calling his sister out to the college gate to hand over the lunch box somehow seemed awkward to him. Since the girl's house was close to the college, he went there first.

The girl happened to be at home. Why she was there that day, he can no longer remember.

He first sought permission from her mother.

Then he turned to the girl.

"Come with me. Please take this lunch box and give it to my sister. It'll only take ten minutes."

The girl fixed him with a long look. Then she narrowed her eyes ever so slightly, as though saying, *I know exactly what you're up to.*

The boy had already started descending the stairs.

"Come on," he called back. "We'll be late."

A few minutes later she came downstairs, having changed her clothes.

He handed her the lunch box, which had been secured to the bicycle's carrier, wheeled the Hercules out onto the road, mounted it, and she took her place on the carrier behind him.

The bicycle rolled forward.

Everything was perfectly ordinary.

And then the boy began to hear a loud, pounding sound.

For a few moments he could not place it.

Then he realized-it was the sound of his own heart.

It was beating so violently that he could almost hear it.

The girl remained silent.

So did the boy.

He could not decide whether to say something or simply surrender himself to the strange happiness flowing through him. It was the first time they had ever gone anywhere alone together.

A few moments passed.

Now it was no longer a few words that struggled to escape him.

It seemed as though an entire dictionary wished to pour out of his mouth.

But...

Once again, that single *but* stopped him.

Countless questions, countless unfinished sentences, countless possibilities-all beginning with the word *What if...?*-crowded his thoughts and held him back.

By then they had reached the college.

The errand for which they had come was completed.

Then they began the journey back.

Straight from the college to her home.

The boy still could not summon the courage to speak to her.

And you must be wondering why he did not take her instead to Bhanwartal Garden, or perhaps to the Coffee House.

Had he done so, this story might have been an entirely different one.

But destiny allows only what has already been written into its script.

Upon this vast stage of the world, every play unfolds under its unseen direction.

The return journey was not completely silent. They did exchange a few words.

Yet, from the boy's point of view, even if they had spoken nothing at all, it would hardly have made any difference.

Still...

Something new had happened that day.

And for the boy, that alone was enough to fill his heart with quiet happiness.

□

Let us step back a little.

Since bicycles have already entered the story, let me show you another photograph.

In it, the boy is riding his faithful Hercules bicycle, while the girl sits quietly on the carrier behind him. It belongs to the days when her family still lived in the old house in Wright Town.

To anyone else, it would seem an utterly ordinary scene-a boy, a girl, a bicycle, and a few familiar streets of a small city.

But memory has a curious way of preserving ordinary moments. Years later, one can return to them and hear, within their silence, the heartbeat of an entire lifetime.

That afternoon the boy had to deliver a lunch box to his younger sister at college. His sister and the girl studied there together. Somehow, the thought of calling his sister out to the college gate and handing her the tiffin in full view of dozens of curious girls made him uncomfortable.

The girl's house stood only a short distance from the college.

Why not ask for her help?

So, he rode straight there.

There must have been some reason why he knew he would find her at home. She was indeed there. Today he can no longer remember why she had not gone to college that day. Whatever the reason may have been, it has faded into oblivion. Perhaps destiny had quietly reserved that afternoon for its own purpose.

Memory is selective. It keeps only what it believes is essential. Sometimes it preserves an entire scene but lets the conversation disappear. Sometimes only a handful of words survive while everything else dissolves into silence.

The boy first sought permission from her mother.

"If you don't mind," he said, "may I take her with me to the college? She only has to hand this lunch box to my sister. It'll take no more than ten minutes."

Her mother smiled and agreed.

The boy turned towards the girl.

"Come along. You can give it to her."

She looked at him for a long moment.

Then her eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

In that fleeting glance, she seemed to say far more than words ever could.

"I know exactly what you're doing... Is the lunch box really the reason, or merely an excuse?"

She said all of this with her eyes alone.

Her lips never moved.

The boy, pretending not to have understood the language of that silence, hurried down the stairs.

"Come quickly," he called. "We'll be late."

A few minutes later she came downstairs. She had probably changed her clothes. He no longer remembers what colour she wore.

Memory is strange that way.

Sometimes it preserves a face but forgets the clothes.

At other times it remembers the flutter of a dupatta while the face itself grows indistinct.

She asked nothing.

Neither did he.

He took the lunch box from where it was secured on the bicycle's carrier and placed it in her hands. Then he straightened the Hercules, gripped the handlebars, climbed onto the saddle, and she settled quietly on the carrier behind him.

That was all.

Nothing more.

Yet some journeys are no longer than this, and later they seem longer than an entire lifetime.

The Hercules rolled gently onto the road.

First came the faint creaking of its wheels.

Then the whisper of the evening breeze.

Then the shadows of trees slipping backwards across the road.

And then...

Suddenly the boy became aware of a loud, rhythmic pounding.

Thud...

Thud...

Thud...

He glanced around.

The road was almost deserted.

Only after a few moments did he realise that the sound was not coming from anywhere outside.

It was rising from within him.

It was the sound of his own heart.

It was as though his heart had chosen that very moment to announce its existence for the first time. It beat with such force that it seemed a door, long locked, had suddenly swung open.

He even feared that the girl might hear it.

Sometimes we are less frightened of our silence than of the noise made by our own hearts.

The girl remained silent.

So did the boy.

Inside him, however, words had gathered like a crowded fair.

Not merely a sentence or two, but countless beginnings, countless questions, countless confessions.

An entire dictionary stood waiting upon his lips.

He could have asked.

He could have spoken.

Every sentence that might have been uttered came racing through his mind.

Yet none found its way into the air.

For every thought that approached the threshold of speech, another word appeared before it like a vigilant gatekeeper.

What if...

What if she took offence?

What if she laughed?

What if she refused?

What if he was never again welcome in her home?

What if even this small, fragile closeness was lost forever?

Life often allows us to overcome formidable obstacles, yet there are moments when we are defeated by a single, insignificant word.

That afternoon, the word was *what if*.

Looking back now, he sometimes feels that there were not two people riding that Hercules bicycle.

There were three.

The boy.

The girl.

And that invisible companion called *What if*.

It was this unseen traveller who quietly turned every word back into silence before it could cross the boy's lips.

By then they had reached the college.

The errand that had brought them there was completed without ceremony. His sister accepted the lunch box. Perhaps a few ordinary words were exchanged.

Those words have disappeared.

Memory discarded them because they never belonged to the real story.

The true story was contained entirely within those few silent minutes before they reached the college.

Now they began the journey home.

The same road.

The same bicycle.

The same two people.

Outwardly, both remained calm.

The boy knew only what was happening within himself-a restless sea beneath an unruffled surface.

Of the girl's inner world, he knew nothing.

Perhaps she was as serene within as she appeared without.

Perhaps what the boy experienced as an unforgettable turning point was, for her, nothing more than helping a friend deliver a lunch box.

And yet...

Something had changed.

Not outside.

Inside.

The boy found himself even more shy than before. It seemed that once silence had seated itself between them, it had become impossible to ask it to leave.

He surrendered completely to destiny.

You may be wondering why he did not turn towards Bhanwartal Garden.

Why he did not suggest the Coffee House.

Why he did not invent some harmless excuse to spend a little more time with her.

Yes...

He could have.

He could have stolen a few more precious moments.

Had he done so...

perhaps the next chapters of his life would have been written differently.

Perhaps everything would have changed.

Or perhaps nothing would have.

For if nothing was destined to change, why should it have changed merely because of another hour together?

Looking back, we build entire worlds out of possibilities.

Life, however, walks only the road upon which our feet actually fall.

And where those feet finally step...

Perhaps that choice belongs to Someone Else.

Does destiny write its script before we begin our journey?

Or do we write it as we walk?

The boy has never found an answer.

He has understood only this:

What remained unsaid that day became just as large a part of his life as anything he might have spoken.

The return journey was not entirely silent.

A few ordinary remarks floated between them-about the road, the college, home, the weather, perhaps even about someone they both knew.

But from the boy's point of view, those were not really conversations.

They were merely little ripples along the banks of silence.

The real river flowed unseen within.

They reached her house.

She climbed down from the bicycle.

Perhaps there was the faintest trace of a smile upon her face.

Then she went upstairs.

The boy remained standing beside his bicycle for a few moments, one hand resting upon the handlebars, as though he still could not believe that such a small journey had truly taken place.

Gently, he patted the handlebars of his Hercules.

It seemed to him that the bicycle had carried much more than two young people that day.

Upon its wheels it had borne the purest, most innocent, and most silent happiness of his youth.

Nothing had been gained.

Nothing had been confessed.

And yet, as he rode home, there was a quiet radiance within him-

like the sunlight that appears after rain, settling softly upon leaves still glistening with water.

□

Here are a few more photographs, much like the previous one.

The same Hercules bicycle. The same two riders-or rather, all three. Yes, *something* was always travelling with them, invisible yet inseparable.

The same roads. The same conversations about things that never really needed to be said-and yet were spoken endlessly. While the words that truly mattered kept circling quietly around them, never quite finding a voice. They remained suspended between them, forever unspoken.

There was, however, one occasion when the girl did say something important.

"There's a boy in my neighbourhood who troubles me on my way to college. He studies in your college too. He's your junior. Please speak to him properly. Don't fight with him-just explain things to him, like a senior."

There was nothing remotely romantic in what she said. No hidden confession. No coded declaration.

Yet, to the boy, those simple words carried more meaning than he could ever have hoped for.

The fact that a neighbourhood boy was harassing her was one thing. Naturally, he had to deal with him.

But she had chosen to tell him, and no one else.

To the boy, that meant everything.

It meant she trusted him. She had asked something of him as though she had every right to. She was also sitting comfortably beside him on his bicycle, entirely at ease-as if, without ever saying it aloud, she was telling him that while casual remarks or unwanted attention from others made her uncomfortable, she felt safe in his company.

Later, with the help of a few boys from his group, he found the fellow in college. They warned him firmly to stay away from her.

After that, the girl never mentioned him again.

And so, upon the silent weave of feelings hidden beneath even the deepest layers of the heart, and the countless ordinary, seemingly meaningless conversations that filled their days, Time continued to work its loom. No recognisable pattern emerged upon the fabric. It remained an abstract tapestry of uneven colours and irregular shapes, rough, unfinished and impossible to decipher.

Perhaps the Weaver above, who was creating those patterns, had an entirely different understanding of them.

But the two of them remained completely unaware of the language being woven into the cloth that was slowly wrapping itself around their lives.

□

Come now-turn the next flap of the album.

These photographs belong to the wedding of one of the boy's adopted sisters.

There is something else you should know.

Apart from his own family, the boy belonged to another family as well. It was the family of his closest childhood friend. The friend had two elder brothers and a much younger sister, and among those four siblings the boy had become almost a fifth brother. The bride was the eldest daughter of the friend's maternal uncle. Both she and the friend's younger sister regarded the boy as their brother. The girl was a classmate of the younger sister in college, and she knew perfectly well how deeply the boy was woven into that family's life.

She had even met the bride before.

On the day the wedding procession arrived, the girl came too. When it grew late and people began discussing her return home, she quietly announced that she would stay the night there. She remained through the entire wedding ceremony.

She was wearing a mehndi-green-perhaps one might call it sap-green-sari that day.

□

And then there is this photograph.

The loveliest one in the entire album.

I do not think a more beautiful photograph was ever taken in the boy's life.

But such is nature's peculiar way. Beautiful moments are destined either to survive only as memories or to remain imprisoned inside photographs. And even if, by some oversight, life itself grants us such moments, Time is quick to correct its mistake. At best, it leaves us with a small kindness: we may look at the photograph whenever we wish or revisit the memory whenever our heart longs for it.

Time, however, never rewinds.

It is never generous enough to let us live those precious moments once again.

There-I am wandering away from the picture again.

Look closely.

See how the two of them are sitting together on the two tin-covered steps outside the front door, like a pair of innocent birds.

The boy has just secured his first job. His appointment letter has arrived, though the formalities are still underway. He has just returned after obtaining the sureties required on the agreement papers. He has entrusted all his important documents to the girl for safekeeping, and she has carefully taken charge of every file.

Now they are talking quietly.

Words so soft that no one but the two of them can hear.

Suddenly, a few fragments of their conversation drift towards me.

The boy, catching hold of some loose thread in their conversation, asks,

"So... which boy's name do you like the most?"

The girl does not pause even for a moment.

She smiles gently and answers,

".....".

"And what about a girl's name?" the boy asks softly.

Again, without the slightest hesitation, she replies,

".....".

It almost seems as though she had chosen those names long ago.

That was all I could overhear before they disappeared once more into their own private conversation.

Like Abdullah at somebody else's wedding, hopelessly enchanted where he had no business being, I quietly walked away.

Why disturb them?

There is one more thing.

It was only much later that the boy realised why those particular names might have appealed to the girl.

By the time that understanding dawned upon him, everything had already been reduced to ruins.

You must be wondering what those names were.

Well, I can only repeat what the boy himself once told me.

The first letter of the boy's chosen name was the first letter of the girl's own name.

The last letter of that name was the last letter of the boy's own name.

Even the vowel placed in the middle occupied exactly the same position in both of their names.

As for the girl's chosen name, its rhyme echoed the affectionate name by which she was known at home.

Could all of that really have been accidental?

Did it not suggest that she had chosen those names with quiet deliberation?

At least, that was how the boy came to see it.

Why those names entered their conversation at all, I cannot say with certainty.

One can only speculate.

And I suspect that, by now, so have you.

□

Only a handful of photographs remain in this album now.

In this one, you can see the girl lying face down on a pillow, weeping silently. Her body trembles with grief. The boy stands beside the bed, unable even to comprehend what he has done. A long, merciless letter of his had washed away the painting before it had even begun to take shape. The sketch itself was still incomplete.

I know of no other story that ended before it had properly begun-indeed, that was brought to an end before it could become a story at all-except perhaps the story of this girl and this boy.

Come. Let me tell you exactly what I witnessed that day.

It was early afternoon.

The sun had drifted just a little westward from directly overhead, yet the front of the girl's house still lay bathed in bright sunlight.

The household servant was outside, washing clothes.

Suddenly, the boy appeared on his Hercules bicycle.

He leaned it carefully against the boundary wall, opened the iron gate, and walked inside.

He looked unusually grave. Perhaps anxious too. Between long, laboured breaths he seemed to be wrestling with his thoughts. One moment he appeared to have reached a decision; the next, he looked as though despair had swallowed that resolve whole.

The girl came out and quietly invited him inside.

No one else seemed to be at home. If anyone was there, they must have been somewhere in the inner rooms.

"What is it?" she asked with her usual ease.

"I need to talk to you about something very important today," the boy said. "Please try to understand what I'm about to say."

He had steeled himself.

"Wait a little. He's still working here," she replied, referring to the servant, who was spreading the freshly washed clothes out in the sun.

But the boy was too restless.

Everything he had bottled up inside himself wanted to burst out at once.

Who knows what strange alignment of stars had gathered over that pitiless afternoon? Beneath their dark shadow, an innocent story was about to be slain with astonishing cruelty.

And so, what destiny had ordained came to pass.

What had already been written in Nature's book unfolded exactly as it was meant to.

God, seated somewhere above, watched without emotion as His design took shape.

Like a bolt of lightning, calamity descended upon a field where the seeds had already been sown, but no tender shoots had yet emerged.

The boy spoke.

He said everything that fate, nature, and providence seemed to have reserved for that moment.

And he would spend the rest of his life regretting those words.

The essence of what he said was simple:

"I can no longer stand beside you."

To justify those words, he marshalled one argument after another, almost like a lawyer presenting his case.

He voiced every concern he should have confronted long before.

Truthfully, he no longer possessed the moral right to retreat in this way. To withdraw now was nothing short of abandoning the very bond he himself had nurtured.

Yet human beings possess one refuge that is always within reach.

They call it destiny.

Or fate.

Or providence.

Behind those names they hide their failures, justify their decisions, and absolve themselves of guilt. Under their shelter, almost any action, any choice, any betrayal can be made to appear reasonable.

How much of the boy's long explanation the girl actually heard can never be known.

She is no longer alive to tell us.

What we do know is that, in the end, she walked silently into the inner room, buried her face in a pillow, and wept.

Her body shook with silent sobs.

The boy followed her inside.

Even then he failed to understand the enormity of what he had done under the respectable disguises of social propriety and family obligations.

There are sins that announce themselves with thunder.

And there are those that arrive wearing the clothes of duty.

This was one of the latter.

After that, Nature quietly returned to her other occupations.

Destiny turned another page in her book.

Providence closed His eyes and went to sleep.

And the boy returned home.

Yet even then, nothing had truly ended.

The story of consequences had only just begun.

But that tale belongs elsewhere.

I shall tell it in the third part of this memoir.

□

Let me show you one or two final photographs before bringing this chapter to a close.

Life did not end after that terrible afternoon.

It never does.

In this boundless universe, stories such as these are born and die every passing moment. Some reach fulfilment; many perish halfway, unfinished and unmourned.

No celestial accountant has ever been appointed to keep their records.

Stories simply come into being...

and quietly disappear.

You will probably say that I have drifted once again into philosophy.

Very well.

Look at this photograph instead.

It was taken at a family gathering in the girl's home.

Several members of her family were present.

The girl's elder sister handed something to the boy and asked him to pass it to her.

The girl was seated across the room.

Before the boy could even reach out to take it, she rose, walked over herself, accepted it directly from her sister's hands, and, loud enough for everyone to hear, said,

"Don't ask him. If he does anything for me, he'll think he's committing a sin."

Nothing more was said.

Nothing needed to be.

□

And now, for the last photograph in this album-for the time being.

The setting is the home of the boy's closest friend.

The boy is sitting quietly in the veranda.

On the wall opposite hangs a portrait of the girl.

He had painted it himself years earlier in oils on canvas.

Inside, his adopted sister has invited several college friends over.

Among them is the girl.

The boy arrives later, unaware that she is there.

The friend's house is almost a second home to him, so he settles comfortably into his work, scarcely paying attention to the laughter drifting out from the innermost room.

The voices are cheerful, overlapping, indistinguishable.

He assumes they are simply his sister's college friends.

After a while the girls come out, ready to leave.

Even then he barely looks up.

And then-

one voice reaches him.

The girl's voice.

"So... why is this still hanging here?"

Startled, he looks up.

She does not stop.

Not even for a heartbeat.

As she walks past, she casts one sideways glance at the portrait on the wall...

then another, equally fleeting, at the boy...

and without waiting for an answer, continues walking away with her friends.

Within that single sentence-

was there a complaint?

Or embarrassment?

Was it concealed anger?

Regret?

A quiet reproach?

Or the unspoken claim of someone who still believed she had a place in his life?

The boy could not answer those questions that day.

Perhaps he never has.

She kept walking.

Still looking at him from the corner of her eyes.

The boy remained standing there, speechless.

The girls crossed the courtyard and disappeared through the green-painted wooden gate that stood open.

For a long while afterward, the boy found himself looking first at that gate-

through which the girl had just passed-

and then back at the portrait on the wall,

where -

she remained forever smiling,
looking at him with that same sideways glance.

□□□

8

Cinema

(Life's Light and Shadow on the Silver Screen)

Once, carried away by some sudden impulse, I said to Akhilesh-in the same dramatic tone with which an old slogan might echo through the air:

"Give me a camera, and I will give you a picture."

By *camera*, I meant a film camera; by *picture*, an entire motion picture. At the time, the sentence must have felt to me like a grand declaration. Looking back on it now, however, I see in it the innocent-perhaps slightly absurd-aspiration of adolescence. I did indeed nurture a desire to make films. The world of cinema fascinated me: its lights, its imagery, and the countless stories hidden within it. Yet there is a subtle distance between desire and obsession, and perhaps I never managed to cross it.

When I look back today, it seems that I possessed the wish, but not the restlessness that compels a person to stake his entire being on a dream. Perhaps that missing element determined the course of my life as well. Some dreams demand more than merely being dreamt; they must be kept burning within, like a lamp in a dark room.

Perhaps that is what happened to me. Throughout my life I dreamt many dreams-or rather, every dream I dreamt, I nurtured with great care. I made room for them in my heart; I fed them with the sunlight of imagination and the water of hope. Yet most of them-perhaps all of them-came to a halt somewhere along the way, before reaching their destination. They did not shatter; they simply faded, little by little, like

the reel of an old film whose images still exist, but whose brilliance has been lost beneath the dust of time.

Before my own dreams could step forward, the circumstances of our household and the dreams of Bai and Babuji would invariably stand before them. Yet, as I write these lines now, I find myself wondering whether I am trying to hide behind an excuse that merely appears reasonable. I do not blame my parents, but neither can I absolve them entirely.

One thing is undeniably true: I never insisted on anything. I simply hoped, silently, that they would think what I thought. But that is hardly fair. How can anyone possibly know the thoughts that remain unspoken in another's mind? Yet I was always afraid that they might suppress their own wishes in order to allow me to pursue mine. The very possibility frightened me deeply. I never wanted that.

There is something else that, at least now, I must acknowledge. I myself was unwilling to take any risk that might one day create circumstances causing pain to either of them. Even today, gathering the courage to take risks remains as difficult for me as it was then. How, then, can I hold them responsible?

I have never wished-nor do I wish today-for my happiness to come at the cost of someone else's. Yet was this reluctance born of a genuine regard for the feelings of others, or was it simply a way of keeping myself safe within my comfort zone, avoiding hardship and uncertainty? That remains a riddle, a question that still appears before me from time to time like a Yaksha's challenge.

Whenever I think I have found the answer, I imagine someone declaring it wrong. But if an answer is truly right, how and why should anyone call it wrong? And at precisely that point, I make a U-turn. I seize upon another thought and fly away from that place, leaving the question unanswered once again.

From the foregoing reflections, it must be fairly clear why, despite wanting to, I never managed to make a “picture.”

□

What did not happen, simply did not happen.

And it is not as though it can never happen now. That, however, is an entirely different matter, and perhaps best left aside for the moment.

What I do wish to say is that during my school and college years I had already watched a great many films by such towering filmmakers and directors as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Basu Bhattacharya, and Basu Chatterjee. Whenever a worthwhile documentary produced by the Films Division was screened alongside a feature film, I made sure to watch that as well. Most of those documentaries were in black and white. They often featured background scores composed by masters such as Vanraj Bhatia, Vijay Raghav Rao, and Raghunath Seth, whose music possessed a charm all its own.

This is not to suggest that I avoided mainstream family dramas or commercial entertainers. I watched those too, and I shall speak about them later. Yet if a film by any of the directors I have just mentioned happened to be shown in any cinema hall in Jabalpur, I would invariably go and watch it. Such opportunities were relatively rare, of course-except in the case of filmmakers like Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Basu Bhattacharya, and Basu Chatterjee, whose films reached audiences more frequently.

There is something I am about to confess that may sound rather childish. Whenever a scene from one of these remarkable films appealed to me, I would mentally "shoot" it again in my own way. Sometimes I would even replace the actors with others of my choosing. It was a game I played with immense delight.

The truth is that I had begun dreaming of becoming a director long before that.

The greatest influence behind this dream was probably the Ram-Leela rehearsals held at Kakka's house- "Ram Kutir"-the home of Kandhilal Ji Vishwakarma.



The rehearsals for the Girija Shankar Ramlila Samiti's annual production, staged during the Sharadiya Navratri festival, did not begin merely a day or two in advance. Preparations would start a month, sometimes six weeks, before the performances.

As soon as I had finished my evening studies, I would often hurry there. Sometimes I sat beside Kakka; at other times I squeezed into whatever little space I could find. From there I watched every activity with complete absorption. Apart from me, there was usually no one else of my age present. Kedarnath-Kandhilal Ji's second son and also my friend-never showed much interest in these rehearsals. The entire affair held little attraction for him.

I, on the other hand, would generally remain there until the very end. If it grew too late, Bua would occasionally come to fetch me. She would then spend some time chatting with Kaki before we finally returned home.

Ram Kutir was a handsome and solidly built one-and-a-half or two-storeyed house. Kakka and his family lived upstairs, while a Sindhi family occupied the ground floor as tenants.

The rehearsals took place in the drawing room, which was really a large hall. Fifteen or twenty people could comfortably sit along its walls. Except for the main entrance, the other doors were kept shut, leaving the central space open for rehearsal. Musicians with harmonium, tabla, dholak, khanjari, manjira, and ghungroos were always present. Senior members of the committee arrived carrying printed scripts of the Ram-Leela, copies of the Ramcharitmanas, and other necessary texts.

As the director, Kandhilal Ji occupied a mattress propped with cushions against the wall opposite the entrance. Sometimes he would place a harmonium before him as well. I have mentioned earlier that he walked with the aid of sturdy wooden crutches. Polio had left both his legs extremely weak and thin, yet from the waist upward he was remarkably strong, healthy, and well-built.

His voice was extraordinary-firm, resonant, and commanding. He recited passages from the Ramcharitmanas with great grace and feeling. Whenever he sang a shloka, a hymn, or a devotional song, it carried melody, rhythm, and sweetness in equal measure.

At times, other senior members present would offer their opinions regarding the staging or presentation of a particular scene. Discussions would follow, often accompanied by spirited arguments. Inwardly, I too would sometimes imagine entirely different ways of doing things, but I never found the courage to voice my thoughts.

The actors, too, contributed their own suggestions regarding dialogue delivery, expressions, gestures, and stage movements. Yet the final decision invariably rested with Kakka-though on many occasions that decision happened to favour the actor's proposal.

The same scene would be rehearsed repeatedly. Actors, singers, and musicians alike were occasionally scolded for mistakes and praised when they performed well.

For me, all of this was the gateway to a different world-a world charged with excitement and possibility. I could not have been more than eight or nine years old at the time, yet it was perhaps then, quietly and unnoticed, that the first seed of becoming a "director" was planted within me.

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After a very long interval-almost sixteen years-that same seed sprouted once again. Around 1981- 82, when I took upon myself the responsibility of staging *Pagla Ghoda*, the celebrated play by one of

India's greatest dramatists, Badal Sircar, I realized that the faint aspiration born in childhood had never truly died. It had remained alive somewhere deep within, waiting patiently for its moment, and the moment it found an opportunity, it rose once more and made its presence felt.

The performance took place, if memory serves me right, on the second day of April 1982, during the first week of the month, on the stage of the then only partially completed auditorium of the Amarkantak Thermal Power Station at Chachai, under the Madhya Pradesh Electricity Board.

But those belong to a much later chapter of life. I shall recount them in detail in the third part of this memoir.

For now, let us return to the subject of cinema.

In the end, I remained connected to cinema only as a spectator. What purpose would there be now in lamenting that fact? Life unfolded as it was destined to unfold. Yet somewhere in the heart, a faint sting remains.

"अफ़सोस किसी से मिट न सकी इंसान के दिल की तिश्ना-लबी
शबनम है कि रोया करती है, बादल हैं कि बरसा करते हैं"

- निसार इटावी

"No regret has ever quenched the thirst of the human heart;
The dewdrops continue to weep, and the clouds continue to rain."

- Nisar Itawi

As happens with most people, my relationship with cinema began with the family. I have absolutely no recollection of the very first film I ever watched. The oldest memory I possess is associated with the film *Insaniyat*.

These memories hang in the corridors of my consciousness like still photographs, suspended here and there as though in an art exhibition. Let me show you one such image.

I am sitting in Bai's lap. My younger sister Anita is not there, which means I must be about a year old, perhaps even younger. I can see a crowd returning home after the film has ended. It is not an especially large crowd. It is nighttime, so it must have been the evening show. I can see the gate of Shri Krishna Talkies. Above it hangs a large poster of the film. In the poster, a huge monkey is dangling from something with one hand. Its long tail is clearly visible. Bai is there, and so are Babuji and Bua. There may have been others with us, but I cannot say for certain. Bai, Babuji, and Bua are talking among themselves as they walk. About what, I have no idea.

Only much later did I learn that the film was *Insaniyat* and that the cinema hall was Shri Krishna Talkies. But the image I have just described has remained hanging on the clothesline of memory exactly as it was, unchanged from then until now.

Later I also learned that the film marked the first and only occasion on which Dilip Kumar and Dev Anand appeared together on screen. I came across several legend-like stories associated with the production as well. And yes, there was that monkey-or perhaps chimpanzee-in the film. I was told its name long ago, but I have since forgotten it. While writing these pages, I looked it up on Wikipedia and found "Zippo as Zippy" listed among the cast. It may well refer to the same animal. Out of curiosity, I even asked Meta AI. When queried in English, it suggested the name "Jangora"; when asked in Hindi, it answered "Jango." At present I am not entirely satisfied with any of these explanations. Perhaps I shall revisit the matter someday. For now, let us move on.

The earliest film that I remember clearly is *Harishchandra Taramati*. It was being shown at Shyam Talkies, and Babuji took me there himself. In other words, it was a film watched only by the two of us. No other member of the family accompanied us.

The film had been released in 1963 and starred Prithviraj Kapoor and Jaymala Adarsh in the leading roles. One particular song from the film-

"Jagat bhar ki roshni ke liye, Suraj re jalte rehna..."
(O Sun, keep burning for the illumination of the world...)

-filled me with a strange exhilaration the very first time I heard it.

I was barely seven years old at the time, yet both the film and this song left a profound impression upon me.

How much I truly understood, at that age, of absolute devotion to truth-of remaining faithful to it in every moment of life, of refusing to abandon it even under the harshest circumstances-I cannot honestly say now. Yet one thing is certain: the film strengthened my attachment to the idea of truth.

After so many decades of living, whatever wisdom or essence I have managed to gather can perhaps best be expressed in Bapu's words:

"There is no God higher than Truth."

- Mahatma Gandhi

Another profound saying comes to mind in the same context:

"It is not what happens to you that matters, but how you bear it."

- Marcus Aurelius

I cannot help relating both these thoughts to King Harishchandra. He placed Truth above everything else, even above his own comfort and security. What did he not endure? Yet he never abandoned the path of truth.

If we consider our own lives, do we not all suffer in one way or another? Some perhaps suffer more, others less, but no one escapes the necessity of passing through hardship. Among us are those who, no matter how great the pain, refuse to seek crooked shortcuts. Others, in their desperation to avoid suffering, will do almost anything. That "anything" often involves transgressing rules and principles. And the moment one knowingly violates them; one begins to separate oneself from one's own truth.

My own belief is that ordinary people like us can never hope to possess the moral and spiritual stature of King Harishchandra. Yet if we can honestly recognize where, when, and how we departed from the path

of truth, that alone is a significant achievement. In fact, it may be enough.

The difficulty is that most of us rarely admit our own mistakes. We are reluctant to acknowledge that we have ever been wrong.

But perhaps I have indulged in enough philosophizing already. Let us set aside these reflections and return to the story itself.

Rather than adding more of my own words, it may be better to introduce you directly to the song *"Suraj Re Jalte Rehna...,"* whose lyrics capture much of what I have been trying to express.

One might say, "It is the nature of the sun to burn." It burns, it will continue to burn, and it too has a lifespan; when that is exhausted, it will perish. That is perfectly true. But such knowledge belongs to the realm of the intellect, not the heart. And here, I am speaking of the heart.

This song, written by Kavi Pradeep, composed by Laxmikant–Pyarelal, and sung by Hemant Kumar-does it not speak to you as well?



Around the same time, two other films were released. One was *Phool Bane Angaare*, starring Mala Sinha and Raj Kumar in the lead roles. The other was Chetan Anand's *Haqeeqat*, released in 1964, featuring Dharmendra, Vijay Anand, Priya Rajvansh, Sanjay Khan, and others.

In 1962, our nation had been confronted with an unexpected and sudden invasion by China along our northern frontier. India had gained independence only a short while earlier. Yet our soldiers stood their ground with remarkable courage and fought with extraordinary valour. In the years immediately following that conflict, a number of films centred on patriotism were made, and these two films belonged to that tradition.

Although the opening portions of *Phool Bane Angaare* were essentially a family drama and a love story, its concluding section dealt with war. *Haqeeqat*, on the other hand, was a pure war film. To be sure, it too

contained a touch of romance between the hero and heroine. Yet, considering the limited resources and technical facilities available at the time, Chetan Anand-elder brother of the legendary Dev Anand-created a magnificent film amidst the cold and rugged landscapes of the Himalayas.

At that age, I did not understand such things in depth, but I knew I had greatly enjoyed the film. Every song in it was memorable. Yet two songs, in particular, stayed with me. One was the immortal "Hoke Majboor Mujhe Usne Bhulaya Hoga..." The other was the lively "Masti Mein Chhed Ke Tarana Koi Dil Ka, Aaj Lutayega Khazana Koi Dil Ka...", picturised on Vijay Anand, Dev Anand's younger brother.

That song remains one of my favourites even today. The carefree exuberance and effortless charm with which Mohammed Rafi sang it still set the strings of my heart vibrating. The bustle, confusion, and disorderly noise of Jabalpur fade away, and I find myself transported to the valleys of Ladakh.

I should mention that both these films were shown to me by Babu Ji. There was another film, *Leader*, which he had intended to take me to see. He had even spoken to me about it. But for some reason, the plan was later cancelled. I never asked him why, nor did he ever explain. I was not a child given to insistence or demands, and certainly not in front of Babu Ji.

There was yet another film, *Naunihal*, released in 1967, which he also wished to show me. That too never happened. Why? Only he knew. I never asked.

Babu Ji worked as a painter at the Central Ordnance Depot (C.O.D.) in Jabalpur. Equipment and supplies manufactured by the various ordnance factories of Jabalpur were stored there. Information regarding the contents had to be marked on the boxes in which they were packed. This was primarily Babu Ji's responsibility.

He would often cut stencils from sheets of tin or thick paper because large numbers of boxes required identical markings. Wherever only a

single inscription was needed, he would simply write it directly with a brush.

Twice, he was offered promotions that involved transfers out of Jabalpur. Yet he declined both promotions and chose to remain there. Much later I learned that the principal reason was our education. Moreover, Bai was employed as well and could not easily relocate. Babu Ji felt that if he moved away, the entire household would be disrupted. So, he chose stability over advancement.

He also took very little leave from work. Whenever necessary, it would be only a day, two days, or perhaps three. Even when he visited Bankhedi-my ancestral village on my father's side-he would combine a Sunday or another holiday with a few days of leave, making it a brief three- or four-day trip. To the best of my recollection, there was only one occasion when he remained away from work for more than ten consecutive days: when he suffered from a severe boil on his thigh.

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Apart from the films I have already mentioned, there were many others that I watched during my childhood with Babu Ji and the entire family. Among those that remain in my memory are '*Son of India*', '*Kan Kan Mein Bhagwan*', '*Aashirwad*', '*Mera Munna*', '*Beti-Bete*', '*Gharana*', '*Grihasthi*', and '*Do Kaliyan*'.

Whenever a good family film arrived at a local cinema hall, the women of our neighbourhood would sometimes make plans to watch it together. The group usually included Bai, my aunt, Bhabhi Ji, the wife of the late Manik Rao Ji-who too is no longer with us-and Krishna's mother, among others.

These memories belong to a time when most families had only one or two children. The group generally attended the matinee show, which in those days meant the screening from three in the afternoon until six in the evening. The noon show, from twelve to three, had not yet become common.

When a few theatres-most notably Jyoti Talkies and Vineet Talkies-began screening films at noon as well, I was as astonished as everyone else. Imagine! One could watch a film in the middle of the day. Later, new films even began to be shown in morning screenings from nine to noon. By then, the novelty had worn off.

Nor was I surprised when *Sholay* was released simultaneously in six theatres across Jabalpur, with screenings beginning as early as six in the morning. This was in 1975. The six theatres were Jyoti, Empire, Shri Krishna, Shyam, Anand, and Plaza.

I first watched *Sholay* at Empire Talkies. Afterwards, I saw it two or three more times, including at Jyoti and Shri Krishna. I went to Shri Krishna Talkies for a rather curious reason: its screen was smaller than those of the other theatres, and I simply wanted to see how *Sholay* would look on a smaller screen. As I recall, however, a somewhat larger temporary screen had been installed there for the film.

There is no harm in saying a few words about *Sholay*. When I first watched it, I was as spellbound as everyone else. Times have changed, and films today are made with astonishing technical sophistication. Yet fifty years ago, *Sholay* was an outstanding achievement in the art of filmmaking. As entertainment, it was complete, compelling, and immensely successful.

Even today, people watch it with the same enthusiasm with which they did when it was first released. Perhaps it is the only film whose dialogues continue to be quoted generation after generation. Many of them have become idioms in everyday speech. What greater proof can there be of a film's immortality?

There is really no need to state this separately, but since it reflects my own conviction, I shall do so nonetheless:

"The greatest achievement of *Sholay* is the character of Gabbar Singh. Even today, he stands alone at the highest summit of villainy in Hindi cinema. No other character has yet emerged to challenge his place. Not even Amjad Khan himself was ever able to recreate, in another

negative role, the magic that Gabbar Singh unleashed upon audiences in *Sholay*. The spell he cast remains unmatched."

□

There were other occasions, too, when I got the chance to watch films during my childhood. Such opportunities often arose whenever someone came to Jabalpur from Bankhedi. Among the regular visitors were Bhagat Ji Dada, Mannu Chacha, and Shabbu Bhaiya. Besides them, a few other acquaintances of Babu Ji would occasionally visit as well. Whether I got to see a film with them was uncertain, but with Bhagat Ji Dada, Mannu Chacha, and Shabbu Bhaiya, one film-and sometimes even two-was almost guaranteed.

Mannu Chacha and Bhagat Ji Dada were as close to Babu Ji as real brothers. Shabbu Bhaiya was the eldest son of Bade Veer, who was himself the elder brother of Bhagat Ji Dada. Bade Veer regarded Babu Ji as his younger brother. Today, Bade Veer is no more; neither is Babu Ji, nor many of the people of that generation. Bade Veer's younger son, whom I remember only by his nickname "Bootha," was a little older than me. He too has passed away. His widow, his sons and daughters-in-law, and his grandchildren still live in the same house that Babu Ji had left behind for that family before moving to Jabalpur. I have already recorded these details at length in *Aarambh*.

I am often reminded of a very old photograph of Bhagat Ji Dada, Mannu Chacha, and Babu Ji. In it, all three stand in the pose of wrestlers, wearing nothing but loincloths. Beside each of them, resting on the ground, lies a wooden Indian club. That photograph hung for many years on the wall of our house in Ghamapur, framed behind glass. It was already old and yellowed when I first saw it. Yet even today I feel as though I can see it clearly. Memories never turn yellow; nor do they fade.

Sometimes another man, Gopi Chacha, would accompany Mannu Chacha. He was like a younger brother to him. Officially, Gopi Chacha worked in Mannu Chacha's sweet shop, making tea and

serving customers. Yet Mannu Chacha never treated him as an employee. In his younger days, Gopi Chacha performed dances in women's attire at village weddings and family celebrations. Later, Mannu Chacha gave him a job at the shop, and he stopped dancing publicly. From then on, he danced only during the annual Ram Lila performances in Bankhedi.

Whenever a film featuring exceptional dance sequences arrived in Jabalpur, Gopi Chacha would invariably travel there with Mannu Chacha to watch it.

One such film that I vividly remember was *Jewel Thief*. It featured the magnificent dance number composed by S. D. Burman- "Hothon Pe Aisi Baat Main Chhupa Ke Chali Aayi..." Even today, Vyjayanthimala's performance in that song is as celebrated as it was in 1967. In fact, it was primarily for this dance sequence that Gopi Chacha had come to Jabalpur.

That evening, Babu Ji, Mannu Chacha, Gopi Chacha, and I went together to the six o'clock show. The film was playing at Jyoti Cinema. After the screening, Gopi Chacha could not stop praising the song and the dance. Mannu Chacha responded enthusiastically to his comments, while Babu Ji, as was usually his way on such occasions, remained mostly silent. As for me, I felt that joining the conversation would have been inappropriate for someone of my age, so I too remained quiet.

The atmosphere remained much the same even later at dinner.

Jewel Thief was a splendid mystery film starring Dev Anand. Vijay Anand directed it, and what can one possibly write about his genius? He was a filmmaker of extraordinary talent. Of course, I learned all that much later. At the time, I simply knew that I had enjoyed the film immensely.

The songs that appealed most to me were "Rula Ke Gaya Sapna Mera..." and "Raat Akeli Hai..." Both remain among my favourite film songs to this day.

Apart from *Jewel Thief*, Gopi Chacha also came to Jabalpur to watch another celebrated dance sequence- "Main Kya Karoon Ram, Mujhe Budha Mil Gaya..." from *Sangam*. Raj Kapoor and Vyjayanthimala made that film a trendsetter in every sense. Hindi cinema had produced many love triangles before *Sangam*, and many after it, yet *Sangam* occupied a place of its own then and continues to do so today.

Even now, whenever the film appears on television and happens to catch my eye, I find myself stopping to watch it.

I am hardly qualified to speak of Raj Kapoor's brilliance as an artist. If I were to begin writing about him, I would never find a place to stop. The world already knows his greatness, so let me leave the matter there.

Sangam was one of Raj Kapoor's finest films. It is associated with many fascinating facts. It was the first Indian Eastmancolor film to be processed in London. I have also read-or perhaps heard somewhere-that the role eventually played by Rajendra Kumar was first offered by Raj Kapoor to his close friend Dilip Kumar. The proposal did not materialize. Why not? Perhaps only those two men knew-or perhaps only God.

Even today, despite Rajendra Kumar's superb performance in the film, I sometimes find myself wondering how remarkable *Sangam* might have been had Dilip Kumar accepted Raj Kapoor's offer.

Another memorable film from those years was *Milan*, starring Sunil Dutt and Nutan. Based on a story inspired by Rabindranath Tagore, it was a beautiful and deeply moving film. One of its songs, "Mubarak Ho Sabko Sama Yeh Suhana...," remains especially dear to me.

Laxmikant and Pyarelal composed all the songs of the film with great melodic grace, but this particular song belongs, at least for me, to an altogether different category.

I watched many films with Mannu Chacha and Gopi Chacha. I have mentioned only a few of the more memorable ones here. To tell the truth, I cannot recall the others at the moment.

Let us move on.

I also had many opportunities to watch films with Bhagat Ji Dada. Unlike Gopi Chacha, he did not come to Jabalpur merely to see films. Whenever he had some business to attend to, needed to purchase goods for his shop, or simply wished to visit us, he would come to the city. Yet whenever he did, he almost always made time to watch at least one film.

With him I watched *Sikandar-e-Azam* and *Mahabharat*, both released in 1965. We must have seen many others as well, but these are the two that come most readily to mind today.

Bhagat Ji Dada had his own charming term for films. He called them "khel"-a play, a spectacle, a performance.

□

Today, as I write these lines on 14 December 2024, it is the centenary of Raj Kapoor's birth.

This wonderful, sensitive, emotional, and immensely gifted man was born on 14 December 1924 in Peshawar-now in Pakistan, but then a part of undivided India.

Although I originally wrote this chapter three years earlier, in 2021, most of its memories belong to my high-school and college years. For that reason, it did not find a place in *Aarambh*. Since the chapter had originally been written with an ink pen on paper, I now have to copy it onto my laptop. Naturally, in the process, some things are being removed, some altered, and some added anew.

That is why it seems appropriate to speak of Raj Kapoor here.

I read today-and perhaps I had read it before as well-that Raj Kapoor referred to films not as films but as "pictures." I have watched most of the pictures he made. Some I saw when they were first released; others I watched later during matinee screenings.

The pictures that he produced and directed possess a distinctive quality, setting them apart from the films in which he merely acted for other producers and directors. His vision, his longing, was to transform this painful, deprived, and often ugly world into a more beautiful one. He devoted a lifetime to that dream, and the pictures he created bear witness to it.

Beginning with *Aag* in 1948, he went on to produce and direct remarkable films such as *Barsaat*, *Awaara*, *Shree 420*, *Sangam*, *Mera Naam Joker*, *Bobby*, *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*, *Prem Rog*, and *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*.

I have always felt that if a film is regarded as a product, then it belongs to its producer. But if it is regarded as a work of art, a creative expression, then it is fundamentally the director's creation.

Raj Kapoor also worked outside the banner of R.K. Studios with many distinguished producers and directors. Among the finest examples are *Anari*, directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee; *Teesri Kasam*, directed by Basu Bhattacharya; *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai*, directed by Radhu Karmakar; and *Andaz*, directed by Mehboob Khan.

Raj Kapoor is one of those rare individuals who have profoundly influenced me for reasons that are difficult to explain fully.

If I were asked to name my two favourite Raj Kapoor films, the first would undoubtedly be *Mera Naam Joker*. It expresses the philosophy of his life and, perhaps, reveals a significant part of his own personal story.

The second would be *Teesri Kasam*, based on Phanishwar Nath Renu's celebrated story *Maare Gaye Gulfam*. The film is not merely a magnificent example of cinematic artistry; it also reveals dimensions of Raj Kapoor's acting talent that few other films do. Produced by the poet-lyricist Shailendra and directed by Basu Bhattacharya, it remains one of the treasures of Indian cinema.

One song from the film, sung with profound feeling by Mukesh - "Sajanwa Bairi Ho Gaye Hamar..." -is especially close to my heart.

Whenever I find myself alone, quietly humming old melodies, this is often one of the songs that rises unbidden to my lips.

□

Of all the people with whom I watched films during my childhood, it was my maternal uncle, Beni Madhav Lakhera-whom I called Rajjan Mama-with whom I saw the greatest number. At home he was variously called Raju, Rajjan, or Rajendra. He was about nine years older than I was.

I watched so many films with him that I can no longer remember them all. Even the ones I do remember coming back in clusters. At one time a few titles surface in my mind; at another, an entirely different set. A casual remark, a forgotten name, or some stray association is often enough to unlock a particular film and the memories surrounding it.

One reason I ended up seeing so many films with Mama was that he could easily obtain permission to take me along. More often than not, he used me as an excuse to watch a film himself. His strategy frequently worked when it came to procuring money for tickets as well. Sometimes he would get it from my grandfather, sometimes from one of my two grandmothers, and occasionally from Bai, my mother.

In those days cinema tickets were astonishingly inexpensive. At theatres such as Lakshmi Talkies and Central Talkies, a third-class ticket could be had for six annas-thirty-seven paise. At the other end of the scale, even the most expensive seats at Jyoti or Vineet Talkies cost no more than two and a half rupees. We bought whatever tickets our pockets could afford. With Mannu Chacha, Bhagat Ji Dada, or Babu Ji, we usually sat in the first-class section and, on occasion, even in the balcony.

The first film I ever watched with Rajjan Mama has vanished completely from my memory. I do not even recall its title. In fact, I am not sure he ever told me. What I do remember vividly is that he persuaded me to accompany him in great haste. I must have been five or six years old.

He took me to Central Talkies. At home-and also at my maternal grandparents' house-he announced that he was taking me to see a religious film.

Within a short time of the screening beginning, however, I realised that the film had nothing to do with religion. It was some kind of fantasy involving magic and sorcery.

I can no longer remember whether it was because the film was not what I had been promised, or for some entirely different reason, but I soon became uncomfortable and began insisting that Mama take me home.

While trying to watch the film, he attempted to reason with me. But stubbornness is stubbornness. I refused to stay. When persuasion failed, I resorted to my ultimate weapon-I began crying at the top of my lungs.

People around us started looking in our direction and asking questions.

Fearing that the situation might become even more embarrassing, Mama spoke briefly with the gatekeeper, took me by the hand, and hurried out. Then, almost running, he escorted me from Central Talkies, which stood near Chhota Fuhara, all the way to my maternal grandparents' home near Kamaniya Gate, nearly a kilometre away. Having safely deposited me there, he immediately turned around and ran back to catch the rest of the film.

Once home, I embellished the story considerably while recounting it to the family, partly to justify my dramatic exit from the cinema. Unfortunately, when Mama returned later, he received a thorough scolding. That had not been my intention, despite the fact that I had been quite angry with him.

In a fit of indignation, he declared that he would never again take me to the cinema.

Of course, such declarations rarely survive reality.

They certainly did not in this case.

Over the next six or seven years, I watched countless films with him. Listing them all would make this account unnecessarily long. Some of the titles that still come to mind are *Waqt*, *Shriman Funtoosh*, *Shaheed*, *Bhoot Bangla*, *Do Dil*, *Gumnaam*, *Johar Mehmood in Goa*, *Teen Devian*, *Phool Aur Patthar*, *Suraj*, *Teesri Kasam*, *An Evening in Paris*, *Meherban*, *Milan Ki Raat*, *Patthar Ke Sanam*, *Ram Aur Shyam*, and *Aadmi*.

If I were to make a serious effort to remember, or inquire among family members, the list would become much longer.

In short, until I was thirteen or fourteen years old, I went to the cinema frequently with Rajjan Mama. Every month or two, we managed at least one or two films.

There is something else worth mentioning.

Only a few months ago, several members of the family were gathered at my house when Rajjan Mama revealed that, on many occasions, Bai herself had asked him to take me to the cinema. He also explained why.

According to him, Bai-his elder sister and my mother-used to say, "This boy is always studying. Take him to a film and freshen his mood."

That may very well have been true. I suspect both explanations are correct. Whatever the reason, I got to watch the film, and that was what mattered.

Around the same period, I also began going to the cinema with my childhood friend Anil Dubey.

Up until the third or fourth standard, we generally watched films only when accompanied by family members, relatives, or family friends. As far as I can recall, Anil and I did not watch a film together on our own until perhaps the fifth standard, except for those shown by a travelling government film unit.

This unit carried a 16-mm projector, reels of film, and a portable screen mounted on stands. Moving from one neighbourhood to

another in a government vehicle, it screened films in open spaces for the public.

Through this arrangement we watched films such as *Ek Ke Baad Ek*, *Hum Hindustani*, *Bapu Ne Kaha Tha*, *Anand Math*, *Upkar*, *Do Aankhen Barah Haath*, *Dr. Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani*, along with numerous documentaries produced by the Films Division.

The vehicle would usually set up in an open area beside the main road. In our neighbourhood there were two such places: the vacant ground opposite Kodulal Seth's house and another open patch near Sardar Seth's timber yard. Once or twice, films were also screened in the open space beside Anil's house.

Ek Ke Baad Ek, a Dev Anand film promoting the idea of a small family, was one we watched repeatedly. Eventually, we stopped going for the film itself and went merely for fun and mischief. We would linger for a while and then wander off elsewhere.

In those days, the day after someone had watched a film was often even more exciting than the screening itself.

The lucky boy who had seen the film would be surrounded at the first opportunity by the rest of us, all demanding a full narration of the story.

Naturally, the storyteller would first put on airs.

Every boy did.

After sufficient pleading, cajoling, and persuasion-or after the listeners began saying, "Fine, don't tell us then!"-the proud narrator would descend from his lofty perch and declare, "All right, wait a minute!"

Within moments, the grand storytelling session would begin.

These sessions took place in any reasonably clean and comfortable corner: beneath a tree, on a raised platform, in someone's courtyard, or beside the cement enclosure surrounding a public water tap.

Our favourite venue, however, was the courtyard of Anil's house.

The courtyard lay in front of the house. It was always spotless and freshly coated with cow-dung plaster and white clay. Every second or third day, Anil's mother lovingly renewed its surface.

On three sides stood sturdy wooden fencing, complete with a gate made of broad wooden planks.

Flower beds lined the inner edges of the enclosure. Most of them contained rose bushes-predominantly pink, with a few deep red blooms. Some of the plants stood nearly two metres tall.

Anil would proudly proclaim:

"My mother's name is Gulab Bai. That's why my father planted so many rose bushes!"

There was also a large and luxuriant night-blooming jasmine shrub whose intoxicating fragrance spread through the neighbourhood after sunset.

Many stories of films were narrated and heard in that courtyard.

Among those I remember listening to were *Khandan*, *Lutera* starring Dara Singh, *Sampoorna Ramayan*, *Saranga*, *Aman*, *Anjana*, *Dharti Kahe Pukar Ke*, *Shaheed* in which Manoj Kumar portrayed Bhagat Singh, and *Aankhen*.

These storytelling gatherings generally took place in the evenings and, during school holidays, sometime between morning and afternoon.

Among the stories I myself narrated were those of *Son of India*, *Kabuliwala*, *Kan Kan Mein Bhagwan*, *Shatranj*, *Jhuk Gaya Aasman*, and *Around the World*.

After the fifth standard, Anil and I finally began going to films together. Sometimes it was just the two of us; at other times one or two friends joined in.

I believe there were several reasons for this. We were growing older. We had moved on from the neighbourhood primary school to

institutions farther from home. Most importantly, Anil had gained admission to Hitkarini School.

During lunch breaks, Anil and his friends would often wander through the grounds of what was then called Victoria Hospital-today's District Hospital-and make their way to Lakshmi Talkies.

Their purpose was not necessarily to watch a film.

They went to see the posters.

And perhaps I should explain what "posters" meant in those days, otherwise much of the charm of this memory would be lost.

Whenever a film was exhibited in a cinema hall, large banners and posters were displayed outside. In addition, eight-by-ten-inch still photographs-sometimes slightly larger-were pinned inside shallow glass-fronted display cases or wire-mesh notice boards within the theatre premises. Usually, ten or twelve such photographs were exhibited together.

They formed part of the film's publicity campaign.

For us-and indeed for many adults as well-simply looking at those posters was a form of entertainment.

Anyone who had been fortunate enough to see them felt duty-bound to return and describe them in extravagant detail to friends, brothers, and sisters. The listeners would stare in wonder, hanging on every word.

The boys would immediately resolve that if they could not watch the film itself, they must at least go and see the posters.

The girls, more often than not, had to remain behind. Some would quietly resent being denied such freedom and would eventually vent their irritation on their brothers and cousins.

The generation growing up in the age of artificial intelligence will probably never understand the pleasure that lay in merely viewing a film poster-or listening to someone describe it.

Ours was a very small world, innocent and uncomplicated, untouched by spectacle and pretence.

It lacked the relentless competition, pressure, anxiety, and constant hurry that seem inseparable from modern life.

In that little world flowed simplicity, sincerity, affection, and ease.

Life was not so complicated then. Nor were there countless options confronting us at every turn, leaving us confused about every choice we made.

□

Let us leave that thread here and return to our original subject-the cinema.

In those days, there was hardly any other form of entertainment available to ordinary people that was as inexpensive and accessible as the cinema. Naturally, people never missed an opportunity to enjoy it in whatever form it happened to be available.

One such form was the film soundtrack.

All one needed was a radio at home.

I distinctly remember two broadcasts of Indian radio that regularly aired film soundtracks. One was *Vividh Bharati* and the other *All India Radio*. Both programmes were usually broadcast on Sunday mornings, beginning around eleven or perhaps half past eleven. I am almost certain about the timing of the *Vividh Bharati* programme, though my memory is somewhat less reliable regarding the exact schedule of the one on *All India Radio*. But there is no reason to interrupt the flow of the story over such a detail.

What matters is that a radio did not arrive in our house until 1968 or perhaps 1969, when I was in the eighth or ninth standard. I clearly remember that our home received an electricity connection when I was in the eighth standard. Naturally, the radio must have come afterwards.

At the time of which I am speaking, transistor radios had either not yet appeared or, at least, we had never heard of them. In fact, during my early childhood we did not own a radio at all. Only a handful of households in our neighbourhood possessed that magical object known as a radio.

Among our immediate neighbours, only Kakka, Kandhilal Ji Vishwakarma, and perhaps Ram Narayan Ji Dubey owned one. If memory serves me correctly, Kamla Bua and Bitti Bua also had radios in their homes. Both belonged to Christian families. The two sisters lived at opposite ends of the part of Western Ghamapur where we had settled. Bitti Bua's large bungalow stood on the main road, while Kamla Bua lived at the far end of our lane.

I have already written about all these people in *Aarambh*. If I linger around their houses, the story will wander away once again, so let me drag it back to the proper road.

I was speaking about film soundtracks.

There were two barber shops near our house, both situated on the main road.

About a hundred metres to the right of our lane stood *Shiv Kesh Kartanalaya*, the shop run by our friend Shibbu. He was three or four years older than we were. Initially, his elder brothers managed the shop, but after they found jobs elsewhere, Shibbu took over. Despite the age difference, he always treated us like friends.

The reason I mention him here is that he owned a radio.

The second shop stood roughly the same distance to the left of our lane, opposite Krishna Colony. I can still remember the words "Cutting Saloon" painted on its signboard, but the actual name of the establishment has completely escaped my memory. The young proprietor was not from our neighbourhood; he came from somewhere farther away.

His shop, too, possessed a brand-new radio, perched on a wooden bracket in one corner.

Anil, the other boys from the neighbourhood, and I frequently visited Shibbu's shop. Occasionally we went to get our hair cut, but more often we went simply to listen to the radio when there was nothing else to do.

I heard a great many programmes on Shibbu's radio.

On Sundays we often went there specifically to listen to the film soundtracks.

Naturally, Sundays were crowded. We would stand pressed against the doorway of the shop and listen with complete concentration.

This was long before the age of FM broadcasting. The old AM transmissions were often plagued by static and interference. Whenever the sound became distorted during a particularly exciting scene, all of us would grow restless and frustrated.

Shibbu himself would stop working and begin adjusting the tuning dial.

If one of us happened to have seen the film whose soundtrack was being broadcast, he would immediately begin providing a running commentary.

If his commentary contained useful or entertaining details, everyone tolerated it. Otherwise, someone would promptly silence him.

Occasionally, the radio would suddenly emit a piercing whistle.

At such moments, an elderly customer-who had been enjoying both his haircut and the unfolding film story-would angrily scold poor Shibbu as though he himself had personally caused the disturbance.

Others would seize the opportunity to advise him to buy a new radio.

A few went even further and solemnly declared that the old box ought to be thrown away altogether.

Shibbu listened to all such opinions with a smile and rarely said a word.

When Sunday crowds became particularly heavy, his brothers Paras and Ambika would come to help in the shop. Both were older than he was. Another brother, younger than Shibbu, was known to us simply as Dinnu. The eldest brother, Mathura, had died in an accident.

On weekdays, especially during the afternoons, the shop was much quieter. During school holidays we would sit there for hours listening to songs.

If Shibbu happened to be in a good mood-or if business had been especially profitable that day-he would order tea for us from Hazari Seth's hotel.

Many film soundtracks passed through those speakers.

At Shibbu's shop I listened to the soundtracks of *Himalaya Ki God Mein*, *Mujhe Jeene Do*, *Ganga Jamuna*, *Shaheed*, *Dil Diya Dard Liya*, and many others.

As for the second barber shop, I usually went there alone. It was there that I listened to the soundtracks of films such as *Patthar Ke Sanam*, *Anita*, and *Shagird*.

At first I felt rather shy and visited that shop only when I actually needed a haircut. Gradually, as a degree of familiarity developed, I began dropping in occasionally for no other reason than to sit quietly and listen to the radio.

Looking back now, it seems extraordinary that a simple radio could create so much excitement.

Yet that was the age in which we lived.

For many of us, the soundtrack of a film was often the closest we could come to the film itself. Through those crackling broadcasts, interrupted by static and whistles, entire worlds opened before our imagination. Long before we saw the moving images on a screen, we

had already travelled through those stories in our minds, guided only by voices, music, and the magic of sound.

□

In those days, very little money was spent on film advertising compared to what is common today. Film posters were usually printed on paper in two or three standard sizes. The largest measured roughly eight feet by four-and-a-half or five feet, sometimes a little larger or smaller. Another common size, in portrait format, was about two-and-a-half feet by four or four-and-a-half feet. These posters could be seen everywhere pasted on walls, on the sides of paan stalls, or on makeshift display boards erected in almost every neighbourhood. Such boards were typically made by driving wooden poles into the ground and fastening sheets of tin across them.

Several film posters would usually share the same board. Alongside them were hand-painted or printed strips announcing the name of the cinema hall, the show timings, and the date from which the film would be screened.

The locations of these larger poster boards were more or less permanent.

In our neighbourhood, midway between our lane and the temple of Maa Sheetla, lived a man known as Balmiki Ji. I remembered his name because he had once lived next door to us in our lane. Beside his house on the main road stood a bicycle repair shop. Above the shop, in place of a conventional signboard, stretched a long sheet-metal display board covered with eight or ten posters advertising films playing in different cinemas.

This was usually where we first learned about new releases.

Dropping by to inspect those posters became one of our favourite ways of passing the time. Quite often we would go to a cinema hall for no purpose other than to look at the posters. We would study not only

the large banners outside but also the photographic stills displayed inside the theatre premises.

All these posters were supplied by film distribution companies and arrived together with the film reels. Some of the larger and more prosperous cinema halls, however, commissioned their own giant posters locally. These could be enormous-ten or twelve feet wide and seven or eight feet high.

The finest of them all belonged to Jyoti Talkies.

The theatre had a broad porch at its entrance, and above it, stretching from one end to the other, hung these magnificent painted banners. Sometimes a single poster occupied the entire length; at other times three separate posters were mounted side by side.

They were painted in oil colours.

Every important detail about the film was rendered in bright colours and elegant lettering. Large portraits of the leading actors and actresses appeared in the costumes and makeup of their respective roles. Supporting actors were also depicted, though usually on a smaller scale or in a monochromatic style. Occasionally, a memorable scene from the film would be illustrated as well.

Jyoti Talkies generally screened films featuring the biggest stars of the day-films that often went on to celebrate Silver Jubilees and even Golden Jubilees.

Apart from Jyoti, other cinemas such as Vineet Talkies, Shyam Talkies, Anand Talkies, and Shri Krishna Talkies also displayed hand-painted oil-colour posters, though these tended to be somewhat smaller. Sometimes such posters arrived rolled up along with the film reels, but more often they were painted locally in Jabalpur.

The best-known studios producing them were Kumar Arts, Venus Arts, and the workshop of Painter Sarfaraz.

Long before a film's release, printed brochures containing publicity photographs would arrive. Using these brochures and photographs as

reference material, artists at these studios painted the posters on primed cloth or inexpensive canvas with oil paints.

I once visited Painter Sarfaraz. I was very young at the time. I had already heard much about him, though by then he was quite elderly. On the back wall of his studio hung a gigantic poster of *Mughal-e-Azam* painted by his own hand.

For years afterwards I would notice it whenever I passed by.

It was a beautiful work.

Dominating the composition was a huge side-profile portrait of Prithviraj Kapoor as Emperor Akbar, rendered in a deep sky-blue monochrome style. In the lower right-hand corner appeared the figures of Dilip Kumar and Madhubala-Salim and Anarkali-embraced together. The title *Mughal-e-Azam* was written in Urdu, Hindi, and English.

I shall describe that meeting in greater detail at a more appropriate place later in this book.

For now, let me merely add that I also visited Kumar Arts and met Kumar Sahib himself. That story, too, belongs to another chapter.

Film publicity in those days did not end with posters.

Bicycles, cycle-rickshaws, horse-drawn tongas, and even motorcars were employed to advertise films. Decorated with posters and fitted with loudspeakers, they travelled through the main roads and broader lanes of the city, announcing forthcoming releases.

At regular intervals, the man speaking through the loudspeaker would scatter handbills into the streets.

These leaflets were printed in black ink on inexpensive recycled paper, usually coloured red, green, or yellow.

Children chased after these vehicles to collect them.

Since the vehicles were engaged in publicity, they travelled slowly. Whenever we heard the sound of a loudspeaker in the distance,

whatever we happened to be doing was immediately abandoned. We would sprint towards the main road and join the pursuit, running after whichever vehicle it happened to be-a rickshaw, a tonga, or a motorcar-trying to catch the leaflets fluttering through the air or gathering those that had already fallen to the ground.

We called this activity "looting handbills."

Many times, we chased them as far as the Government Well crossroads in one direction and the Sheetla Mai Temple in the other.

We treasured those leaflets and stored them carefully.

The more handbills one possessed, the richer one was considered.

Our childhood treasures consisted of marbles, tamarind seeds, custard-apple seeds, cowrie shells, and film handbills.

These memories belong to the years when we were studying in the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh standards.

One particular incident remains vivid in my mind.

We were once racing after a motorcar, eagerly collecting the leaflets it was scattering. Suddenly, for some reason, the vehicle came to an abrupt halt. A few moments later it started moving again.

In those brief seconds, however, Anil's face struck the rear mudguard of the car.

His upper lip was cut. Blood flowed freely.

Even today, that spot on his lip remains ever so slightly swollen-a tiny permanent souvenir of our childhood adventures in pursuit of cinema dreams.

□

The list of films I watched with Anil is equally long.

Somewhere earlier I mentioned Lakshmi Talkies. A great many of the films Anil and I saw together were screened there. Most of them starred the reigning action hero of that era-Dara Singh.

The principal characters in these films were usually Dara Singh himself, his younger brother Randhawa, and quite often a foreign wrestler known as Emil Czaja. I cannot vouch for the spelling of his name, and if it is incorrect, I beg forgiveness. In India, however, he became famous under the name "King Kong." He was indeed a Hungarian by origin, but he spent a considerable part of his life in India.

The stories of these films were generally designed in such a way that they provided plenty of opportunities for wrestling bouts at regular intervals. Truth be told, audiences went to the cinema primarily to watch those wrestling matches. Among the heroines were Nishi, Meenu Mumtaz, Bela Bose, Laxmi Chhaya, Helen, and others.

Some of the titles I still remember are *Faulad*, *Aaya Toofan*, *King Kong*, *Rustom-e-Hind*, *Daku Mangal Singh*, *Samson*, and *Tarzan Comes to Delhi*.

Of course, it was not only Dara Singh's films that Anil and I watched. We also saw many films featuring other actors at Lakshmi Talkies and elsewhere. These memories belong to our middle-school years.

Money was always in short supply.

A third-class ticket at Lakshmi Talkies cost only six annas-thirty-seven paise. We generally tried to collect at least ninety-five paise, or better still, a full rupee between us. That amount would cover two tickets, two cups of tea during the interval, and at least one large fried papad.

Tea cost one anna, while the enormous crispy papads sold for five paise each.

Those little luxuries doubled the pleasure of watching a film.

There were also cream rolls available for one anna. Occasionally, instead of tea and papad, we would spend our money on cream rolls.

To maintain order inside the hall, there was a burly, middle-aged man who looked more like a wrestler than an usher. Before the film began, he would patrol the aisles continuously.

He invariably wore a crumpled white kurta-pyjama, creased and permanently rumpled. His kurta was of Lucknow chikankari fabric, though it looked as if it had not been washed in ages. His hair, dyed with henna, displayed a curious mixture of dark brown, orange, and patches of white. In one hand he carried a short black cane; in the other, a torch.

Lakshmi Talkies had no numbered seating.

Consequently, a fierce battle was always fought over seats directly beneath the ceiling fans.

Groups of friends wanted to sit together, but enough vacant seats were seldom available. Those already seated refused to move. Arguments erupted. Abuses followed. Occasionally, fists flew.

If the newsreel, advertisements, or the film itself had already begun, the situation became even more chaotic. The audience sitting behind the quarrelling groups could no longer see the screen and would begin shouting as well.

At such moments the wrestler-usher would arrive at the scene, hurling colourful insults in a loud, gravelly voice. If words failed, the cane occasionally came into use.

There was another problem common to many cinema halls of that era: broken seats.

Some lacked backrests. Others lacked the seat itself.

A few such seats existed in almost every theatre. Some had only two or three; others had considerably more.

Naturally, no one wished to sit on them.

Yet if a show was house-full, some unfortunate soul inevitably found himself assigned one of these miserable contraptions.

The choice was simple: either watch the film as best you could or leave.

Refunds were out of the question.

There was no one available to discuss the matter with, and very few people possessed the courage to argue with the wrestler.

Once peace had finally been restored, he would settle himself on a chair outside the hall and begin smoking bidis.

It would be wrong to suggest that Dara Singh's films were screened only at Lakshmi Talkies. I simply happened to watch many of them there with Anil.



Strangely enough, as I write these lines, memories of Dracula films come flooding back.

Let us talk about them for a while.

In those days, Dracula films existed almost exclusively in English. To my knowledge, no Hindi adaptation was available then, and I cannot say much about films in other languages.

The very mention of Dracula inevitably brings one name to mind: Christopher Lee.

His full name was Sir Christopher Frank Carandini Lee (27 May 1922 – 7 June 2015). Possessed of a deep and commanding voice, he was one of Britain's most distinguished actors and singers. He became famous for portraying villains, particularly in horror and fantasy films. In 2009 he was knighted for his services to drama and charity.

Between 1958 and 1974, he portrayed Count Dracula in ten horror films with such authority and conviction that his name became almost synonymous with the character itself.

These films were shown in Jabalpur only at Empire and Delight cinemas, the two theatres that regularly screened English films.

At that time both theatres generally ran only two shows each day: the Evening Show and the Night Show.

By the time we finished making plans and gathering enough enthusiasm, it was usually the Night Show that we ended up attending.

Perhaps our subconscious minds preferred it that way.

From Western Ghamapur to either theatre, the journey itself felt like the opening sequence of a horror film.

Beyond Byohar Bagh, the roads became increasingly deserted. Near Delight Talkies, the road crossed the Omti drain. To the left stretched the vast police parade ground, which at night dissolved into a sea of darkness. The right side was equally desolate. Farther ahead stood what is now Dr. Ambedkar Chowk, then known as Tehsili Chowk.

Neither Indira Market nor the large modern traffic circle existed then.

The roads leading away from the square disappeared into ominous darkness.

A furlong farther on, beneath ancient tamarind and neem trees, Delight Talkies suddenly emerged among dense foliage like something from another world.

The compound contained only one or two electric poles. Their dim yellow bulbs leaked a weak, sickly light onto the ground. The boundary wall stood broken in many places and elsewhere had vanished altogether.

Everything about the place seemed designed for Dracula.

Empire Talkies, though grander, possessed its own unsettling atmosphere.

The road leading there was even lonelier.

After Tehsili Chowk one had to continue past the High Court, cross Dr. Rajendra Prasad Chowk, skirt the railway grounds, pass beneath Number Two Bridge, and proceed towards Circuit House Number One before reaching the theatre.

At night the entire route lay submerged in silence.

It is impossible to separate such deserted roads and ghostly stillness from memories of horror films.

We almost always returned home after the Night Show.

While a crowd of spectators remained around us, everything felt perfectly normal. People laughed loudly, joked, and discussed the film. In retrospect, I suspect this too was a way of driving away fear.

But once we turned onto the road leading home, Dracula slowly began creeping back into our minds.

I never watched a Dracula film alone.

Either Anil or Akhilesh was always with me.

On our bicycles we pedalled furiously through the darkest stretches of road. Streetlights then consisted not of bright white tubes but feeble yellow bulbs. Many were broken or fused.

Naturally, they always seemed to be out of order on the nights we returned from Dracula films.

More than once we solemnly vowed never to watch another Dracula film.

Yet within weeks we would be eagerly awaiting the next one.

Fear has a strange magnetism.

At that age the mind trembles, shadows move where none exist, and darkness acquires a life of its own.

Sometimes, after returning home, Anil and I were so frightened that we slept in the same room.

On a few occasions I even scratched a tiny cross onto the wall above my bed with a pointed object.

Today the memory makes me laugh.

Yet another part of me thinks that if a horror film fails to frighten us, has it truly succeeded?

We willingly laugh aloud at a good comedy long after the scene has passed. Why then should a horror film not continue to haunt us?

What made those Dracula films unforgettable was the extraordinary combination of sets, cinematography, lighting, storytelling, and above all Christopher Lee's mesmerising performance.

-The old castle stood isolated in a vast forest. . .

-The coffin lid began to creak open. . .

-Pale smoke drifted outward. . .

-A lifeless face emerged from the mist. . .

-Then suddenly those dead eyes opened. . .

At such moments a peculiar sound would ripple through the audience-not quite a scream, not quite a whimper, but something suspended between the two.

A sound born of pure terror. . .

I myself produced such noises on more than one occasion.

I still remember one particular evening at Delight Talkies.

Anil and I were seated side by side watching some Dracula film whose title I have long forgotten.

The carriage carrying Dracula's guest rolled through the dark forest.

The castle loomed ahead.

The soundtrack throbbed ominously.

The coffin lid slowly lifted.

The pale smoke thickened.

The corpse-like figure began to rise.

Suddenly, a gentleman seated to my left cried out in near panic:

"Why don't they bring the army? Why do these fools always go alone?"

In his terror he had also seized my left hand so tightly that I could barely move it.

When I turned to look at him, I discovered that both his feet were perched on his chair.

Once the frightening sequence ended, an audible sigh swept through the entire auditorium.

The audience had survived another encounter with Dracula.

A moment later came nervous laughter.

Then conversation resumed.

That was the magic of those films.

Today, countless Dracula films have been made. Since the first adaptation appeared in 1931, nearly two hundred films have explored the character in one form or another. Many actors have portrayed him.

I have watched quite a few.

Yet, in my opinion, Christopher Lee remains the greatest of them all, who so ever played Dracula.

Even now I enjoy horror films immensely.

Mysteries, thrillers, investigative dramas, documentaries, and suspense series remain my favourite forms of entertainment. Streaming platforms and the internet now provide an endless supply of such material.

The stories themselves are important, but I am equally captivated by their locations-remote mountains, dense forests, isolated islands, and lonely coastlines.

Through them I can travel without leaving home.

Perhaps that is why I watch them so attentively.

I study the background score, the sets, the locations, the performances, the dialogue, and the screenplay with great care.

I confess that I am, unfortunately, something of a perfectionist.

I have a bad habit of noticing flaws.

Perhaps some people dislike me for that reason.

I treat my own work the same way. Until I am satisfied, I revise it again and again. Whenever I reread something, I have written, corrections inevitably appear. I have returned to paintings years later, repainting entire sections or even covering the whole canvas and starting afresh.

What exactly I am, and why I am this way, is perhaps better left to psychologists and scholars.

For my part, if my work satisfies me and brings me happiness, I ask for little more.

Yet now, at this stage of life, I have begun to feel that my obsessive pursuit of perfection should gradually be loosened-perhaps even abandoned altogether.

The perfection worth seeking now lies not in the work of my hands, but in the world within.

□

Let us leave that philosophy aside for the moment. Something else has come to mind, and I must tell it before it slips away.

It was a Sunday morning. At Shri Krishna Talkies, the 9 a.m. to noon show was screening *Aamne Samne*, starring Shashi Kapoor and Sharmila Tagore. The film had originally been released in 1967, but this must have been a year or two later when it returned to Jabalpur for a re-run. We had missed it during its first run.

In those days, whenever a successful film returned to the theatres, it was usually screened in the morning or matinee shows.

Early that morning, Anil somehow came across a newspaper advertisement announcing the film, and immediately the fuse marked *"We must see this picture!"* was lit.

Since it was a holiday, disappearing from home between eight-thirty in the morning and twelve-thirty in the afternoon posed no difficulty. The family would simply assume that we had gone to visit Daniel, Ravi Nikhare, or one of our other friends.

The only problem was money.

Between us, we were short by about twenty-five or thirty paise-the amount needed for two tickets.

There was little time to think.

A decision was made instantly.

We gathered a few old magazines and last year's school notebooks from my house, tucked them inside our shirts between our trousers and our stomachs, and headed straight for Mohan's grocery shop.

Fortunately for us, Mohan was not there. His father, Harumal, was minding the shop.

Without asking a single question, he weighed the old magazines and notebooks on his scale and paid us six annas-thirty-seven paise.

Our problem was solved.

From there we hurried through a series of shortcuts and reached the cinema. By the time we purchased our tickets and entered the hall, the film had already begun.

I turned to the gentleman seated beside me and asked,

"How long ago did it start?"

He replied,

"My friend, I just arrived myself. Watch the picture. You'll figure it out soon enough."

That was the first time we had ever resorted to such a scheme, which is probably why I still remember it so vividly.

For several days afterwards, I lived in mortal fear that Harumal might mention the matter to his wife. She often visited our house, and I

imagined her casually bringing up the incident in conversation with Bai or my aunt.

Fortunately, Harumal was a businessman.

He had no intention of involving himself in such matters.

And he never did.

The secret remained between him, Anil, and me.

On two or three later occasions, whenever circumstances demanded an urgent financial arrangement, we employed the same technique again.

Though we always made sure that Harumal himself was present in the shop.

Whether what we did was right or wrong is a question that properly belongs in the *Baital Pachisi*. It should have been asked by Baital to King Vikramaditya. Whether he ever asked it or not, I do not know.

People often say:

"All is fair in love and war."

Permit me to add a third category:

"All is fair in love, war, and emergent situations."

At that particular moment, arranging money quickly certainly qualified as an emergency. Our passionate devotion to cinema was equally beyond dispute.

And frankly, I see no need for any further justification.

□

Anil was always physically stronger than I was. He was also about a year or eighteen months older. Consequently, the responsibility of purchasing tickets generally fell upon him, especially when a new film had just been released and we were attempting to watch it on the very first day.

Among boys of our age, "First Day, First Show" possessed an almost magical appeal.

On such occasions the crowds were enormous.

If one arrived late, even entering the cinema compound could become impossible.

The first show usually began at noon, and it was often necessary to join the queue outside the ticket window by ten in the morning.

Of course, we could only attempt such adventures when school was closed.

During our college years, holidays occurred for all sorts of reasons, but those stories belong elsewhere.

One thing I can say with certainty: we never bunked school or college to watch films.

Now, returning to Anil.

Whenever the crowd became overwhelming, I would initially stand in line with him. But as we drew closer to the ticket window, anxiety inevitably increased among the waiting crowd.

Would tickets still be available?

Would we actually get them?

What if the window closed just as our turn arrived?

Such fears produced visible restlessness. People began pushing one another. Voices rose. Arguments erupted. Tempers flared.

Whenever the situation seemed likely to become ugly, Anil would instruct me to leave the queue and wait near the entrance gate.

From that point onward, he took complete responsibility for securing the tickets.

And when he eventually emerged-drenched in sweat, shirt crumpled, hair dishevelled, tickets triumphantly clutched in his hand-he looked every bit like a victorious warrior returning from battle.

Seeing those tickets in his hand filled me with equal joy.

Even after we had taken our seats inside the hall, he would spend several minutes describing the ordeal he had undergone to obtain them.

One particular incident comes vividly to mind.

It occurred at Vineet Talkies.

The film was *Mughal-e-Azam*, then being screened in a matinee show for perhaps the second, third, or fourth time.

Mughal-e-Azam remains one of the crowning jewels of Hindi cinema. Its brilliance today is no less dazzling than it must have been in 1960 when the film was first released.

I believe we had gone to watch the very first show of its re-release.

The crowd was extraordinary.

The management had closed every possible route into the theatre except through the official ticket queue. This meant that anyone who entered the hall had to do so by legitimately purchasing a ticket.

The queues themselves passed through narrow tunnel-like corridors leading toward the theatre entrance. Different corridors served different classes of seating.

In other words, I too was obliged to stand in line.

The queue stretched far beyond the entrance to the corridor.

Once ticket sales began, we moved forward inch by inch.

When we finally entered the narrow passageway, the sight was astonishing.

People were packed together so tightly that movement seemed impossible.

Even under such conditions, a few determined souls continued smoking cigarettes and bidis.

The corridor was thick with tobacco smoke.

At the same time, a deafening chorus of shouts, curses, and arguments echoed off the walls.

"Where are you pushing, you fool?"

"Stand properly!"

"Watch out-don't let anyone cut in from the front!"

"Keep that cigarette away!"

"You burned me, idiot!"

The air itself seemed to vibrate with irritation.

After a while, I became convinced that all the tickets would be sold out long before we reached the window.

I voiced this fear to Anil.

I suspect he was thinking exactly the same thing.

The reason for my concern was simple.

Several adventurous young men had already abandoned the queue altogether.

One after another, they began climbing over people's shoulders and heads, wriggling, crawling, and slithering forward like crocodiles through the packed corridor.

The uproar intensified.

Insults flew in every direction.

Along the entire length of the corridor, just beneath the roof, ran a narrow ventilation opening about a foot wide. Small supporting pillars interrupted it at intervals.

Suddenly Anil jumped.

Grabbing hold of the opening, he hauled himself upward.

Then he too began advancing above the crowd-half crawling, half wriggling-towards the ticket window.

I could see him moving steadily forward.

What I could not see was how he eventually managed to secure not one but two tickets.

By the time I finally reached the ticket window through the proper queue, it had already closed.

Those who had failed to obtain tickets were returning in frustration, muttering curses and pushing their way back through the crowd.

When I emerged from the corridor, Anil was standing outside.

In his hand were two tickets.

We said nothing.

I never asked how he had obtained them.

I could make a fairly good guess.

Nor did he volunteer an explanation.

He was too busy catching his breath.

When we finally entered the hall, the opening titles had already begun.

I remember very clearly the first thing I saw on the screen.

The names of the dialogue writers appeared before my eyes:

Kamal Amrohi and Wajahat Mirza.

The struggle through which we had earned the right to watch that film doubled our enjoyment of it.

At the time we were in the ninth standard.

And since *Mughal-e-Azam* deserves a chapter of its own, I shall return to it later in these pages.

□

Let us leave that philosophy aside and return to something else that has just surfaced from memory.

It was probably during the Diwali holidays of that very year that I became friends with Akhilesh.

Akhilesh had joined Model High School in the ninth standard. Before that, he had studied at Arya Samaj Kanya Vidyalaya, situated on the road leading from Russell Chowk towards Nagarath Chowk. In those days, Model High School had three sections up to Class Eight, but from Class Nine onward two additional sections were added. There were two sections for Mathematics students, one each for Biology and Arts, and another for Commerce and Agriculture-five sections in all. The mathematics stream was divided into Sections A and B. I was in Section B, and so was Akhilesh.

Because of these additional sections, the number of available seats increased from roughly one hundred and fifty to nearly two hundred and fifty. The extra students came from schools across Jabalpur and neighbouring areas, their admission determined by merit. Akhilesh was one of them.

He sat several desks away from me in the beginning. We occupied different rows, and I no longer remember how we were first introduced. Yet the seeds of friendship must have been sown shortly before the Diwali vacation, because the first clear image I have of him belongs to that holiday season.

I was staying at my maternal grandparents' house when one day he appeared there unexpectedly. I must have given him the address earlier. We were thirteen or fourteen years old then. If memory serves me correctly, he had suffered from typhoid shortly before the half-yearly examinations that year. After recovering from the illness, his height seemed to increase suddenly and dramatically.

By the time we reached Class Ten, we had become very close friends.

We had already begun sharing a desk in Class Nine. In Class Ten, however, our class teacher, Kanade Sir, arranged seating according to

the ranks obtained in the previous year. I had stood third in the class, and according to his system the highest-ranking student was paired with the lowest ranking one. Thus, Sukumar Das became my desk partner, while Akhilesh sat with Ashok Dubey.

After three or four months, some voluntary rearrangements occurred. Dilawar Singh, who had been Sukumar's close friend since their days at Naveen Vidya Bhavan School, began sitting between us. The arrangement changed again in Class Eleven, and from then onward students were largely free to sit with their friends.

That was when Akhilesh and I finally began sharing the same desk.

I have spent so much time describing him because no one accompanied me to more films than he did. Since this chapter is about cinema, it is impossible to leave him out.

I believe I watched no fewer than three or four hundred films with him.

Most of these were seen between 1967–68 and 1976–77. After that, I do not remember watching any films with him, although we may have seen one or two later when he visited Chachai, at the Amarkantak Power Station in Shahdol district, after I joined the Madhya Pradesh Electricity Board. If we did, no memory of it remains.

In those years, every road eventually led to a film –

-If something good happened-we watched a film.
-If something bad happened-we watched a film.
-If we were suddenly in the mood-we watched a film.
-If the mood was excellent-we watched a film.
-If the mood was terrible-we watched a film.
-If we had an argument-we watched a film.
-If there was absolutely nothing to do-we watched a film.
-If we needed a break after several days of serious study-we watched a film.
-If we were about to begin studying seriously again-we watched a film, the day before.
-If we had just finished an examination-we watched a film.
-If the examination had gone exceptionally well-,we watched a film.
-If it had gone less well than expected-we watched a film.

In short, we did not search for excuses to watch films; excuses found us.

What could we possibly do about that?

-If a new film was released, it had to be seen.
-If an old film appeared in a matinee show and we had never seen it, it had to be seen.
-If an old film reappeared and we had already seen it but wished to watch it again, it had to be seen.
-If an award-winning film arrived, regardless of language, it had to be seen.
-If a film by Satyajit Ray or Mrinal Sen was screened, it absolutely had to be seen.

And many films we never intended to watch somehow ended up being watched anyway.

How and why, that happened is a story for another time.

For the moment, let me speak of the films we genuinely wanted to see- and did.

□

During the period I have just described, roughly from 1967-68 to 1976-77, Jabalpur had nearly twenty cinema halls.

Let me count them:

Jyoti, Vineet, Shri Krishna, Shyam, Plaza, Prabhu, Vandana, Anand, Subhash, Mahavir, Shri, Central, Kalpana, Payal, Navneet, Sharda, Sheela, Lakshmi, Delight, and Empire Talkies.

Perhaps I have forgotten one or two, but there were certainly around twenty.

Over time, they disappeared one by one.

The decline probably began with 'Shri Talkies' or the 'Central Talkies' - the very theatre from which, years earlier, I had forced poor Rajjan Mama to run all the way back to Kamaniya Gate.

The arrival of television in ordinary homes during the 1980s dealt the first major blow to cinema halls. Then came video cassette players, video cassette recorders, and rental cassettes.

The very people who constituted the core audience of the film industry suddenly found they could watch films without leaving their homes.

Neighbours formed groups. Several families would gather in a single house and watch multiple films in one evening for a fraction of the cost of visiting a theatre.

The consequences for cinema halls were devastating.

Films continued to be made throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but audiences increasingly watched them on television, VCPs, and VCRs rather than in theatres.

The arrival of mobile phones later completed what television had begun.

The damage affected not only theatre owners but also film producers and distributors.

Yet the film industry refused to surrender.

Determined efforts were made to lure audiences back into theatres. New technologies were adopted. Greater attention was paid to technical excellence. Sound systems improved. Location shooting became more ambitious. Cinematography evolved rapidly.

The arrival of multiplexes, combined with unprecedented advances in communication technology, gradually restored the industry's fortunes.

Changing social realities were also reflected in storytelling. Traditional family dramas, moral tales, dacoit films, and fantasy adventures gave way to suspense, thrillers, mysteries, action spectacles, and more sophisticated forms of entertainment.

Such films had always existed, of course. Many masterpieces had already been made in these genres.

But audiences wanted a new recipe.

Filmmakers responded by becoming more selective about stories. Music evolved as well. Western melodies and instruments blended with Indian traditions. The result was a wave of exciting experimentation that resonated with a changing society.

And so, the industry rose again.

Films now premiere simultaneously in multiplexes, on television, and on streaming platforms. The fascination with stars has returned. Film music enjoys immense popularity once more.

At least, that was the situation as of December 2024.

One further detail deserves mention.

The chain of theatre closures that had begun with Shri Talkies and Central Talkies continued until Jyoti Talkies itself shut its doors in 2017.

Established in 1963, Jyoti had served audiences for fifty-four years. Generations of film lovers-including my own-had enjoyed countless memorable films there. Strongly built, elegant, and remarkably comfortable, it offered a cinema-going experience unlike any other.

Today, a large shopping mall stands on that site.

As far as I know, it is called *Krishna Avatar Mall* and includes a PVR multiplex. When I first wrote these lines, the project was nearing completion.

As I make the final edits to this chapter on 9 June 2026, at 10:54 in the morning, the mall has already been operational for about a year, perhaps a little more or a little less.



But my purpose here is not to write a history of Indian cinema or the cinema halls of Jabalpur.

I am merely trying to describe my own relationship with cinema-the place it occupied in the life of an ordinary man.

So let me return to Akhilesh and the films we watched together.

As I mentioned earlier, we must have seen more than five hundred films during a span of roughly nine years.

By simple arithmetic, that works out to four or five films every month-sometimes fewer, sometimes more. Viewed in that light, the number no longer seems quite so astonishing, especially considering the stage of life we were in. Of those five hundred films, at least one hundred and fifty to two hundred were English-language films.

This did not mean we were trying to improve our English.

Far from it.

I understood almost none of the English spoken in those films. Akhilesh was not much better off.

We were students from Hindi-medium schools, after all. And film characters do not speak slowly for the benefit of language learners. They speak according to their personalities, their emotions, and the demands of the scene.

Whenever I concentrated on the acting, the sets, or the locations, the dialogue escaped me completely.

When I tried to follow the dialogue, I missed what was happening on the screen.

Eventually, I abandoned any serious effort to understand the words and simply followed the story through the performances and visual cues.

Occasionally the situation became so bewildering that remaining seated felt pointless.

At such moments, Akhilesh and I would whisper briefly, arrive at a quick decision, and leave the theatre altogether.

One may well ask why, despite all this, we watched so many English films.

The answer is simple.

Akhilesh's maternal uncle-whom we all called *Bade Mama*-was an Excise Department officer, either a Sub-Inspector or an Inspector. Thanks to him, we could often watch films at Empire or Delight Talkies for half price, and sometimes even free of charge.

Besides, English films attracted very small audiences in Jabalpur. By the second or third day, the halls were practically empty. Many films disappeared after only three or four days. That too encouraged us to watch them.

Between the two theatres, fifteen or twenty English films might arrive and disappear in a single month. Naturally, we ended up seeing two or three of them.

Hindi films generally ran much longer, and through Bade Mama's connections we often watched them during their third or fourth week.

If we lacked the patience to wait, we bought tickets ourselves.

□

I have already mentioned that the ticket window at Delight Talkies was usually managed by the uncle of our friend Dinesh Nayak.

One evening, Akhilesh and I arrived there for the 9 p.m. to midnight show.

As usual, Dinesh's uncle was sitting at the ticket counter.

There was virtually no crowd.

The moment he saw us approach, he stepped out of the small ticket booth and asked:

"Don't you boys ever study?"

Behind that simple question lay many things.

- Our embarrassment.

- His annoyance-or perhaps disappointment.

Whatever it was, we felt thoroughly ashamed.

At the same time, being young, we also felt a flicker of irritation.

He handed us the tickets.

For some reason, I blurted out:

"Dinesh is our friend."

Why I said that I have never understood-not then, not now.

Perhaps I was merely trying to escape the discomfort of the moment.

He had already turned away, but my absurd remark brought him back immediately.

"That's exactly why I'm saying it," he replied.

Then he returned to his booth.

One of my enduring weaknesses has always been that even when criticism is justified, I find it difficult to bear at first. For a few moments, I become intensely uncomfortable, as though I have been caught stealing.

If I remain silent during those moments, I eventually regain my composure and accept my mistake quietly.

But if I fail to do so, I often blurt out something foolish, irrelevant, or unnecessary-words I later regret.

In any case, Akhilesh and I turned away.

Before we could decide what to do next, we found ourselves standing in the corridor leading into the auditorium.

Without another word, we entered the hall.

And for many weeks afterwards, we avoided Delight Talkies altogether.

□

Now let me recount another episode connected with English films. Strictly speaking, it is not really an episode at all, but rather an amusing observation.

I have already mentioned that I began watching films around 1962–63 and continued doing so almost uninterrupted until 1976–77. During the first three or four years, I watched films with my father and other family members-or rather, they took me to see them. Later, most of my movie-going adventures were shared with Rajjan Mama, Anil, and Akhilesh. In between, I also watched a few films with Mannu Chacha and Bhagat Ji Dada.

During this period-especially between 1970 and 1977, I saw a great many cowboy films. Those were the years when such films were being produced in abundance. By "cowboy," I mean the riders who tended cattle, protected livestock, and guarded the farms and ranches upon which everyday life depended. In the American West, such men were known as cowboys. They rode horses, carried weapons for protection, and kept with them all the tools necessary to manage large herds of animals.

The life they led was far from easy. Today, mobile phones and modern conveniences have made such work much simpler. But in those days, everything demanded tremendous effort and endurance. It was these rugged characters who inspired countless successful films in Hollywood and throughout the Western world.

The cowboy heroes of those films rode magnificent horses. Their costumes were unforgettable: faded and tattered jeans and shirts, stylish fringed leather jackets, broad-brimmed cowboy hats, high leather riding boots, wide gun belts with holsters on both sides carrying long-barrelled revolvers, cartridge belts slung across the waist or shoulder, thick cigars clenched between their lips, and long leather whips tucked into their belts.

Among the famous Westerns of that era were *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, *True Grit*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, *Once Upon a Time in the West*, and *They Call Me Trinity*. These are only a few of the titles I can still recall.

The reason I remember so few is simple. We understood much of the story by intuition and guesswork. A fair amount made sense, but a good deal of it existed only in our imagination.

One advantage of Hollywood films was that they were generally shorter than Hindi films. Consequently, the main feature often began after the interval. Before that, twenty or thirty minutes would be devoted to a Films Division newsreel, a short documentary, trailers for forthcoming films, and various advertisements. The principal feature was then screened in one uninterrupted stretch, usually lasting between an hour and an hour and a half.

Another pleasant feature was the relative absence of long-winded dialogues and endless debates. Every two or three minutes somebody fired a gun, and then horses began galloping. They would continue galloping for what felt like forever. During stretches where there was little dialogue, one heard only the neighing of horses while the cowboy hero panted heavily, spat in anger, or emptied a few cartridges into the sky for no apparent reason.

Crossing vast plains and barren deserts, he would eventually arrive at some new settlement or tribal outpost. By then his horse would have slowed to a dignified trot. The townspeople, abandoning whatever work they were doing, would stop and stare at him. Among them would often be the heroine. She would turn her beautiful neck toward him, exchange a glance, and then curl her lip in disdain.

Soon our cowboy hero would reach a saloon-like drinking establishment. The place would already be crowded. Men drank liquor from enormous mugs, tore into roasted chunks of meat, and filled the air with laughter, shouting, and general commotion. Before long, one of these rough fellows would pick a quarrel with the newcomer,

leading either to a fistfight or a shooting contest. Naturally, our hero always emerged victorious.

With minor variations, this sequence appeared in almost every cowboy film we watched during those years.

Thereafter, the story would move forward, differing somewhat from film to film. Yet certain elements remained constant: the neighing of horses, frantic chases, falls and tumbles, leaps and scrambles, gunshots, and the rugged hero gently blowing across the smoking barrel of his revolver after firing. Then there was the heroine-with her handsome yet dusty face, parched lips, and dazzling white teeth-being sought by the hero's mud-stained eyes.

The actors I still remember including Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Eli Wallach, Burt Lancaster, and Yul Brynner.

Among the heroines, the one who captivated me most was Claudia Cardinale. Her face and mannerisms bore a remarkable resemblance to another face-

-the face that haunted my thoughts then and continues to hover somewhere in my mind even today.

As for the other actresses, their names have long since slipped away.

Young people who were devoted to these films admired the heroes' rough, arrogant, and carefree mannerisms. These cowboys seemed to take up residence inside them, firing imaginary bullets all day long and forever blowing smoke from the barrels of their pistols.

But I was speaking of an observation, and to explain it, all this background was necessary. That is why I have taken so long to arrive at the point.

Whenever we went to Empire or Delight Talkies to watch a film, we frequently encountered a local cowboy-particularly during the night shows.

He wore a cowboy hat at all times.

His head was shaved in the manner of Yul Brynner. In place of a cigar, a cigarette hung perpetually from his lips. It was almost certainly a Panama, Charminar, or perhaps a Caesars cigarette-which, in Jabalpur slang, was known as a "Scissors" or "कैंची सिगरेट".

He kept his hat on throughout the film and smoked continuously. He always selected a seat with an empty row behind him so that he would not be forced to remove his hat. Occasionally, when a film attracted a full house, this arrangement became difficult.

In those days, every cinema hall in Jabalpur contained a few members of a very special species of spectator. Their self-appointed duty was to relieve the audience whenever a horror scene became too intense, a serious sequence too heavy, an emotional scene too tearful, or a dull stretch too exhausting.

Their remarks, whistles, and peculiar vocal effects could provoke laughter from an entire hall.

While watching films at Empire or Delight, whenever a heroine struck a particularly glamorous pose, a terrifying horror sequence appeared on screen, or even a horse entered the frame, one of these gifted individuals would suddenly produce such a convincing horse-neigh that the solemn silence of the auditorium would instantly dissolve into fountains of laughter.

The audience, many of whom were struggling heroically through English dialogues they barely understood, would relax at once. Refreshed and re-energized, they would return to the difficult task of watching an English film.

When the show finally ended, people emerged from the theatre looking at one another as though they had just been released after a lengthy captivity and had somehow fought their way to freedom.

Our local cowboy, too, would stride out with his head held high, blowing rings of cigarette smoke into the night air.

And by "blowing smoke rings," I mean exactly that. He must have practised the art diligently.

Without acknowledging anyone, he would march with measured steps toward the bicycle stand. Whenever he happened to be there, our attention was fixed entirely upon him.

He would remove his bicycle from the stand as though he were leading a horse out of a stable. Holding the handlebars with one hand, he would wheel it free and then spring onto the saddle with a sudden leap.

To us, it looked exactly as though he were mounting a horse.

I suspect that was precisely how it felt to him as well.

Then his steed would trot away into the darkness.

Only after he had departed would we collect our own "horses." If we had come on a single horse that day, the responsibility naturally fell to Akhilesh.

□

The names of many of the films I watched during those years have now faded from memory. Even so, a few titles still linger in my mind: *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Mackenna's Gold*, *The Guns of Navarone*, *Vanishing Point*, *The Magnificent Seven*, *Born Free*, *African Safari*, *Men from Istanbul*, *Fear Is the Key*, *Drums of Destiny*, *Mad, Mad, Mad World*, *Romance of a Horse Thief*, and *The Ultimate Warrior*.

These are among the few names that have survived the passage of time.

More than fifty years have elapsed between the days when I watched those films and the time of writing these recollections in December 2024. I am now in my sixty-ninth year. It is therefore wiser not to burden memory any further and to move on.

The moment we stepped out of the cinema after watching an English film, a second show would begin-not on the screen, but among ourselves.

This new show would commence as we parted ways for our respective homes, or, if two of us were riding the same bicycle, it would continue until one had dropped the other off. Sometimes it extended over three or four days in successive installments.

As I have already mentioned, we seldom understood the English dialogues properly. We were students educated through the Hindi medium, and English had been merely one subject among many. The pronunciation used in those films was vastly different from the pronunciation we had learned in school or heard in our classrooms. Neither in our homes nor in our neighbourhoods was there any tradition of speaking English. Moreover, when the actors delivered their lines according to the emotional demands of a scene, the words often flew completely over our heads.

So, we relied on guesswork.

Subtitles, too, were uncommon in those days. In truth, we were almost glad when they were absent. By the time we had managed to read half a subtitle, the scene would change and a new subtitle would appear. We would end up neither reading properly nor watching properly.

It was often far better to watch a film without subtitles, calmly interpreting each scene in our own way and moving forward with our own understanding.

Quite frequently, however, later scenes would overturn our earlier assumptions. This would produce both frustration and delight. Those English films possessed the unique ability to offer us two opposite emotional experiences at the same moment.

Even while the film was in progress, we kept explaining things to one another and trying to make sense of what we were seeing. The real discussions began as soon as the film ended. Each of us would narrate the story as he had understood it. Sometimes we arrived at a common interpretation; sometimes we revised our own conclusions; and at other times we enthusiastically corrected one another's theories.

Of course, not every film posed such difficulties.

Many cowboy films, Tarzan films-in which poor Tarzan himself seemed to know little English-safari adventures, and numerous action films were easy enough to follow. Newspaper advertisements for such films often carried the reassuring line:

"No knowledge of English is required to enjoy this film."

And then there were the films of Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy.

How could I possibly forget them?

We never missed those.

For those films, there was genuinely no need to understand English at all. Everything became perfectly clear right there in the cinema hall.

Whatever praise may be offered to these great artists, it will always seem inadequate.

Yet through them, I would also like to express my heartfelt gratitude to countless other artists-regardless of their language or country-

those whose work, whose stories, whose written scenes, whose dialogues, whose performances, whose songs, whose music, whose direction, and whose films have given us moments of comfort in a world so full of sorrow and suffering; those who, even if only for a little while, have made us smile and forget our troubles.

Causing pain to others is something that all of us do, knowingly or unknowingly, at one time or another. But the gift of making people laugh is entrusted by Providence only to a chosen few.

The great Raj Kapoor, the incomparable Kishore Kumar, Mehmood Mian, Johnny Walker Sahib, Johnny Lever, and countless others belong to that blessed fraternity.

If I were to begin compiling a complete list of such names, this book itself would become too small to contain them. The moment one artist comes to mind, four others follow.

And how could one ever forget the majestic artistry of the legendary Dilip Kumar? His unforgettable performances in films such as *Kohinoor*, *Azaad*, *Ram Aur Shyam*, and *Gopi* remain shining examples of acting at its finest.

□

In those days, films produced by major banners and starring celebrated actors did not run merely for weeks; they often ran for months. If a film completed twenty-five weeks in a theatre, it earned the distinction of a *Silver Jubilee*. If it continued for fifty weeks, it was honoured as a *Golden Jubilee* film.

Such milestones were celebrated in the very cinema halls where the films were being screened.

In the larger cities, these occasions were often attended by the film's producers, directors, leading actors and actresses, as well as members of the technical crew. In Bombay (now Mumbai), these events could be remarkably grand. Not only would those associate with the film be present, but numerous distinguished personalities from the film industry and other fields would also be invited.

Today Jabalpur may be classified as a Tier-2 city, though I have no idea what category it belonged to during the 1970s and 1980s. What I do remember is that several films celebrated Silver and Golden Jubilees there as well. Even so, I do not recall any major star ever visiting Jabalpur to participate in such functions. Usually, representatives of the film distributors or production companies would arrive, present commemorative trophies bearing the film's name to the cinema owners and other associated individuals and depart. It is possible that an occasional supporting actor, actress, or assistant director may also have attended, but I have no knowledge of such visits.

I myself never went to any of these celebrations. Reading about them in the newspaper the following day was quite sufficient for me.

Among the films that enjoyed Silver Jubilees, Golden Jubilees, or even longer runs in Jabalpur, the ones that come immediately to mind are *Bobby*, *Pakeezah*, *Milan*, *Aradhana*, *Mera Gaon Mera Desh*, and *Phool Aur Patthar*.

Perhaps it is wiser to stop the list here, for countless films starring giants such as Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Rajendra Kumar, Sunil Dutt, Rajesh Khanna, Jeetendra, Dharmendra, and Manoj Kumar achieved similar feats during that era. One title would remind me of another, and I would go on writing indefinitely.

So let me simply say that, like the people of countless other Indian cities, towns, and villages, the people of Jabalpur were extraordinarily fond of cinema. Watching the same film several times over was considered perfectly normal.

I too watched certain films repeatedly-*Bobby*, *Pakeezah*, *Julie*, *Ram Aur Shyam*, *Sholay*, *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Chhoti Si Baat*, and *Aashirwad*, to name a few. Most of these I must have seen three or four times. The number of films I watched twice was considerably larger.

Quite often I would see a film with someone other than Akhilesh. Yet if he later decided to watch the same film, it was almost certain that I would accompany him and see it again.

There is, however, one fact that deserves special mention.

Anil watched *Bobby* seventy-two times.

Compared with him, I had seen it only eight times.

In this particular competition of film devotion, I was nowhere near his league.

A rather amusing incident connected with this comes to mind.

The year was 1973, and the film was *Kashmakash*. It starred Feroz Khan, Rekha, Shatrughan Sinha, Asha Sachdev, I. S. Johar, and several other prominent actors. It was a murder mystery based on James Hadley Chase's novel *Tiger by the Tail*.

For reasons I can no longer remember, I happened to watch the film alone. Such a thing was unusual, but it did occur.

After seeing it, I spent the next two or three days being extremely careful not to reveal the identity of the murderer to Akhilesh by accident. If one already knows the culprit in such films, half the enjoyment is lost.

A few days later we made plans to watch *Kashmakash* together. We arrived at Jyoti Talkies in time for the six-to-nine evening show.

The ticket windows at Jyoti Cinema were located on either side of the entrance. We purchased tickets for the reserved class. Since the film had not yet begun, we stood beneath the porch chatting.

The porch was actually a large, cantilevered canopy stretching across the entire width of the entrance. Beneath it lay a cemented floor. In front was a vast open compound enclosed by a boundary wall. Large iron gates opened onto the road from either side. Cars were parked in this compound. The bicycle stand occupied the left side, and along its barbed-wire fence stood three or four paan shops.

Suddenly my attention was drawn toward those shops.

At one of them stood our classmate Mahendra Chaubey.

We called him "Manchi."

He had not noticed us and was leisurely lighting a cigarette. At that time we were in the second year of engineering college. Smoking among students was hardly unusual. Akhilesh and I, however, had not yet begun smoking. The story of my first cigarette belongs to the third volume of this book.

For the moment, let us return to Mahendra Chaubey.

Naturally, he too had come to watch *Kashmakash*.

As I watched him, a mischievous thought flashed through my mind, and without thinking I said to Akhilesh:

"Imagine if someone walked up to Manchi right now and told him that I. S. Johar is the real murderer! He'd be furious. Wouldn't that be fun, Guru?"

I was laughing, thoroughly entertained by my own joke.

Then I noticed Akhilesh staring at me.

In the very next instant, I realised what I had done.

But there was nothing to be done now. The arrow had already left the bow.

Composing myself, I calmly asked,

"What happened, yaar?"

Akhilesh said nothing.

I tried again.

"Shall we go inside?"

Outwardly, I appeared completely relaxed.

Akhilesh replied,

"Yes, let's go. If Manchi comes over here, he might get caught in your trap too."

We entered the hall.

Although I appeared calm, I was inwardly consumed with guilt and annoyance at my own carelessness.

After the newsreel and advertisements, the main feature began.

Akhilesh and I never watched films in complete silence. We were constantly exchanging comments and observations. But that evening I was under considerable strain. Most of my responses were limited to absent-minded grunts and nods.

What surprised me was that Akhilesh seemed entirely normal. He watched the film attentively and chatted from time to time as though nothing had happened.

As the story moved toward its conclusion and the moment of revelation approached, my anxiety steadily increased.

The climax was approaching-not only on the screen but between us as well.

At last, the decisive moment arrived.

The mystery was unveiled.

It became clear that the character portrayed by I. S. Johar was indeed the murderer.

Immediately Akhilesh exclaimed,

"Hey! He really is the killer!"

Then he snapped his head toward me and stared with exaggerated astonishment.

For a moment I was completely stunned. I had no idea what was going through his mind.

Then, recovering myself, I smiled.

Akhilesh broke into a quiet laugh.

I laughed too.

When we emerged from the cinema, we spent the entire journey discussing the incident.

Only then did I learn that throughout the film he had suspected nearly every character of being the murderer-except the one played by I. S. Johar.

He had assumed that when I made my joke about spoiling the mystery for Manchi, I had deliberately named I. S. Johar precisely to avoid revealing the true culprit.

And to be honest, that is the part of the story I like most.

The enjoyment that I feared I had stolen from him remained completely intact. If anything, it was I who spent the entire film carrying the burden of unnecessary guilt.

As I write about the incident today, another thought comes to mind.

Sometimes it feels as though there is Someone, somewhere, quietly watching and listening.

That Presence does not interfere in everything, nor does it respond immediately to every mistake we make.

But perhaps, when our intentions are not dishonest, it quietly corrects our errors in its own mysterious way.

At least, during that evening's screening of *Kashmakash*, that is exactly how it seemed to me.



A wonderfully innocent incident comes to mind.

It took place at Empire Talkies.

One of the most beautiful films produced and directed by Vasu Bhattacharya is *Aavishkar*, released in 1974, starring Rajesh Khanna and Sharmila Tagore in the lead roles. The film explored the complexities of urban middle-class married life and formed the second part of Bhattacharya's celebrated "introspection trilogy." The first film in the trilogy was *Anubhav* (1971), and the third was *Griha Pravesh* (1979).

No discussion of Vasu Bhattacharya's finest works can ever be complete without mentioning *Teesri Kasam*. To this day, it remains among the ten greatest films I have ever seen. But that is a conversation for another time. For the moment, our concern is *Aavishkar*, which was playing at Empire Talkies during those days.

Akhilesh and I had gone to watch the matinee show.

When the film ended, we left the auditorium and made our way to the bicycle stand where our bicycle was parked. The bicycle belonged to both of us-or at least, in practical terms, it did.

Serious, introspective films rarely attracted large crowds, and this was a matinee show running from noon until three o'clock. There were few spectators to begin with, and only a handful had reached the bicycle stand. An unusual stillness hung in the air. Perhaps the film itself had contributed to it. After watching a film like *Aavishkar*, one tends to remain entangled in one's own thoughts for some time.

We were wheeling the bicycle out on foot, with Akhilesh holding the handlebars.

Walking alongside us was a young Sikh gentleman accompanied by his small son.

Akhilesh and I were silent, but the father and son were engaged in an animated conversation. Since they were discussing the film, our attention was naturally drawn toward them.

The little boy, who could not have been more than eight or nine years old, was saying to his father in a mixture of Punjabi and Hindi:

"पापा, तुसीं मैनूं इक होर फिलम दिखाणी पवेगी।"

("Papa, you'll have to show me one more film.")

The elder Sikh, in a patient tone, replied:

"पुत्तर, मैंने पहले ही कहा सी कि जन्मदिन ते तैनूं इक फिलम दिखावांगा। ओ ते मैंने दिखा दित्ती।"

("Son, I already told you that I'd take you to one film on your birthday. And I've done that.")

But the child was in no mood to surrender.

"नहीं जी, मैनूं ते इक होर फिलम वी देखणी है। पक्का!"

"No, Papa. I want to watch another film too. Definitely!"

This time the father spoke more firmly.

“ओये, ज़िद न कर पुत्तर। चल, साइकल ते बैठ।”

"Hey, don't be stubborn, son. Come on, sit on the bicycle."

Still muttering under his breath, the little fellow climbed onto the bicycle's crossbar. Father and son then rode away.What conversation followed between them, how far the argument went, and how it finally ended-I have no way of knowing.

But even then, I felt that the child's insistence was entirely justified.

And I still feel the same way today.

After all, what else could one expect when an eight- or nine-year-old child is given *Aavishkar* as a birthday treat?

What should one call that?

I have no hesitation in admitting that the film felt somewhat heavy even for my eighteen-year-old mind. Many of its emotions, silences, and subtle layers of human relationships were beyond my complete understanding at the time.

And that little Sikh boy was only eight or nine years old!

Had I been in his place, I too would have demanded another film the moment the first one ended.

□

Let us pause for a moment and talk about films themselves-about things that most people know in one form or another.

From a very early age, I was fascinated by cinema. Not merely by films, but by almost everything connected with them. The movement of projected images, the way they came alive upon the screen, the mysterious workings of the projector, the film reels themselves-everything seemed magical to me.

In reality, a film consisted of countless tiny still images.

These images were imprinted upon small rectangular strips of celluloid. Tiny perforations along the upper and lower edges of each strip engaged with the sprockets inside the projector, allowing the film to advance at a precise speed.

When thousands of such images were joined together into a long strip, the result was called a film.

The circular spool around which this strip was wound was known as a reel.

At the top of the projector was the feed spool, where the film reel was mounted. Below was the take-up spool, fitted with an empty reel. As the film ran, it unwound from the upper reel and gradually wound itself onto the lower one.

Meanwhile, the film travelled over various sprockets and rollers until it reached the front of the projector lens. There, an intense beam of light shining from behind passed through each individual frame, carrying with it the patterns of light, shadow, and colour encoded within the image.

Eventually, that light struck the cinema screen.

From the screen it reflected into the eyes of the audience and then into their minds.

The entire process occurred in less than a second.

During each second, numerous still images flashed before the viewer's eyes so rapidly that the innocent eye and trusting brain were deceived into believing that a single figure on the screen was moving, speaking, laughing, and weeping.

For two, two-and-a-half, or even three hours, the spectator watched millions of such images pass before him and emerged from the theatre convinced that he had witnessed a living, breathing, moving story.

Perhaps that is why it has been said:

"Even what we see with our own eyes is not always the truth."

What I have described above was the general working principle of the film projectors used during our time.

In some cinemas, the exit from the balcony was located near the projection room. Whenever I passed that way, my eyes would invariably wander toward it. Occasionally the door stood open, and inside I could see two enormous projectors.

At the time, I assumed that two machines were required so that when one reel ended, the next could begin immediately without interrupting the flow of the film.

A complete feature film generally required fifteen or sixteen reels, and sometimes even more.

In those days, 16 mm and 35 mm films were common. Most cinema halls screened 35 mm prints. Later came the era of 70 mm films.

Titles such as *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Sholay*, *Aandhi*, *Sangam*, and *Dharam Veer* come readily to mind in that context.

If I were now to begin explaining the technical differences between 16 mm, 35 mm, and 70 mm film, my memoir would start resembling a textbook on physics. So let us leave that subject behind and return to the world of stories.

Today we live in the age of digital projection.

The gigantic projectors of our youth have become part of history and memory. One is more likely to encounter them now in museums or old photographs than in working cinemas.

Earlier I mentioned those tiny strips of celluloid film.

In those days, five or six such fragments would be sold in small transparent plastic packets for five paise or a single anna. We children bought them eagerly and then tried to identify which film scenes they contained.

It was very much like a lottery.

The pieces were so tiny that it was almost impossible to determine, through the plastic, which actor or actress appeared in them.

If a fortunate friend happened to find a clear image of a major film star in his packet, he would be beside himself with joy. The rest of us would look at him as though he had discovered a priceless treasure.

That reminds me of another memory from those innocent years.

Kakka-that is, Kandhilal Vishwakarma's son, Kedarnath-was about my age. He may have been a year older or younger than me. He was his parents' third child and their second son.

His uncle lived in Calcutta.

On one visit, his uncle brought him a fascinating toy.

The toy contained a viewing lens. A short distance behind the lens was a tiny white plastic screen. On the outside was a mechanical arrangement into which a circular cardboard disc could be inserted.

Attached to the disc were eight or ten film frames.

Whenever a special lever was pressed, the disc rotated slightly and the next frame moved into position before the miniature screen. Light entering from behind illuminated the frame, and when viewed through the lens, the image appeared enlarged, bright, and remarkably clear.

Press the lever once-another picture appeared.

Press it again-the next one followed.

In this way, the entire disc became a tiny cinematic universe.

The little film fragments that we struggled to examine by holding them up to the sunlight between our fingers could be viewed by Kedarnath effortlessly and in perfect clarity through that device.

He possessed three or four such discs.

He would examine them whenever he pleased.

Occasionally he allowed me to look through the viewer as well, but always while holding it himself. Once I had finished, he would promptly carry it back inside the house and put it away.

For a few days, I was jealous of him.

After all, he possessed a treasure that I did not.

But childhood jealousies have such short lives.

After some time, I must have quietly made peace with the fact. Gradually, I forgot about the toy altogether.

Yet now, after so many years, as I sit opening the bundle of old memories, that toy has returned to me once again.

And with it returns the image of a little boy who was slightly envious, deeply fascinated, and endlessly curious about something that belonged to someone else.

This too is a small incident from those days. It survives in memory not as a complete story but as a handful of scattered frames from an old film reel. Each frame is separate, incomplete, and slightly blurred-yet the light hidden within them still shines with undiminished brightness.

In our neighbourhood, just beyond the mouth of our lane and a little to the left along the main road, stood Vikram Babu's bungalow. I have already described this house in some detail in *The Beginning*. It was one of those old colonial-era bungalows whose architecture possessed a quiet dignity of its own. A long front verandah stretched across its façade. Large bedrooms stood at either end, while inside were a drawing room, a kitchen, and another verandah at the back. Its lime-washed white walls and red English roof tiles made it look, from a distance, like a picture from another age.

Great neem and tamarind trees stood before the bungalow. Their shadows wandered slowly across the ground throughout the day. Around one of the trees was a raised earthen platform where chessboards were often spread out in the evenings, and sometimes

games of chaupar were played as well. The players were usually elderly men from the surrounding neighbourhood. Yet I never saw Vikram Babu among them.

His younger son Rajesh, however, who was seven or eight years older than me, would occasionally be seen playing chess. At that age I knew little about the game, but I had heard enough to understand that Rajesh was considered an excellent player. He had won several prizes and was also exceptionally bright in his studies.

In the front room on the left side of the bungalow, Chhote Bhaiya had set up a projector on a table. With it, he cast a luminous image approximately four feet by two and a half feet onto the wall opposite. Small fragments of film were fed into the machine, and on that wall they seemed to come alive.

Every evening after darkness fell, Chhote Bhaiya ran two shows. Admission cost four or five annas.

Chhote Bhaiya was the younger son of Vikram Babu's brother-in-law-that is to say, the son of Kamla Bua, who was the sister of Bitti Bua. But no one in the neighbourhood ever bothered with such lengthy explanations of family relationships. To everyone, he was simply "Chhote Bhaiya."

I never even tried to learn his real name. And if I ever did know it, it has long since disappeared beneath the dust of memory.

His silent cinema did not survive very long-perhaps a month or two at most. Yet for as long as it existed, it was nothing short of magical for the children of the neighbourhood.

Later, he had two small rooms constructed in one corner of the compound using wooden planks and partitions. In the front room of that little tiled-roof structure, he opened a lending library called *Rajesh Library*.

Curiously, Rajesh was not his own name but the name of his cousin-Vikram Babu's son-the same Rajesh I mentioned earlier.

The library remained in existence until the final years of Chhote Bhaiya's life. In fact, he eventually came to live in that little library himself. But that is a story for another time, to be told in the chapter devoted to books.

For now, let us return to the cinema.

I too attended one of those screenings.

I could not have been more than eight or nine years old. Since it was already dark outside, my father personally accompanied me there and paid for my ticket.

When eight or ten spectators had gathered-most of them children - Chhote Bhaiya switched off the light. For a while he adjusted the projector's beam upon the wall. Then, one by one, he began feeding film fragments into the machine.

And thus, the show began.

Looking back now, I realize it was not really a film at all. It was a collection of broken pieces gathered from many different films, as though someone had selected a few scenes from distant corners of the world and strung them together into a single sequence.

I remember seeing the sea upon the wall.

Ships stood near the waves.

Then another scene would appear.

A dense forest.

Wild animals.

There was no story, no hero, no songs.

Only changing images-and within those images, a mysterious world waiting to be discovered.

I had watched perhaps fifteen or twenty fragments when my father's voice came from outside.

He called my name.

In childhood, a father's voice carried the authority of a command. However much the heart might protest, the feet knew they had to obey.

Reluctantly, I stood up.

Whether the wall was showing the sea or the jungle at that moment, I no longer remember. I remember only the feeling that the film had been left unfinished.

Perhaps that is why it has never truly ended.

Even after sixty or sixty-five years, that little wall still glows somewhere in a dark corner of memory. Ships still sail across its seas. Forests still emerge from its shadows.

And then my father's voice arrives once more from outside:

"Come along. It's time to go home."

And once again I leave that unfinished film behind.

□

In those days, travelling bioscope men also wandered through neighbourhood streets carrying their bioscope boxes upon their heads and a wooden stand in one hand, calling out for customers.

A bioscope was a wooden box.

Instead of film, it displayed printed pictures mounted on paper. Inside the rear section were two spools upon which a strip of pictures was wound. Levers mounted on top allowed the operator to rotate the spools and advance the images. A small electric bulb illuminated the pictures from within, and many bioscopes even had a miniature gramophone mounted on top.

The front panel of the box resembled the shape of the "D" marking on a hockey field, though formed from short straight lines rather than a smooth curve. Four or five circular viewing windows were cut into this

panel, each covered by a small lid. Through these openings children watched what was known as "bioscope cinema."

The moment the bioscope man's call was heard; children would come running out of their homes. They would plead with their parents, who would then summon the bioscope operator. One or two neighbouring children would soon join them.

The operator would first erect his wooden stand and place the box upon it. Then he would switch on the internal light and open the covers of the viewing windows.

Four or five children would immediately press their faces against the openings, cupping their hands around their eyes to block out the sunlight.

Then either the gramophone record would begin to play, or the bioscope man himself would start singing. As he sang, he turned the spool lever by hand, causing the pictures to move forward one after another.

To children, it was pure magic.

Even though the pictures were motionless, they seemed to contain an entire living world.

Many bioscopes did not possess gramophones. In such cases, the operator supplied both music and narration himself. Using a small wooden stick decorated with tiny bells, he tapped rhythmic beats upon the box while singing verses that described each picture.

These songs often rhymed and possessed a simple charm that delighted children.

The pictures shown in a bioscope usually depicted religious scenes, historical monuments, famous personalities, and popular film stars.

Actresses such as Madhubala, Nimmi, Shyama, Kumkum, and Meena Kumari were favourites among both children and adults. As each image appeared, the bioscope man would introduce it, praising the personality in song and rhyme.

To the children watching through those little windows, it seemed as though an entire miniature universe had taken up residence inside the wooden box.

□

I have already spoken about the films shown on government vehicles using 16 mm projectors. Let me now mention the films I watched in open-air theatres-the makeshift cinemas popularly known as *Tatta Talkies*.

I encountered such theatres in my ancestral village of Bankhedi, in the colony of the Gandhi Sagar Hydel Powerhouse, and in the town of Neemuch. There was another one near Chachai, in a place called Budhar, close to the Amarkantak Thermal Power Station, although I never saw a film there.

Before going further, I should explain what a *Tatta Talkies* actually was.

These makeshift cinemas were generally found in rural areas and less developed towns. Their construction was temporary. Large woven bamboo mats, known locally as *tattas*, were fixed upright with bamboo poles and used as walls. Usually there was no roof at all.

Above the audience stretched only the open sky.

Ahead lay the magic of cinema.

The screen itself was rarely permanent. Sometimes an ordinary brick wall would be plastered and whitewashed to serve as a projection surface. Elsewhere, two upright poles would support a stretched white cloth.

Films were projected onto these improvised screens using either 16 mm or 35 mm projectors.

The seating arrangements were equally fascinating.

The front rows consisted of rugs spread directly upon the ground. Many spectators brought their own mats, sacks, or wooden planks from home. Behind them stood temporary benches constructed by

fixing wooden boards onto upright poles. Somewhere among these benches a sturdy table would be placed, supporting the projector itself.

Where electricity was unavailable, diesel generators supplied power. Where electricity existed, it was used instead.

These cinemas usually screened selected films that had been released a year or two earlier. Old religious films and particularly popular favourites were often shown repeatedly.

The only film I remember watching in Bankhedi with my cousins was a black-and-white religious film. Its songs were beautiful, and I think Mahipal was the hero.

Beyond that, I remember nothing.

Indeed, I am no longer entirely certain whether I saw it in Bankhedi itself or in Pipariya, about twenty-six kilometres away.

I also watched two or three films in the Gandhi Sagar Hydel Powerhouse colony, but their names have vanished from memory. I lived there from September 15, 1977, until January 1978 while undergoing training as an Assistant Engineer with the Madhya Pradesh Electricity Board.

That stay is associated with many interesting memories, which I shall describe in detail in the third volume of this book.

The film I watched in Neemuch was probably *Kacche Dhaage*, starring Kabir Bedi, Vinod Khanna, and Moushumi Chatterjee.

I saw it with one of my closest friends and one of the gentlest human beings I have ever known Idris.

The story of Idris, and the circumstances under which we watched that film together, also belongs to the third volume.

A brief mention here would not do justice to it.

Some memories demand space.

To compress them into a few sentences would be unfair to them.

□

My journey with films began in early childhood.

In those days, I would hold tiny fragments of transparent film strips between my fingers and examine them with the naked eye. The still images frozen within those miniature frames seemed to me like little windows opening onto some mysterious realm. Perhaps it was then that my fascination with moving images first took root.

Around the same time, I acquired a toy whose proper name I can no longer remember. It was a small, black, triangular, flattened box. Its interior was dark and slightly rough-textured. Two transparencies of the same scene, mounted side by side on a card, could be inserted into the device. One then looked through its lens with a single eye closed. The two images merged into what appeared to be a three-dimensional scene.

At that age, it felt like pure magic.

It was there that my relationship with moving images truly began.

From that toy, the journey led to the bioscope box, where pictures came accompanied by songs and stories. Then came slide projectors, films shown by government mobile cinema vans, the open-air *tatta talkies*, the grand experience of watching films in cinema halls, screenings on 16 mm projectors at officers' clubs, and eventually the arrival of television.

Today, that same journey has reached multiplexes, laptops, and smartphones.

The medium has changed. Technology has transformed itself repeatedly. Screens have grown larger and larger, only to shrink once again until they fit comfortably into the palm of a hand.

Yet one thing has never changed:

my fascination with moving images.

Many decades and countless technological revolutions stand between the child who held a tiny strip of film up to the light and the man who now watches films on a smartphone screen. Yet the thread connecting the two remains exactly the same-a sense of wonder and enchantment before the world of images.

□

When I look back, it often seems to me that a single human life is actually lived along many dimensions, many pathways, and many parallel journeys at once.

We imagine that we are living one life.

The truth, however, is that countless lives move alongside one another within us.

Each possesses its own memories, its own people, its own seasons, and its own journeys.

If I speak only of films, that too forms one separate path along which I have travelled all these years.

That path has its own memories, its own stories, its own joys and sorrows.

It possesses its own poetry.

Its own romance.

It is a world unto itself, coloured by experiences unlike any other.

When I cast my gaze over this entire road, it seems as though countless people are still standing there, smiling.

So many films lie scattered along its length.

So many scenes continue to glow beneath layers of time's dust.

So many stories flutter about like colourful butterflies, moving from one flower of memory to another.

I try to catch them, but each time they drift a little farther away and begin swaying once more in the wind.

Somewhere there is the deep darkness of night.

Elsewhere, the clear brightness of day.

In one place, a twilight sky slowly descends; in another, the first ray of dawn has only just touched the earth.

Here are fireflies blinking in the darkness.

There are stars shining in silent stillness.

Somewhere lies the scorching sand of a burning desert.

Elsewhere rests the icy stillness of snow-covered mountains.

A river flows by, murmuring and singing as it goes.

Far away, restless ocean waves hurl themselves endlessly against the shore.

Flowers smile quietly.

Birds weave the morning into their songs.

Clouds gather.

Rain falls.

The sky opens into immeasurable heights where birds soar freely through the blue.

There are vast fields stretching into the distance, green and yellow and earth-coloured.

There are dense forests filled with living greenery, where even time itself seems inclined to pause for a while beneath their shade.

And all of this exists not only within the films.

It exists within my journey of watching them.

It exists along the roads I travelled.

Within the people beside whom I sat while witnessing the magic of moving images upon a screen.

Within those cinema halls, those *tatta talkies*, those bioscopes, those projectors, and within the vanished time hidden behind every screen.

Yes-

all of this exists along this path.

And perhaps much more besides.

Things that still stand waiting somewhere in the mist of memory, awaiting the moment I call them by name.

□

Sooner or later, one must bring these conversations about films to a halt.

But before doing so, I feel compelled to mention those films that touched me in one way or another, that left some mark upon me.

Such influence is not always obvious.

Sometimes it remains within the mind like a single unforgettable scene.

Sometimes it continues to play within us like the melody of a song.

Sometimes the echo of a dialogue can still be heard decades later.

And sometimes the loneliness or courage of a character quietly becomes part of our own emotional memory.

Cinema is a strange and expansive art.

Within it exists almost everything that exists in life itself-love, hatred, compassion, violence, beauty, struggle, dreams, defeat, hope, memory, and time.

Perhaps that is why every film touches us in some way.

The particular colour through which it reaches us, however, differs from person to person.

One viewer may be astonished by technical brilliance.

Another may be captivated by the realism and beauty of the sets.

Some travel far with the story itself.

Others lose themselves in the music.

Sometimes it is the songs that remain.

Sometimes an actor's face and performance settle permanently in memory.

The world of cinema contains so many doorways of attraction that every viewer enters through a different one.

For that reason, what affects me in a film need not affect someone else in the same way.

If we were to analyse this difference psychologically, we could wander very far indeed.

Human beings do not see merely with their eyes.

They see through their memories, their experiences, their loneliness, their desires, and their wounds.

Perhaps that is why the same film is reborn in different meanings within different people.

I believe you understand what I am trying to say.

I am not speaking merely about liking a film.

There is a subtle difference between liking and being affected.

Many films entertain us.

But some films settle somewhere deep within us.

They do more than entertain.

They touch the inner self.

Sometimes they change us a little.

Sometimes they nudge us toward a new way of thinking.

Sometimes they awaken an emotion long forgotten and quietly depart.

I have watched so many films during my lifetime that most of them have now vanished into the twilight of memory.

Many names have been forgotten entirely.

Yet those films that still remain must surely contain something special-something that prevented them from falling into the dark well of oblivion.

Despite the countless layers of time, they remain preserved somewhere within me.

At times it feels as though they are all still sitting before me.

Just as alive.

Just as awake.

Like a tame parrot that comes and settles fearlessly upon one's finger, looking directly into one's eyes, those films too have perched upon the finger of memory.

They look at me.

And I look at them.

A great distance of time lies between us.

Yet recognition remains.

□

There are certain films that are not merely watched.

They enter one's being.

Slowly.

Like evening twilight descending into an old room-

without knocking at the door.

Such films continue to breathe within me even today.

They breathe alongside my own breath-

like an old melody that plays not upon the lips but somewhere deep between the ribs.

And so let us begin there.

With the story of a man who knows only one thing:

how to give love.

He wishes to make people laugh-at any cost.

To place a smile upon another face, he is willing to do anything.

He can conceal his sorrow.

He can transform his pain into a performance.

And what does he ask in return?

Very little.

Perhaps only this:

that someone might understand him.

Understand his words.

Understand his silences.

And if even that proves impossible-

then perhaps simply grant him permission to preserve his memories.

Those faces.

Those moments.

The only companions of his loneliness.

I am speaking of *Mera Naam Joker*.

Raj Kapoor's film is perhaps nobody else's story at all.

It is his own story-told in his uniquely personal way.

There is a clown on the screen.

But in the clown's eyes one can glimpse Raj Kapoor's solitude, a loneliness that perhaps he could not have expressed in any other manner.

Before I say anything more about the film, however, there is a song.

Because sometimes a single song contains the essence of an entire film.

Not in its words alone-

but in the emptiness that breathes between two lines.

"ए भाई, ज़रा देखके चलो, आगे ही नहीं पीछे भी
दायें ही नहीं बायें भी, ऊपर ही नहीं नीचे भी -
ए भाई

तू जहाँ आया है वो तेरा - घर नहीं, गाँव नहीं
गली नहीं, कूचा नहीं, रस्ता नहीं, बस्ती नहीं

दुनिया है . . . . !
और प्यारे, दुनिया यह एक सरकस है
और इस सरकस में —
बड़े को भी, छोटे को भी
खरे को भी, खोटे को भी, मोटे को भी, पतले को भी
नीचे से ऊपर को, ऊपर से नीचे को
बार बार आना-जाना पड़ता है

और रिंग मास्टर के कोड़े पर - कोड़ा जो भूख है
कोड़ा जो पैसा है, कोड़ा जो क़िस्मत है
तरह-तरह नाच कर दिखाना यहाँ पड़ता है
बार-बार रोना और गाना यहाँ पड़ता है
हीरो से जोकर बन जाना पड़ता है . . . !

गिरने से डरता है क्यों, मरने से डरता है क्यों ?
ठोकर तू जब तक न खाएगा,
पास किसी ग़म को न जब तक बुलाएगा
ज़िंदगी है चीज़ क्या नहीं जान पायेगा !
रोता हुआ आया है रोता चला जाएगा,
कैसा है करिश्मा, कैसा खिलवाड़ है !
जानवर आदमी से ज़्यादा वफ़ादार है
खाता है कोड़ा भी रहता है भूखा भी
फिर भी वो मालिक पर करता नहीं वार है !!
और इन्सान ये –
माल जिस का खाता है
प्यार जिस से पाता है, गीत जिस के गाता है
उसी के ही सीने में भोंकता कटार है . . . !

हाँ बाबू ,
यह सरकस है शो तीन घंटे का -
पहला घंटा बचपन है, दूसरा जवानी है
तीसरा बुढ़ापा है। । ।
और उसके बाद - माँ नहीं, बाप नहीं
बेटा नहीं, बेटी नहीं, तू नहीं,
मैं नहीं, कुछ भी नहीं . . . रहता है

रहता है जो कुछ वो –
ख़ाली-ख़ाली कुर्सियाँ हैं
ख़ाली-ख़ाली तम्बू है,
ख़ाली-ख़ाली घेरा है
बिना चिड़िया का बसेरा है,
न तेरा है, न मेरा है
न तेरा है, न मेरा है. . . . .!!”

This philosophy of life that *Mera Naam Joker* expresses remind me again and again of a beautiful song from *Anari*, directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, in which Raj Kapoor played the lead role.

The song seems to embody, with remarkable simplicity and grace, the very outlook toward life that Raj Kapoor's screen persona so often carried within it-a belief that goodness is worth preserving even in a world that may not always value it; that one must continue to love, to laugh, and to remain human despite disappointments.

Whenever I think of the clown in *Mera Naam Joker*-a man who hides his wounds behind a smile and transforms his sorrows into entertainment for others-my mind inevitably drifts toward that song from *Anari*.

It feels almost as though both films are speaking to each other across the years, echoing the same emotional truth through different stories.

For beneath the laughter, beneath the performances, beneath the applause, there remains the same gentle question:

How should one live in a world that is often indifferent to innocence?

Perhaps Raj Kapoor's answer was always the same-to remain true to one's essential humanity, even at a personal cost.

And few songs have expressed that sentiment more beautifully than the one from *Anari*:

"किसी की मुस्कुराहटों पे हो निसार
किसी का दर्द मिल सके तो ले उधार
किसी के वास्ते हो तेरे दिल में प्यार
जीना इसी का नाम है

माना अपनी जेब से फ़कीर हैं
फिर भी यारों दिल के हम अमीर हैं
मिटे जो प्यार के लिए वो ज़िन्दगी
जले बहार के लिये वो ज़िन्दगी

किसी को हो न हो हमें तो ऐतबार
जीना इसी का नाम है

रिश्ता दिल से दिल के ऐतबार का
ज़िन्दा है हमीं से नाम प्यार का
कि मर के भी किसी को याद आएंगे
किसी के आंसुओं में मुस्कुराएंगे
कहेगा फूल हर कली से बार बार
जीना इसी का नाम है . . . .”

("To dedicate yourself to another's smile,
To borrow another's sorrow if you can help bear it,
To keep love in your heart for others-
That is what life is called. Though our pockets may be poor,
we are rich at heart, my friends.

A life that is spent in the service of love
is a life truly lived.

A life that burns itself away
to bring springtime into another's world
is a life fulfilled.

Whether anyone else believes it or not,
we certainly do-

that is what living truly means.

The bond between one heart and another
is founded upon trust.

It is through people like us
that the very name of love remains alive.

Even after we are gone,
someone will remember us.

We shall return as smiles
in another person's tears.

And every flower will tell every budding blossom,
again and again:

This is what life is called" . . .

When *Mera Naam Joker* was first released, it was, in a sense, a failure at the box office. Perhaps the film was too long. Perhaps audiences were unable to identify with its deeper emotional core. There may have been other reasons as well. But when it was re-released some years later, it found appreciation and acceptance. By then, perhaps, viewers had begun to understand what Raj Kapoor had been trying to say through it.

I did not see the film during its initial release. But when I finally watched it, it struck me as the story of a simple, innocent human being whose dreams seemed to embody the kind of person God might have wished to create.

Somewhere, however, God appears to have miscalculated.

Human beings turned out to be far cleverer than He had anticipated, and they began taking full advantage of that oversight.

Or perhaps it was God's own design.

Perhaps, to keep the world in motion, He deliberately scattered a few simple-hearted souls among countless clever ones. Thus, the eternal struggle between goodness and cunning continues, and the great fair of life remains forever in session.

Of all the films I have seen, *Mera Naam Joker* is among those that have affected me most deeply. It touched something very profound within me.

Let me add one more thing.

I once read that the great filmmaker Satyajit Ray regarded the first part of *Mera Naam Joker*-the segment featuring Rishi Kapoor and Simi Garewal-as one of the ten finest films he had ever seen.

Ray's admiration for that portion of the film demonstrates something important: true connoisseurs are often slightly ahead of their time.

There is a reason why people say that only a jeweller can truly recognize a diamond.

□

Alongside it, I would like to mention a few other films that have touched my soul.

In one way or another.

How they did so, I shall explain only briefly.

Perhaps someday, if the mood strikes and the circumstances are right, I may even write an entire book about them.

□

That book can wait.

For the moment, let us talk about *Pakeezah*.

In this film, the innocent and pure love story of Sahibjaan and Salim unfolds upon the screen with such exquisite beauty that it feels less like cinema and more like poetry.

A poem whose every word seems to have been written with ink made from crushed pearls, scented with flowers and moistened with tears.

Every frame of the film, every dialogue, is a small miracle of refinement and artistic elevation.

The social issue around which the story is woven is itself unique and deeply significant.

As for me, I was enchanted by the sheer wizardry of its filmmaking and storytelling.

The songs composed by Ghulam Mohammed, and the way they were visualized on screen-what can one say except:

"Wonderful. Simply wonderful."

And then there is that immortal line:

"आपके पांव देखे, बहुत हसीन हैं...

इन्हें ज़मीन पर मत उतारिएगा, मैले हो जाएंगे।"

"I have seen your feet. They are extraordinarily beautiful. Please do not place them upon the ground-they will become soiled."

What praise could be more beautiful than that?

Can there be a more enchanting beginning to a love story?

And Meena Kumari-

the spell of her performance, the haunting allure of her voice...

What should I praise, and what should I leave unmentioned?

□

Mughal-e-Azam is another film made not merely with skill, but with heart.

Its world is crowded with political intrigue, rebellion, war, clashing swords, and the splatter of blood. Yet everything ultimately revolves around a single point-

a tear falling from Anarkali's eyes.

Adorned with the incomparable performances of Prithviraj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar, and Madhubala, this unfinished love story remains unmatched in its grandeur.

Created with technological resources that were extremely limited by modern standards, it still stands tall against many contemporary productions created with the aid of computers and digital wizardry.

It is not merely equal to them.

Even today, it surpasses many of them.



Aashirwad, released in 1968 and directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, was another extraordinary film.

The song-

"जीवन से लंबे हैं बंधु ये जीवन के रास्ते. . . ."

"Jeevan se lambe hain bandhu, ye jeevan ke raste..."
(The roads of life, my friend, are longer than life itself...)

-contains, for me, the essence of the entire film.

The character of Jogi Thakur completely won my heart.

This unforgettable role was performed by "Dada Muni," Ashok Kumar.

Performed is perhaps too weak a word.

He lived the character.

He became the character.

And alongside him was Harindranath Chattopadhyay, who played Baiju, the dholak player.

The colours he added to the film have never faded from my memory.

The indomitable spirit of Jogi Thakur continues to inspire me even today.

Perhaps this is the right place to mention that I had originally intended to title the first volume of my memoir *Ek Tha Bachpan* (*Once There Was a Childhood*) instead of *Aarambh* (*The Beginning*).

The inspiration came from another beautiful song from this very film:

“एक था बचपन, एक था बचपन
छोटा सा, नन्हा सा बचपन
एक था बचपन

बचपन के एक बाबू जी थे
अच्छे-सच्चे बाबुजी थे
दोनों का सुंदर था बंधन
एक था बचपन “

(“Once there was a childhood-
Small and tender,
Fragile and bright.

Yes, once there was a childhood.

And in that childhood
There was a father-

Kind and honest,
Gentle and true.

Between them bloomed
A bond of rare beauty.

Once there was a childhood”.)

I first saw *Aashirwad* as a young child, together with my entire family. It was playing at Subhash Talkies in Jabalpur.

After the film ended, I remember reading the name "Hrishikesh Mukherjee" on a poster mounted high above the theatre building.

The name struck me as unusual and appealing.

At that age, however, I had only the faintest idea of what a film director actually was.

□

Do Aankhen Barah Haath, released in 1957, was yet another magnificent film.

Naturally, I was barely a year old at the time of its release, so I certainly did not see it then. And if I did happen to accompany my parents to a screening, I have no memory of it whatsoever.

The film received numerous national and international awards.

It was frequently screened in matinee shows.

I watched it both on the projector carried by the government's mobile cinema van and later in a proper theatre.

The story revolves around Adinath, a young jailer with progressive and reformist ideals. He obtains permission to take six hardened murder convicts out of prison and into an old, dilapidated farmhouse, where he attempts to rehabilitate them through trust, responsibility, and meaningful work.

What follows is a long and emotionally charged journey of hope and disappointment, faith and doubt.

Do Aankhen Barah Haath is ultimately the story of hope itself-

the hope that searches for goodness within evil.

It strives to establish a profound truth:

that human beings themselves are not inherently evil; rather, it is their actions that become evil.

Therefore, one should hate the crime, not the criminal.

Based upon principles of humanistic psychology and the concept of open prisons, this remarkable work by producer, director, and actor V. Shantaram was nothing short of revolutionary.

This idea has appeared before me repeatedly throughout life in different forms and circumstances.

I myself have always been sympathetic to such a view.

Or perhaps my thinking gradually became this way under the influence of events, experiences, and great individuals who held similar beliefs.

What I mean is simply this:

this film strengthened those convictions within me.

It supported me and gave me courage to stand firm in such beliefs.

And its immortal prayer-song-

"ऐ मालिक तेरे बंदे हम. . . "

"Ae Malik Tere Bande Hum. . ."
("O Lord, we are Your children. . .")

continues to inspire countless people, including myself.
Even today, it gives strength.

It spreads light across the unknown and difficult paths of life.

And for many of us, it remains a lamp that continues to burn long after the film itself has ended.



After this, I must mention another masterpiece directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee-*Anand*.

In my view, to call *Anand* merely a film would be doing it an injustice. It is far more than that. It is, in itself, a complete guidebook on how life ought to be lived-how one should live, like Anand himself, with joy, courage, and grace.

The story was written by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, while the dialogues were penned by Gulzar. I once read that Mukherjee had conceived the story as early as 1954 with his friend Raj Kapoor in mind. Yet when *Anand* was finally released in 1971, it was Rajesh Khanna who stepped into the title role.

Without a doubt, the film stands as one of the finest examples of Rajesh Khanna's artistry as an actor.

Raj Kapoor used to affectionately call Hrishikesh Mukherjee "Babu Moshai." In a delightful twist of fate, the same expression became the trademark refrain of Anand Sehgal-the character portrayed by Rajesh Khanna in the film.

Even today, many of the film's dialogues continue to be quoted:

"Babu Moshai, do you know what our problem is? We drag tomorrow's sorrows into today's happiness, and in doing so, we poison the joy that was ours to enjoy."

And this unforgettable reflection:

"Life and death are in the hands of the Almighty, Your Majesty. Neither you nor I can alter them. We are all but puppets upon a stage, our strings held in the fingers of One above. Who will rise, when, and how-no one can say."

And perhaps the most celebrated line of all:

"Life should be great, Babu Moshai-not merely long."

Within the film there was also a brief yet deeply touching poem by Gulzar Sahib-a few simple lines carrying the quiet wisdom and tenderness that only he could weave into words.

“मौत तू एक कविता है
मुझसे एक कविता का वादा है मिलेगी मुझको
डूबती नब्ज़ों में जब दर्द को नींद आने लगे
ज़र्द सा चेहरा लिये जब चांद उफक तक पहुँचे
दिन अभी पानी में हो, रात किनारे के करीब
ना अंधेरा ना उजाला हो, ना अभी रात ना दिन
जिस्म जब ख़त्म हो और रूह को जब साँस आऐ
मुझसे एक कविता का वादा है मिलेगी मुझको . . . . “

("Death, you are a poem.

A poem has promised itself to me;
one day, it shall come to meet me.

When, in the fading pulse,
pain itself begins to fall asleep;

When the moon,
wearing a pale and yellowed face,
reaches the edge of the horizon;

When the day still lingers half-submerged in water,
and the nightstands waiting upon the shore;

When there is neither darkness nor light,
when it is neither night nor day;

When the body has come to its end,
and the soul draws its first true breath-

A poem has promised itself to me;

One day,
it shall come to meet me. . . .")

I imagine that most people of my generation-and those a few years older or younger-must have seen *Anand*. Even so, a few words about it are worth saying.

The protagonist, Anand, is a young man battling a terminal illness-cancer. Into his life enters Dr. Bhaskar, played by Amitabh Bachchan. During the course of treatment, a deep friendship develops between the two.

The story then unfolds.

While Anand continues to fight his private battle against death, he refuses to burden others with his suffering. Instead, he fills the lives of those around him with laughter, warmth, and affection. Rather than lamenting his fate, he teaches everyone how life ought to be lived.

And that, perhaps, is the film's greatest achievement.

I am certain that I am not alone in loving it. Anyone who has seen *Anand* must surely have been touched by it. At least, that is what I firmly believe.

□

Junoon, released in 1979, was another remarkable film. It was produced by Shashi Kapoor and directed by Shyam Benegal. Based on Ruskin Bond's novel *A Flight of Pigeons*, it is set against the backdrop of the Indian Uprising of 1857.

The cast included Shashi Kapoor, his wife Jennifer Kendal, Nafisa Ali, Tom Alter, Shabana Azmi, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Naseeruddin Shah, Deepti Naval, Pearl Padamsee, and Sushma Seth.

At heart, it is a love story.

The romance may be fictional, but the historical landscape upon which it unfolds is rendered with such beauty and authenticity that the film becomes a vivid doorway into that turbulent period of history. For anyone interested in the past, *Junoon* is nothing less than a gift.

Naseeruddin Shah's performance is extraordinary.

The music, the background score, and especially the cinematography by the great Govind Nihalani transports the viewer directly into the nineteenth century. Every frame breathes the atmosphere of its time.

And when the director is someone of Shyam Benegal's stature, excellence is hardly surprising. Like so many of his films, *Junoon* stands among the finest achievements of Indian cinema.

When I began listing the films that have influenced me and remained unforgettable despite the passage of years, scenes from *Junoon* repeatedly floated before my eyes.

One in particular involves Sarfaraz, played by Naseeruddin Shah. When he learns that the Indian forces have lost the battle for Delhi,

he erupts in a fury so overwhelming that he destroys Javed's pigeon coops and releases all of his beloved birds.

I no longer remember the exact dialogue spoken in that scene.

Yet I remember something far more important:

the chills that ran down my spine when I heard it.

Even today, that sensation remains alive in memory.

Another unforgettable moment is the filming of Amir Khusro's immortal composition:

"Aaj Rang Hai Ri Maa, Rang Hai Ri..."

The picturization of that song is astonishing. Even now, I can feel the thrill I experienced while watching Rajesh Vivek's performance in that sequence.

The same thrill that coursed through me in the darkened hall of Kalpana Talkies.

The film concludes with a voice-over informing us that ***Javed dies fighting the British, while Ruth and her mother return to England. Fifty-five years later, Ruth dies unmarried.***

That final voice-over struck me like a powerful emotional blow.

At least, it did so for me.

□

Sparsh, released in 1980 and directed by Sai Paranjpye, was another deeply moving and powerful film.

Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi delivered magnificent performances in the lead roles.

Anirudh, played by Naseeruddin Shah, is the blind principal of a school for visually impaired children.

Kavita, portrayed by Shabana Azmi, lost her beloved husband several years earlier and has since lived with a profound sense of loneliness. In an effort to cope with her grief, she begins teaching music.

Through a childhood friend, she becomes connected to Anirudh's school and eventually to Anirudh himself.

Gradually, affection blossoms into love.

Their engagement follows.

Yet Anirudh suddenly becomes convinced that marriage would amount to a sacrifice on Kavita's part-that she would be giving up too much for him.

Despite Kavita's attempts to reassure him, he refuses to marry her.

Once again, Kavita's childhood friend intervenes, helping him see the truth of the situation. A series of events further compels him to reconsider his decision.

In the film's final scene, the audience watches Anirudh walk toward Kavita's house and finally enter it.

It is a conclusion both understated and deeply satisfying.

Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi are magnificent throughout the film.

Yet *Sparsh* is much more than a love story.

It sensitively explores the world of the visually impaired-their challenges, frustrations, strengths, and emotional realities. Even today, the film remains strikingly relevant.

It introduces us, with rare subtlety, to the experiences of people who cannot see and who navigate life primarily through touch, sound, and intuition.

Any film capable of drawing us so completely into such a world deserves to be remembered and discussed.

□

Another film I greatly admired was *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*.

Its central message is simple, yet profound: the life we are living has been given to us only once.

Whether another life awaits us afterward, no one knows.

The ideas presented in the film were not entirely new to me. They were things I had understood, at least intellectually, before watching it. Yet the film brought them alive with freshness and vitality.

To me, its message seemed to be this:

Why should we not live life exactly as we truly wish to live it?

Why should we allow fears, anxieties, social expectations, and endless hesitations to stand in our way?

Why not set aside all those "ifs" and "buts," all those "whys" and "therefores," all those endless calculations that prevent us from embracing life wholeheartedly?

Why not live with courage?

With sincerity?

With love?

Why not live life in its fullest truth?

Released in 2011, the film was directed by Zoya Akhtar, and it carries this philosophy with remarkable energy and charm.

□

When I counted the films, I had mentioned so far, the number came to nine-nine films that, in one way or another, have left a lasting impression upon me.

But as I write, more names begin to surface.

How can one forget Vasu Bhattacharya's *Teesri Kasam* and the unforgettable innocence of Hiraman?

Or *Harishchandra Taramati*, with the majestic presence of Prithviraj Kapoor?

Or *Ek Pal*, directed by Kalpana Lajmi and featuring Shabana Azmi, Naseeruddin Shah, and Farooq Sheikh?

As I think of *Ek Pal*, a song from that film returns to me.

Even today, whenever I hear it, I do not know why, but something deep within me grows moist with emotion.
Something within quietly surrenders to its melancholy beauty.

Some songs do not merely pass through our ears.

They become part of our inner weather.
And long after the film itself has faded, they continue to rain gently somewhere within the heart.

"ज़रा धीरे ज़रा धीमे लेके जइयो डोली
बड़ी नाज़ुक मेरी जाई मेरी बहना भोली
काँची तलैया से गुज़रे जो डोली
गोरी , दो बूंद आंसू के दे जइयो हो
ज़रा धीरे ज़रा धीमे लेके जइयो डोली
बड़ी नाज़ुक मेरी जाई मेरी बहना भोली. . . .

नहा के चदरी कैसे सुखायेगी
गोरी अँगना की छैया ले जइयो हो
ज़रा धीरे ज़रा धीमे लेके जइयो डोली
बड़ी नाज़ुक मेरी जाई मेरी बहना भोली
पीपल की पौड़ी से गुजरे जो डोली
गोरी , सिन्दूरी बिन्दिया दे जइयो हो
ज़रा धीरे ज़रा धीमे लेके जइयो डोली
बड़ी नाज़ुक मेरी जाई मेरी बहना भोली. . . .

लोहित की पुलिया से गुजरे जो डोली
गोरी सोने का बिछुवा दे जइयो हो
ज़रा धीरे ज़रा धीमे लेके जइयो डोली
बड़ी नाज़ुक मेरी जाई मेरी बहना भोली
ज़रा धीरे ज़रा धीमे लेके जइयो डोली
बड़ी नाज़ुक मेरी जाई मेरी बहना भोली . . . .”

"Carry the bridal palanquin gently, ever so gently;
My sister is delicate, innocent, and tender.

If the palanquin passes by the little pond of Kanchi,
Dear bride, leave behind two drops of your tears.

Carry the bridal palanquin gently, ever so gently;
My sister is delicate, innocent, and tender...

How will she spread her wet clothes to dry after bathing?
Dear bride, leave behind a little of the courtyard's shade.

Carry the bridal palanquin gently, ever so gently;
My sister is delicate, innocent, and tender.

If the palanquin passes beneath the old peepal tree,
Dear bride, leave behind your vermilion bindi.

Carry the bridal palanquin gently, ever so gently;
My sister is delicate, innocent, and tender...

If the palanquin crosses the little bridge over the Lohit,
Dear bride, leave behind your golden toe-ring.

Carry the bridal palanquin gently, ever so gently;
My sister is delicate, innocent, and tender...

Carry the bridal palanquin gently, ever so gently;
My sister is delicate, innocent, and tender."

□

Thinking itself is a kind of mode-a state in which the mind begins to flow in a particular direction. If, at this moment, I was to place my mind into its "film mode," countless movies would begin appearing upon the screen of memory. One after another, each for its own reason, each carrying its own story. There would be no end to them.

But this chapter, too, must eventually come to an end.

I have not even spoken about actors yet. Nor have I discussed lyricists, composers, or songs. Their turn will come when the right place and time arrive.

As far as I can tell, at least during our teenage years, if there was any world besides real life that helped shape us, it was the world of cinema.

Films moulded us.

They trimmed and reshaped our ways of living. They adorned us, influenced us, improved us in some ways and perhaps spoiled us in others. Sometimes a story became our guide. Sometimes a character. Sometimes a song.

They accompanied us through our everyday lives like alternate versions of ourselves.

And this still happens.

I cannot speak for others, but it certainly happens to me.

Good films leave their mark upon me-sometimes briefly, sometimes for years. Certain films, and certain characters within them, have coloured my imagination so deeply that their hues remain as vivid today as they were when I first encountered them.

There are times in life when one finds oneself trapped within a labyrinth from which no exit seems visible. There is no helping hand nearby. The end appears frighteningly close.

At such moments, some character from a film suddenly emerges from a forgotten corner of memory and quietly comes to stand beside me.

Without saying a word, that presence lends me courage to continue the struggle.

Whenever it feels as though I am about to break apart, whenever it seems that there is no one even to witness my collapse, let alone help prevent it, some character, some song, some scene unexpectedly appears and saves me from falling into pieces.

These are friends who do not remain beside us all the time.

Yet whenever they are needed, somehow, they know.

They arrive silently and place a hand upon our shoulder.

Many people may find this strange.

But believe me-it happens to me.

I love these friends.

And they, in their own way, love me back.

Sometimes I think that if films and books had not existed in my life, then many things within me would never have taken shape.

There has always been a certain incompleteness somewhere inside me.

Why it exists, what it truly is-I may never fully know.

But I do know this:

it would have existed regardless.

Among those things that have helped fill the empty spaces within that incompleteness are certain films, certain books, and certain characters who never truly existed, yet stood beside me at life's most difficult crossroads more faithfully than many real people.

Let me introduce you to some of them -

They include Raju from *Mera Naam Joker* (Raj Kapoor); Raj Kumar from *Anari* (Raj Kapoor); King Harishchandra from *Harishchandra-Taramati* (Prithviraj Kapoor); Devdas (Dilip Kumar) and Chunni Babu (Motilal) from *Devdas*; Hiraman from *Teesri Kasam* (Raj Kapoor); Jogi

Thakur (Ashok Kumar) and Baiju (Harindranath Chattopadhyay) from *Aashirwad*; Anand (Rajesh Khanna) from *Anand*; Jack Braganza (Prem Nath) from *Bobby*; Margaret, or Maggie, from *Julie*; Rai Sahib (Pran), Nilesh (Sanjeev Kumar), and Rama (Jaya Bhaduri) from *Parichay*; Dungarus (Naseeruddin Shah) and Rukmini Bai (Shabana Azmi) from *Mandi*; Somu (Kamal Haasan) from *Sadma*; Sahibjaan (Meena Kumari) from *Pakeezah*; Satya (Mehmood) singing "Soi Ja Tara..." in *Mastana*; Guru (Kishore Kumar) from *Padosan*; Anandi Devi (Meena Kumari) from *Mere Apne*; Nurse Radha (Waheeda Rehman) from *Khamoshi*; and Dr. Amarnath (Sanjeev Kumar) from *Mausam*.

And countless others.

If I were to untie the bundle of memory and sit with it for a while, they would all begin arriving one after another. The list would become so long that it would have no end.

Whenever I have needed support, whenever life has demanded the presence of a friend, each of them has taken my hand in one way or another.

And to tell the truth, they still do.

That is why, at the end of this chapter, I wish once again to express my gratitude to all those who helped bring these characters into existence-the writers, directors, actors, musicians, and all the countless unnamed individuals whose imagination, sensitivity, and labour gave them life.

True, they are not living men and women of flesh and blood.

Their names do not appear on electoral rolls.

Their addresses cannot be found in any city.

And yet, for me, they are no less real than actual human beings.

During the long journey of life, they have often stood beside me in places where real people could not.

Sometimes they become elder brothers and place a reassuring hand upon my shoulder.

Sometimes they become friends and offer their shoulder, upon which I can rest my head and unload my accumulated sorrow, frustration, and weariness.

Sometimes they simply walk beside me in silence, offering neither advice nor questions.

And sometimes, when the road ahead grows dim and uncertain, they step forward and light a small torch.

It is a curious thing.

We know they are fictional.

And perhaps, if they could know such things, they would know that we have mistaken them for reality.

But human relationships are not built solely upon reality.

Some are built from memories.

Some from dreams.

And some from stories that gradually become part of our own story.

When I look back now, it seems that not only the people of my life walked beside me upon my path.

The footprints of these characters are there as well.

Some faint.

Some clear.

Some deeply impressed into the soil.

They gave words to my loneliness.

They gave patience to my defeats.

And many times, they helped gather together the scattered pieces of my being.

Perhaps that is why, as I write the final page of this chapter, I do not really wish to say goodbye to them.

Because I know it is not a real farewell.

The book will close.

The chapter will end.

But they will remain somewhere within me-like familiar objects kept in an old room of a beloved house. One does not see them every day, yet their presence quietly reassures us.

And when life next arrives at some difficult turning, when the road once again seems unbearably long, perhaps one of them will appear before me with a smile.

Perhaps he will place a hand upon my shoulder and softly say:

“घबराओ मत... मैं हूँ ना।”

"Do not be afraid... I am here."

And then, as always-

I shall find myself a little steadier,

a little stronger,

and ready to continue the journey once more.

□□□

9

Madan Mahal Ki Pahadiyan

(Dialogues with the Silence of Black Rocks)

Those years between the ninth and eleventh grades belonged to that tender season of adolescence, a time of mild, sun-warmed afternoons and long, drifting shadows. Days never seemed complete in themselves, and the nights often paused quietly at the threshold of some untold story.

We were seven or eight friends, a small world of our own, where every voice carried a different note, yet our laughter rose in the same rhythm.

Akhilesh, Ashok Dubey, Suresh Salunke, Anjan Sarkar, Shaligram, and Anil Dubey.

Perhaps a few names escape me now, but at least these were always there. Sometimes one or two more would join us; sometimes a few would drift away. What I can truly speak of, however, are only those fragments of time in which I was present.

None of us were merely names.
Behind every name, an entire season seemed to stand still.
Each pair of eyes carried its own glimmer, its own dream, its own sky.

We walked together, wandered together.
And yet, perhaps each one of us was also travelling somewhere deep within himself.

We had arrived at that strange threshold
where childhood was slowly slipping away.
Or perhaps, it had already slipped away.

Not entirely, though, because the stories and little legends of childhood still lingered inside us like poems remembered by heart. Each of us had our own tales, our own private poems. Sometimes we would pull them out from within ourselves, the way a magician slowly draws mysterious objects from an old bundle and arranges them one by one before the crowd, before striking the little drum and beginning his tricks.

We performed these small magic shows for one another. Some days passed doing nothing else, merely watching and showing these tricks of wonder.

At that age, everything itself seemed magical.

Whenever we gathered, only those moments felt truly ours, even if they lasted for just a few hours out of the endless cycle of day and night.

And life -
life had not yet unveiled its true face before us.
It stood somewhere in the shadows, watching in silence as we played with our small enchantments, unaware that, even then, time was gently carving us into the strangers we would one day become.

□

The stage of life we had arrived at was no ordinary one. It was that strange threshold where the "I" and the act of "being" both cling to each other and drift apart at the same time, slowly beginning to form their own separate identities - sometimes as companions, sometimes by moving away from one another.

Every week or fifteen days, we would inevitably make a trip to the Madan Mahal Hills. Whenever an opportunity arose, we somehow found our way there. One major reason for this was that both Ashok Dubey and Anjan Sarkar lived in Garha, and the Madan Mahal Hills stretched right alongside the Garha settlement. They still do - but things were very different then, fifty or fifty-five years ago.

Today, much of the hill has been cut away. In those days, dark grey granite boulders lay scattered everywhere among the houses and open spaces, in clusters large and small. Now even the main hill has been quarried at many places for granite stone. Large portions of it have been encroached upon; people have built houses all the way up the slopes. The untouched, enchanting beauty of nature has almost vanished.

To reach the houses built above, stones have been hacked away to create crooked stairways and uneven, disorderly paths. Some encroachments have since been removed, and plantations have been carried out as well. Yet much remains unfinished. Even the areas where work has been done now appear neglected. Along the edges of the hill, especially on the side facing 'Supatal', the footpaths that were once built there have gradually filled up with handcarts and tiny makeshift shops, much like in other parts of Jabalpur. The shops, their customers, and the vehicles parked beside them occupy nearly half the road.

What astonishes me most is this - no one ever seems disturbed by any of it, nor by the inconveniences it creates.

But let me leave that thought aside for now and return to where I had paused.

In those days, whenever time allowed, we would wander among the dark, rounded granite rocks of Madan Mahal. This ritual had begun after we entered the ninth grade. By then we were truly stepping into the age of fourteen or fifteen. We had started shaping our own identities before our own eyes. We had begun paying attention to our clothes and appearance. For the first time, we were becoming aware that apart from our families and friends, we also possessed an independent self of our own.

Each of us was engaged, in his own way, in building that identity.

Of course, every now and then some elder would sharply put us in our place, while older boys from the neighbourhood - the self-appointed

"big brothers"- never missed a chance to pass sarcastic remarks or hand out unsolicited advice as we walked by. Some even seemed personally offended by our growing confidence. And they never failed to express it.

Especially at those moments when, according to our own youthful calculations, we were batting rather well among familiar faces - especially among girls and acquaintances - these elders took great pleasure in stumping us out or running us over with a single mocking remark. Their work ended there. They would casually walk away toward their own fields, leaving us behind - scorched, smouldering, and inwardly singed.

Whenever we went during the day, it was usually in the afternoon. We would climb upward through winding trails that passed between giant black boulders, along narrow gravelly paths strewn with tiny loose stones, slippery and uneven beneath our feet. If, along the way, we discovered some clean cave-like hollow among the rocks, we would stop there for a while to rest. Sometimes we would climb higher afterward; sometimes that very spot would become our camp for the day.

The Madan Mahal Hills were never merely heaps of towering rocks for me-neither then, nor now.

They were like some silent chamber within my own being, a place where I would often go to meet myself.□Bottom of Form

Today, after forty or forty-five years, so much has changed.

Time has altered the face of the city, changed the names of roads, even transformed the faces of people.

Yet there is one thing that has remained exactly where it always was - the love that lives in my heart for those Madan Mahal Hills.

That love has neither grown weary with time nor faded with distance. It still stands at the same place within me -

like the roots of an old tree,
silently growing deeper beneath the earth.

While walking among those hills, I would often feel as though I had wandered into another time altogether -
a place where words began to fall short,
and silence itself started speaking.

Now, after so many years, when almost everything has changed,
the memory of those hills settles softly inside me like a pale winter sunlight -
neither fully bright nor entirely dim.

And sometimes I wonder:
are those hills truly still the same,
or is it merely my memory that wishes to preserve them that way?

The city has changed in countless ways. Roads have taken on new forms; houses have turned into buildings; old shops in the markets have given way to large stores and shopping malls. Much else has changed too. Yet that one corner of my being which belongs to those hills remains untouched even today -

like an unfinished sentence -
that even such a long journey through time could never complete.

The Madan Mahal Hills were, in many ways, a mirror for me -
a place where I could see myself without any pretence.

Even today, their pull remains as strong as ever.

And that is strange, because returning there is no longer what it once was.
I am now a seventy-year-old man - worn by time, weathered, somewhat broken.
Those hills remain where they always were, almost unchanged, while I have travelled fifty-five years farther ahead.

I am no longer the person who could run effortlessly across those rocks and climb them with restless energy. Time has slowly sipped away my

strength. Yet the dark granite stones still hold the same ancient firmness they always had.

And still, I look at them with the same affection, the same longing, the same intensity of feeling - that alone, it seems to me, has not changed at all.

Perhaps, if anything, it has only deepened over the years.

Yet one must eventually accept this truth:
some relationships are not formed with places alone,
but with some hidden part within us.

And such parts do not change easily.
If anything, they grow stronger with every passing moment.

Those hills felt like an extension of some inner landscape within me - a place where I could exist without performing any role, simply alone with myself.

Passing through them, I often felt not that I was arriving somewhere, but that I was returning -
returning to some forgotten corner within my own being.

And today, after all these years,
when I try to reach out and touch that vanished time once again -
I begin to understand.

Some places do not exist outside us, but within.
And once they settle inside,
time can only brush past them -
it cannot alter them.

They become like the root of memory itself -
and when the roots run deep,
the branches emerge in their own season, effortlessly, without force.

Perhaps memories are meant only to be lived repeatedly within ourselves.

The fierce white glare of a summer afternoon,
the sudden warmth of a sun-heated rock against the palm,
or the cool touch of these dark stones beneath a sky washed clean with stars,
while somewhere in the distance a folk song drifts in, carried on the rhythm of a dholak.



The hills of Madan Mahal in Jabalpur are geologically ancient beyond imagination.
They are not merely piles of stone; they are among the earth's oldest memories.

They were born in the Archean Age, nearly 2.5 billion years ago, when the planet itself was still shaping its form.

These hills are composed mainly of granite and other intrusive igneous rocks-stones formed deep beneath the earth as magma cooled slowly over immense stretches of time.

Magma, the molten rock gathered beneath the earth's crust, becomes lava only when it erupts onto the surface through volcanoes.

Then, over ages beyond counting, wind, water, and sunlight touched these rocks, sculpted them, weathered them, until they became what we see today-rounded stones, some flattened, some towering, some leaning into one another, balanced impossibly upon each other, clinging together as though held by an ancient intimacy.

These strangely graceful, rough-hewn boulders-like giant imperfect pearls shaped by invisible hands - and the famous Balancing Rock are the result of centuries of erosion and weathering. Nature, with infinite patience, carved them into these astonishing forms.

The Balancing Rocks themselves feel like sculptures of miracle and endurance as though some unseen hand still holds them steady. When you first look at the most famous balancing rock, it seems that

a mere touch should send it tumbling down. Yet no matter how much force is applied, it does not move.

Nature is both powerful and wondrous beyond comprehension.

□

These hills are significant not only geologically, but historically as well.
Upon these billions-of-years-old rocks stands the Madan Mahal Fort.

The fort, of course, came much later -
a mere nine hundred years ago, in the 11th century, around 1100–1116 CE,
when it was built by the Gond ruler Raja Madan Singh.

It served mainly as a military outpost and watchtower,
a vigilant sentinel capable of surveying distant horizons.

Later, it became an important centre during the reign of the great Gond queen, Rani Durgavati,
and the fort stood witness to her courage and fierce dignity.

So, while the hills are a silent inheritance from geological time,
the fort is a luminous signature left by human history.

Whenever I look toward the hills of Madan Mahal,
I do not merely see stones.
I see time itself.

So ancient
that even words seem young before it.

I have already said these hills are millions upon millions of years old -
born in that primordial age of the earth
when everything was still forming slowly, silently, deep within itself.

But for me...
these hills are only as old
as my very first memory.

I remember climbing those towering rocks
and feeling a strange kind of freedom,
as though I had risen slightly above the earth,
and the world below had suddenly grown smaller.

These rocks, entwined with one another, supporting each other like true and loyal friends, seemed to be engaged in an endless conversation. Their dialogue never appeared to reach a conclusion. Then again, the conversations between friends are never truly finished. Yet we human beings are perhaps the ones who pay the least attention to this simple truth.

On the Madan Mahal hill, countless broken, fractured, and half-destroyed rock formations can now be seen scattered everywhere. They resemble the bodies of fallen soldiers on a battlefield after the fighting has ended - torn apart, lifeless, and abandoned.

I do not possess any statistics on what percentage of the Madan Mahal hills has fallen victim to our greed and avarice. But what is visible to the naked eye is enough to fill one with sadness and shame.

If only everyone felt the same way.

And then there are the houses -
built recklessly across the slopes, above and below, wherever space could be seized.
They have crushed the untouched innocence of this landscape with startling brutality.

The reasons behind this destruction are known to everyone.
But if I begin speaking of them, the story itself will lose its path.

So let us return instead to those black rocks.

Whatever remains of the hills - and much still does remain - is still vast, still beautiful,
still as enchanting as it was in those years I spoke of earlier.

Even today, many rocks remain untouched by time.
They stand there, just as alluring and mysterious as before,
balanced one upon another in ways that still astonish the eye.

In the crevices between them grow trees, shrubs, and climbing vines.
Roots - young, old, ancient - twist outward from the stone as though
the earth itself were breathing through them.
The stains of moss and rainwater - brown, black, weathered - seem
less like decay and more like adornment,
their ornaments and jewellery.

Sometimes it feels as though these steadfast, balanced, enduring
rocks
are not merely stones at all,
but scriptures written by nature in its own secret language -
Vedas and Puranas carved without words.

We could read them, if we wished.
But perhaps that is the hardest thing of all.

And somewhere amidst these black rocks,
the fort of Madan Mahal still stands -
not like history,
but like a silent witness.

Now, when I remember those hills after so many years,
it feels as though nothing there has changed except me.

Those rocks are still there,
the same wind, the same rising and fading sunlight,
the same steep climbs and descending slopes,
the same crooked gravel paths strewn with pebbles and stones,
winding upward and downward through the hills.

But we friends are no longer that same inseparable group
that used to arrive there several times each month, laughing, singing,
roaring with carefree joy.
Each one of us carried a story, a rumour, a joke,
or some softly glowing dream within.

We listened to one another, teased one another, laughed endlessly together.

Now, however, going alone to see those black rocks
has become difficult - physically as well as emotionally.

Only now do I understand
that in those days there was never any clear purpose behind our going there.
And now... now the very act of going itself becomes a purpose.

It is not that I never visit anymore.
I still do.
But climbing those rugged slopes has become difficult for me -
partly because of age,
and partly because of injuries left behind by accidents.

Still, I go as far as I can.
And with me is Sahil,
a young man of twenty-five or twenty-six, who drives my car.

Now these hills continue to live and grow inside the memories of all of us.
Whenever I speak to one of those old friends over the phone,
somewhere in the middle of conversation,
these hills suddenly emerge from some forgotten corner and stand before us again.

After a certain point in life,
the places connected to us do not merely remain where they physically exist -
they begin to exist within us as well.

They settle inside us.
Forever.

□

And while walking through these memories, something suddenly came back to me -

and before I forget it, before the narrative drifts too far ahead and the mention begins to feel misplaced, let me say it now.

In the story of an extraordinary man – 'Osho' -
these black rocks, these hills, and Madan Mahal exist in a deeply significant way.

Why am I speaking of Osho here?
I will tell you.

The very period of life I am speaking about
was also the time when I first encountered Osho -
not personally, but through his books.

The elder brother of my friend Dinesh Jain ("Annu"), who lived in our neighbourhood, Nirmal Jain, had become associated with Osho Amrit Dham in Jabalpur and had even taken Sanyas.
He was a lecturer in the Mathematics Department at Jabalpur Engineering College.
He owned several books by Osho, which I borrowed through Annu.

I could never finish reading all of them,
but whatever little I did read was extraordinary - enough to draw me into Osho's magnetic presence.

I never visited any of his ashrams,
nor did I ever take Sanyas or follow that path formally.
Yet I have always sincerely admired Osho and deeply respected the immense contribution he made to humanity.

I read much of what he wrote, listened to many of his talks,
and I truly believe that his writings and discourses helped refine and shape my own philosophy of life,
my own ability to look at and understand the world.

Even today, I remain profoundly influenced by the work Osho did.
He reinterpreted the entire body of spiritual wisdom in the language and context of the modern world.

In a way, he prepared maps for every inner path that leads a human being toward that mysterious presence seated within oneself.

That is an extraordinary achievement - perhaps greater than most works ever attempted in the spiritual realm.

What he said still survives today - in his own voice, in recordings, and in printed books - available to anyone who truly wishes to receive it.

And that is why,
if I speak of the hills of Madan Mahal and do not mention Osho,
the story would remain incomplete.

There will certainly be occasions later when I will speak of him in greater detail.
But for now, this much needed to be said.

During the nearly two decades Osho - then known as Acharya Rajneesh - spent in Jabalpur,
he shared a quiet and deeply spiritual relationship with the hills of Madan Mahal.

In the fading light of the 1950s, Rajneesh lived in a small, rented room near Madan Mahal Road.
He would often wander into an old house among the hills, known locally as "the Haveli" - deserted, melancholic, and mysterious.

There, beneath the shadows of the hills,
he listened to that silence which perhaps can only be heard by those who live very close to nature.

It was in those rocky slopes and stretches of solitude
that Rajneesh first recognized the stillness within himself.

For him, the hills of Madan Mahal and the region around Devtal were never merely geography.
Sitting for hours upon those granite rocks, he would sink into meditation.
The ancientness of the hills seemed to awaken some forgotten memory within him.

Osho often spoke of the Gond kings' fort and of the turret of Madan Mahal,
standing balanced upon a massive rock.

For him, that stone was not merely stone -
it was frozen testimony to time itself.

Even today, Osho Amrit Dham, nestled in the shelter of the Madan Mahal hills, carries echoes of that earlier era -
a place where a great philosopher sought to dissolve the distance between solitude and the crowd.

The ashram was founded by Swami Anand Vijay, Osho's childhood friend.
It is said that Osho himself had urged him to establish an ashram amidst these "black rocks" of Jabalpur.

Though the formal and modern structure of the ashram developed in later years,
activity around Devtal and gatherings of Osho's followers had already begun there during the 1970s, after Osho left Jabalpur for Mumbai and later Pune.

The ashram was created to embody Osho's vision -
a place where people could remain close to nature while experiencing meditation, silence, and inner stillness.

This ashram is not merely a structure of stone;
it is a living remnant of an old friendship and a spiritual promise Rajneesh once made to his companion beneath the shelter of these hills.

Today, this place is known as Osho Amrit Dham,
where people from across the world come to experience the energy of Osho.

□

In the hills of Madan Mahal, near Tripuri Chowk, stands a dargah directly across the road from what is now the Mahindra & Mahindra

showroom.
It is known as the Dargah of "Hazrat Pirane Pir Dastgir",
also called "Hazrat Ghaus Pak Dargah".

It is believed that nearly three hundred years ago, sacred relics brought from Baghdad Sharif were placed here.

There is a slow, deep light in this memory -
like a small earthen lamp still flickering quietly in the courtyard of an old house,
without noise, yet with complete faith.

If one were to gently shape this memory while preserving its intimacy, perhaps it could be written like this -

In our neighbourhood, Paschimi Ghamapur,
where my childhood and adolescence slowly took form,
Muharram processions - the *Sawaris* - were placed at both ends of our lane during the days of Muharram.

The first was the *Sawari* of Jeevan, across the main road facing our street,
and the second belonged to Gangadeen, near the far end of the lane.

Both *Sawaris* were maintained by Hindu families.

As a child, this never felt strange to me.
It was simply a scene that returned every year in the same way -
without raising a single question.

Only later did I realize
that perhaps this was the most extraordinary thing about it:
that nothing there ever felt extraordinary.

The spirit of those days was very different from the times we live in now.

Both Jeevan's and Gangadeen's families were Hindu,
yet the Muharram *Sawaris* in their homes were prepared with devotion, discipline, and reverence -

as though the occasion belonged not to a single religion, but to the shared faith of the entire neighbourhood.

Preparations would begin in both houses.
Threads, colours, fabrics, the faint fragrance of incense -
and amidst all of it,
something unnamed,
something no one ever tried to define,
yet because of which people kept gathering there.

The people of the neighbourhood came -
some with work to do, some with none -
but slowly everyone became part of the preparations.

Each person contributed in their own way.
Someone lent a hand, someone offered time,
someone simply completed the atmosphere with their presence.

And when, on the nights of the ninth and tenth of Muharram, the *Sawaris* finally emerged in procession,
it felt as though the entire lane itself had begun to move together.

There were no divisions, no distances -
only a shared devotion flowing through the sound of footsteps, the beat of drums, and the quiet moisture gathering in people's eyes.

These were not merely events passing outside us.
We passed through them ourselves.
And some fragment of that unfolding time passed through us as well.

We would silently converse with the wordless stirrings within ourselves,
touching them gently, trying to understand them.

At that moment, when the procession moved forward,
everyone seemed tied together by some sacred invisible thread.
On that path, no difference mattered -
not religion, not caste, not age.
Everyone simply moved together.

And I...

Many times, I walked with those processions - barefoot.

Sometimes with Jeevan's *Sawari*,
sometimes with Gangadeen's.

At that age, walking barefoot did not feel like a conscious decision.
I had simply been told that one walked in the procession without shoes or slippers.
And since everyone else walked that way, I walked too.

The coolness of the ground,
the occasional sharp pebble beneath the feet,
the dust rising now and then -
all of it became part of the journey,
as though silently teaching something that words could never fully explain.

Even while being among everyone,
at times I would find myself slightly apart -
quietly observing it all.

And somewhere within that silence,
I too was slowly being shaped, carved, formed -
though I remained completely unaware of the process.

"Yes... one thought kept returning to my mind again and again:
how beautiful the world is."

One night, the *Sawaris* would go to the Madan Mahal Dargah.
And on another night, to the Madar Tekari Dargah.

Which came first, I no longer remember.
If I search a little, I could probably find out.
But for what I am trying to say here, that detail changes neither the feeling nor the essence of the memory.

On those nights, the familiar roads transformed into something entirely different.

A silently moving crowd,
occasional hushed voices,
and a strange kind of exhaustion
that never felt like a burden.

At the dargahs there would be a pause -
as though the journey itself had stopped for a moment to look
inward at its own soul.

And then the return...

By the time we turned back,
the night had already reached its final edge.

By the time we reached home,
morning would already have arrived.

Soft, pale, half-awake -
as though dawn itself had not yet fully opened its eyes.

And in that moment,
between tired feet and drowsy eyes,
there existed a strange kind of peace.

At the time, I never understood what that peace meant.
But now it feels as though
that perhaps was the true meaning of the entire journey.

Before the procession began - for nearly half an hour, sometimes
even an hour or more -
the drums would continue to beat.

There was no sweetness of dance in that rhythm.
It sounded instead like the crackling roar of thunder,
growing gradually more intense.

At first it was merely a sound...
then slowly, it began striking some invisible place deep inside.

Jeevan would stand before the *Sawari* -
he must have been around my father's age then.

He would stare fixedly at the *Neza* mounted upon the *Sawari*,
without blinking,
as though he were not merely looking at it,
but entering it.

(In the context of Muharram and Karbala, the *Neza* - the ceremonial spear - is not merely a weapon, but part of a profound symbolic memory.

The tragedy of Karbala marks that moment in Islamic history when Hazrat Imam Hussain and his companions embraced martyrdom while standing against injustice. Spears, swords, and lances were used in that battle, and later, within the mourning traditions of Muharram, the *Neza* became a symbol of sacrifice, courage, and remembrance.

In the Indian subcontinent, especially in smaller towns and neighbourhoods, the long iron staff or spear-like emblem carried with Muharram *Sawaris* is often called a *Neza*. In many places, crescent symbols, *Alams*, or sacred emblems are attached to its upper portion.

The *Neza* comes to embody many meanings at once:
the memory of Imam Hussain's martyrdom,
the courage to stand against injustice,
spiritual devotion and steadfastness,
mourning and reverence.

In many neighbourhoods across central India, the *Neza* ceased to be merely a religious object; it became the centre of a shared collective faith. The pounding drums, the fragrance of incense and Loban, and the unwavering gaze of those fixed upon the *Neza* made the entire scene resemble a form of folk meditation.

There was also a belief in local tradition that fixing one's gaze upon the *Neza*, or standing before it in deep concentration, was not simply ritualistic behaviour. People saw it as an expression of inner absorption, devotion, and spiritual connection. That is why the person standing before the *Sawari* often appeared less like a participant in a

ceremony and more like a seeker lost in meditation - someone momentarily detached from the outer world.)

□

Around him stood two or three young men -
silent, alert, waiting for some unspoken signal.

Dense clouds of Loban smoke spread through the air.
Its deep fragrance drifted everywhere,
and with each breath it felt as though something unseen were entering within.

Now and then, a few voices would rise -
indistinct, unfinished -
like fragments of prayer,
or some ancient memory
breaking apart before becoming words,
yet somehow still reaching the place it was meant to reach.

The drums grew louder and louder.

And then suddenly -
Jeevan's eyes would seem to turn upward.

For a moment his body stiffened sharply.

And at once, the young men beside him would hold him steady.

A *Morchhal* - the ceremonial peacock-feather fan - would be placed in his hands.

After that, he no longer seemed the same person.
It felt as though he was no longer Jeevan at all.

As though someone else had entered him.
Or perhaps he himself had gone somewhere else entirely.

The whites of his eyes, now even more intensely fixed upon the *Neza*, appeared caught in some strange trance.

He would begin to sway -
forward, backward, left, right -
as though his body had surrendered to the rhythm of another unseen world.

People would say:
"He has entered *haal*."

(In folk language, when people say someone has entered *haal*, they mean that the person has passed into a state of deep emotional or spiritual absorption. It is not a formal theological doctrine, but an experience rooted in folk belief and Sufi sensibility.

In such moments, a person appears transformed from ordinary consciousness. Their eyes change, the body trembles, they sway intensely, sometimes weep, sometimes stand transfixed before the *Neza* or *Alam*. This state is commonly described as "*haal* coming upon someone."

The relentless beat of the drums, the cries of "Ya Hussain," the fragrance of incense and Loban, and the emotional energy of the gathered crowd together created an atmosphere in which a person seemed to connect with some hidden layer within themselves.

In Sufi tradition, the word *haal* itself refers to a spiritual condition that suddenly descends upon the heart.
It is temporary, yet in that moment the person feels overwhelmed by a larger presence or experience.
Within the folk culture surrounding Muharram, this gradually became known as "*haal* coming upon someone."

In many places, when those carrying the *Sawari* or standing before the *Neza* entered such a state, people nearby would support and steady them. It was not seen as performance, but as a genuine condition born of devotion and emotional intensity.)

Then some of the women and men of the neighbourhood would begin approaching him one by one.
Each carried some wish, some plea, some fragile hope addressed to

that unseen power -
that mysterious force believed to govern the world.

Someone bowed their head.
Someone whispered softly -
vows, fears, longings, prayers...

All of them gathered into that single moment.

'Jeevan' - or whoever it was that seemed to inhabit him in those moments -
would pass the *Morchhal* over people's heads.

Sometimes gently,
sometimes with sudden force.

And strangely enough,
the harder someone was struck by the *Morchhal*, the happier they appeared -
as though their prayer had finally been heard.

As though this too was part of the faith itself,
part of the trust and surrender with which they had come there.

When all this ended, the *Sawari* would finally be lifted.

A strong young man, wearing around his neck a thick padded ring of folded cloth, would support the lower portion of the *Sawari* upon it. From the upper part of the *Sawari* hung a strong, heavy rope, the other end held by someone walking behind, and in this way its balance was maintained.

And I...

I kept watching all of this -
as though I stood outside it all,
yet something deep within me was constantly trembling.

A faint kind of fear...
A strange pull...

And many questions too -
questions that at that age had not yet found words.

Then the procession would begin moving.

"Ya Hussain... Ya Hussain..."
"Ya Ali... Ya Ali..."

The cries rose into the air, echoing through the night.

And the drummers - now walking at the very front - continued beating the drums in that same crackling, thunderous rhythm.

The *Sawari*, Jeevan, the men supporting him...
and behind them, many people from the neighbourhood -
all moving together.

Yet perhaps each person carried something entirely different within themselves.

And while walking amidst that crowd,
I was not merely watching.

Something was happening within me too.

□

The crackling sound created by the continuous strikes of stick and beater upon the drum
slowly began echoing not only outside, but inside me as well.

As though my heartbeat itself had taken hold of that rhythm.

I would begin to feel something like fear.

But it was not a clear or ordinary fear.
Nor the sense of any visible danger.

It felt instead like the nearness of something
I could neither understand nor fully see -
a vague shifting shape, forever forming and dissolving.

Like abstract figures drawn in watery ink upon paper,
trying to suggest something,
yet losing their own way before the meaning became clear.

Even today, that feeling remains just as mysterious to me as it was then.

Even at that age, I often felt -
yes, perhaps I was beginning to understand something...
and then suddenly everything scattered again,
the thread of understanding slipping from my hands.

The same thing still happens sometimes.

Whenever I turn back stubbornly, trying to understand everything at once,
the road appears for a while...
and then suddenly it feels as though I have taken a wrong turn somewhere.

At times it even seems
that perhaps just one more step -
and everything will finally become clear.

But in the very next moment,
everything disappears again.

And I find myself standing there speechless,
like a stone statue -
whose form may express countless emotions,
yet who knows whether the statue itself feels anything at all.

Jeevan's eyes...

The whiteness of those upturned eyes -
did they somehow receive answers to those questions?
I would wonder.

Did someone truly enter into him?

And if so, perhaps the answers too belonged to that presence coming from elsewhere.

Or did he himself travel inward to some other realm?
And if he did -
did the memory of that place remain with him afterward?
Did he meet someone there who answered every question?

"What is all this?"

Even that question never found an answer.

And then, without my realizing when or how,
those questions were left behind somewhere as life moved forward.

Now, at this age, I have understood only this much:
many things connected to us are not meant to be fully known.

Perhaps they are not even questions at all -
and that is why they have no answers.

They are simply meant to be lived.
At most, only felt.

At that time, I walked alongside the procession,
yet I also remained somehow outside the entire unfolding moment.

One part of me wished to surrender completely to that rhythm.
And another part wanted to stand at a slight distance and watch whatever was happening.

The part that wanted to dissolve into the experience -
I do not know when it drifted away from me.
Perhaps it is still flowing somewhere in that current,
or perhaps it has reached some shore at last. I do not know.

But the other part -
the one that kept walking at a slight distance -

remains with me.
In fact, perhaps only that part remains with me now.

And maybe it is that very distance
which has slowly become words.

Even after all these years,
when I remember those nights,
no single clear image emerges.

Only scattered fragments remain -
the smoke of Loban,
the crackling thunder of the drums,
Jeevan's swaying body,
and amidst all of it - me.

A boy touching, for the very first time,
those unseen and unknown spaces within himself.

And in the end - when everything grew quiet,
when the sharp sounds of the drums faded far behind,
and the cries of "Ya Hussain" and "Ya Ali" slowly dissolved into the night air -
I would begin to feel, more than the exhaustion in my feet,
the turbulence within myself.

Even then I could never fully understand what exactly I was returning from -
a procession,
a faith,
or some unknown layer of my own inner being.

But one thing I understood clearly:

during those nights,
however far I may have walked outwardly,
I had travelled far deeper within myself.

Memories never truly leave us.
They simply sit quietly somewhere,
waiting for our return.

□

It was during this same period that I wrote a short novel of nearly a hundred pages - *Bikhre-Bikhre* ("Scattered Fragments").

The title had not arrived suddenly.
It had emerged from those scattered pieces that life had already left within me by then -
broken relationships, unfinished desires, unspoken sentences, faces blurred by time yet never fully erased.

Bikhre-Bikhre was really an account of that present moment of life, and of the time just slightly behind it.

No... perhaps not an account exactly.
Rather, a translation of experience into a language that could still be understood, while remaining partly indistinct -
where some portions appeared clearly visible, and much else remained submerged in mist.

At that age, perhaps all of us are somewhat scattered within ourselves.
Only most people never accept it.

For the first time, I tried to give words to that fragmentation.

The characters may have been fictional,
but their sadness, their restlessness, their small dreams came from very real corners of life.
Or perhaps it would be more truthful to say:
they came from the way life appeared to me then.

Looking back now, it feels as though *Bikhre-Bikhre* was not merely a short novel,
but an early attempt to understand the fog spreading within my own being.

Adolescence is an extraordinarily delicate time -
the age when feelings slowly begin changing their colours and forms.

Something very similar was happening to me as well.

I had begun looking at the events unfolding around me with entirely new eyes.
The people around me, too, had started acquiring new meanings and dimensions within me.

From some people, shy distances were quietly forming.
Others were coming closer.
And a few came so close that they almost began living inside me.

But I could not explain any of this to anyone in the way it wandered through me internally.

And yet remaining silent about it filled me with restlessness.

Perhaps that is why, without even informing me,
existence itself took my hand and pointed me toward a path.

I bought a large foolscap notebook
and began bringing the people around me into my inner world,
conversing with them there.

Inside my writing, I made them speak the way I wanted them to speak,
think the way I wanted them to think,
act the way I wished them to act.

Within the pages of that notebook,
they became almost like puppets moved by my hands.

And yet I had not changed them entirely.
I had only changed their names.

Whatever I saw in them,
I would slightly intensify or soften, reshape according to my own desires,
and then pour into the characters of my novel.

I deepened someone's silence,
added mystery to someone's smile,
filled someone's eyes with the same restlessness that perhaps lived within me.

The people who existed in the outer world slowly began living differently upon my pages -
truer, more intimate, and often more sorrowful too.

Gradually, that notebook ceased being merely a bundle of papers.

It became a place
where I could safely place the confusions within myself without fear.

A place where I could untangle those confusions in my own way,
solve riddles according to my own wishes.

A place where love could exist without names.
Where attraction did not feel like a crime.
Where longing could walk freely among everyone.
Where one did not have to helplessly endure what felt unbearable.
Where one did not need to suppress frustration.
Where sadness did not have to be hidden.
Where false smiles did not have to be pasted upon the face.

Now when I think about it, it seems that adolescence is not merely an age of years,
but the age when sensitivity awakens for the first time.

The world remains the same,
yet its light changes completely.

Trees, roads, faces, voices -
suddenly everything begins carrying new meanings.

And perhaps writing is born precisely at that moment
when there is no longer any space outside for the overflowing world within.

Bikhre-Bikhre was perhaps the child of that first restlessness.

A mirror in which, while trying to write others,
I had unknowingly begun reading myself.

The interesting thing was that I too existed there as a character among them.

And at the same time, I remained outside all of them - even outside myself.

While writing, I sometimes even felt the strange sensation of being "God."

Small incidents happening around me now lingered within for long stretches of time.
People's presence, their speech, their silence, their laughter - everything began opening into second meanings.

Some people drifted away from me without explanation.
Between them and me, a faint awkwardness quietly took root.

And some came so close that escaping them became impossible.
They lived less in the outer world and far more inside me.

Nor did I wish to escape them.
What I truly wanted was this:
that there should remain no difference between the way they lived within me
and the way they existed outside in the world.

I carried them everywhere with me -
through streets, school corridors, college verandas, even into sleep.

Within their silences I placed my own sentences,
behind their decisions my own desires.
And then transformed all of it into words upon paper.

In those days,
I was living simultaneously in two worlds -
one outside, and one within.

And side by side, both were being recorded in that notebook.

As though I wanted to preserve forever
whatever was being lived inside me.

□

As I have already mentioned, the characters of *Bikhre-Bikhre* had not arrived from some imaginary universe.
They were made from the dust, sunlight, and voices of those very days through which I was living.

Akhilesh, Anil Dubey, Ashok Dubey, Anil Khare, Bitty, Kalpana - and somewhere among them, myself.

The story was not really a story at all.
It was merely a vague feeling flowing slowly around a few faces - like a shallow stream weaving through hills: visible in some places, hidden behind rocks in others, yet continuing to flow somewhere beneath everything.

Perhaps none of us then realized how deeply we had entered one another's lives.
We were simply together - without declaration, without definition.

Later, when I tried to capture them in words,
it felt like trying to gather old sunlight resting inside a forgotten room into the palm of my hand.

I changed all their names.
Perhaps not to hide them,
but because with time people survive less in their names and more in our memories of them.

Except for Bitti and Kalpana, I have already mentioned the others in '*Aarambh*'.
Those who have read it will recognize these faces -
the way one suddenly recognizes a familiar footstep on a deserted road after many years.

And Bitti... Kalpana...

I will speak of them elsewhere.

Some people do not become words for a very long time.
They remain instead like a faint sadness, a blurred light, or the lingering fragrance of an evening long gone.

□

Now let us move toward another place -
hidden amidst those same black rocks,
a place that somehow belonged more to the night than to the day.

Whenever darkness descended and we headed there,
we usually chose the old path that passed beside Devtal.

The path still exists today - though it too has changed somewhat.
Time has left faint marks upon its body as well.

Somewhere the earth has shifted,
somewhere bushes have thickened,
somewhere the path itself has grown quieter than before.

In those days, as we walked, black rocks rose to our right,
their cracks filled with shrubs and small trees,
with narrow trails climbing upward through them.

Now a wall has been built along the hillside.

Earlier, the moment we stepped onto that path,
it felt as though the settlement behind us had suddenly been left far away,
and we had entered another world entirely.

That feeling no longer comes now.

But I am speaking of those days,
so let us return there once more.

Walking that path, climbing and descending,
we would eventually reach an open space.

It was neither exactly a field nor merely an empty clearing -
it felt instead like some still breathing space resting quietly among the rocks.

Blackish-brown sand stretched across the ground.
Scattered within it lay small stones -

some entirely black, as though freshly emerged from darkness itself; some light brown, some gray, some carrying a faint yellow tint.

It appears the earth had carefully preserved there a few leftover colours from its ancient past.

And there we would lie down upon the sand.

Beneath our backs, the warmth gathered by the earth throughout the day slowly cooling away.
Above us, a sky washed clean and endlessly clear.

So clear that sometimes it felt as though the sky was not a visible thing at all,
but a vast silence in which countless stars burned softly.

The flickering of those stars gave life to the immense stillness spread around us.

For a while none of us would speak.
Everyone surrendered quietly to the enchantment of that place.

I think some among us drifted effortlessly into that atmosphere, while others lay utterly motionless, as though stilled outside the flow of time itself.

The wind struck the rocks and passed on soundlessly.
Somewhere far away, a dog barked.
Or from the direction of Devtal came a faint damp fragrance.

That was all the world there was.

Sometimes, during those nights, we spoke very little.
Perhaps it was our silent telepathic understanding.

For long stretches we simply lay there,
each wandering through the caves within ourselves, searching for something unnamed.

Sometimes someone would discover a thought within themselves that they wished to share,
or a question they suddenly needed to ask.

Then the silence would break.

Still lying down - or lifting themselves upon their elbows like reptiles raising their heads - someone would begin speaking.
And slowly conversations would unfold.

I should clarify here that we did not always simply go there and lie down.

Many times, whenever some confusion or emotional knot remained unresolved, this place became the perfect ground upon which to untangle it.

Then we would sit together in a circle.
There would be discussions, arguments, suggestions, advice.

Usually, the knots did unravel eventually.
Or else we collectively accepted whichever version of truth felt most bearable or most reasonable to all of us.

And afterward, to celebrate the resolution, we might go drink tea at some small restaurant or roadside Dhaba.

If our pockets happened to contain a little extra money,
an Aloo-Bonda or Samosa would join the tea as well.

It was at this very place, one late evening, that we even held a discussion gathering about "*Bikhre-Bikhre*."
I will speak about that gathering later, in the chapter related to the writing and reading of the book.

At that age, perhaps we did not truly understand life.
We merely felt it.

And now, when I look back, it seems that beneath those black rocks, upon that sand, under those stars,
we were not merely adolescent boys.

We were companions of that silence which was being born within us for the very first time -

the silence that later, perhaps, people come to call memory, loneliness, or even the soul itself.

□

Bikhre–Bikhre" was perhaps the child of that first restlessness.

A mirror in which, while writing others, I was unknowingly reading myself.

What was fascinating was that I, too, existed there as a character among them all. And yet, at the same time, I also stood outside them - and outside myself. While writing, I would sometimes even experience the strange sensation of being a god.

The smallest incidents unfolding around me lingered within for a long time now. People's presence, their speaking, their silences, their laughter - everything had begun opening into another meaning.

Some people had drifted away from me without reason. A thin veil of hesitation had come to stand between us. Others had come so close that it became impossible to free me from them. They existed less in the outer world and far more within me. Nor did I wish to escape them. In fact, what I truly desired was that there remains no difference between the way they lived within me and the way they existed outside in the world.

I carried them with me everywhere - along roads, through school corridors, even into my sleep at night.

Into their silences, I placed my own sentences; behind their decisions, my own desires. And then I transformed all of it into words and laid it upon paper.

In those days, I was living in two worlds at once.

One outside, and another within - whose unfolding account was simultaneously being recorded in that notebook.

As though I wanted to preserve forever whatever had been lived within me.

□

There is another memory tied to these hills –

a memory so tender, so immaculate, as though the door of an old forgotten room were suddenly opened after many years, and its darkness slowly, very slowly, began to drape itself in a veil of light. And then, little by little, behind that shimmering old veil, a beautiful face began to emerge. Before one reaches that memory, the mind instinctively pauses, as though even touching it should not be hurried.

One night, we were all heading once again toward that stretch of sand.

The path that passed beside Devtal used to be almost deserted in those days. We were all on bicycles. As usual, I was sitting on the carrier of either Akhilesh's or Anil Dubey's bicycle. Perhaps that was why, that night, I felt somewhat detached from the others-lighter, freer. I neither had to pedal, nor steer, nor keep my eyes fixed on the uneven road ahead. I was simply sinking quietly into myself.

The journey was still unfinished when, from somewhere far away, the soft beat of a dholak drifted toward us. Along with it came the faint waves of a collective song-so dim at first that it felt as though the wind itself was carrying some forgotten melody within it. Slowly, however, the voices became clearer. There was a strange sweetness in them, an intimacy so deep that it entered the soul without even touching it. It began gently searching every hidden chamber within.

The loneliness of that winding road...

The still waters of Devtal...

The small domed temples along the ghats, where trembling flames of oil lamps flickered upon the doors and outer pillars of the sanctums...

The towering masses of black and deep-grey rocks, standing almost silent...

And far above them, high in the darkness, the stars quietly shimmering...

Everything seemed to dissolve slowly into that melody.

It felt as though the night itself had gathered those voices into its arms, and the whole world was swaying very softly to their rhythm.

What descended into me during those moments is difficult to capture in words now, after so many years. It was not the sharp brightness of joy, but something gentler-like the fine mist of a cool spring silently soaking you without announcement.

And you do not even wish to resist that soaking.

You simply wish to keep dissolving into it.

The words of the song that were pouring sweetness into my ears at that moment, and which I could clearly understand, went something like this:

"जगाए लो मनाए लो बुलाए लो सखी
बन्ना सोबै रे अटरिया
जगाए लो सखी . . . .
बेला फूल की कली,कचनार की कली
हाँ गुलाब की कली
बन्ना सोबै रे अटरिया
जगाए लो सखी . . . . "

("Go wake him, go woo him, go call him, sister -
the banna's asleep on the terrace.
Wake him, sister...
Bela-bud blossom, kachnar-bud blossom,
aye, a rosebud blossom too -
the banna's asleep on the terrace.
Wake him, sister...")

(This is a Bundeli folk song known as a Banna. In the Bundeli language, the groom is called Banna and the bride, Banni. During weddings, countless such Banna-Banni songs are sung by women in different melodies. These songs are primarily celebrations of the bride

and groom-their beauty described from head to toe-transforming the occasion of marriage into a living festival.)

"जगाए लो मनाए लो बुलाए लो सखी
बन्ना सोबै रे अटरिया
जगाए लो सखी . . . .

("Go wake him, go woo him, go call him, sister-
the banna's asleep on the terrace.
Wake him, sister...)

As I mentioned earlier, this was essentially a joyful wedding song, sung during moments of celebration. Yet in those moments, I felt a piercing ache hidden within its words and melody. Whatever was unfolding inside me at that age perhaps cast its own shadow upon the song.

I felt, with overwhelming intensity, that within those simple lines there was longing too, a quiet call too, and somewhere deep inside, the desire to gently touch the trembling flame of a tiny lamp flickering in some hidden corner of the soul. It was these undertones of sorrow, pain, and yearning that drenched me so completely that even today, after all these years, whenever I hear this song, I find myself transported back to that same road beside Devtal.

Bundeli is an extraordinarily sweet language. Its true tenderness reveals itself most deeply in folk songs - especially in those touched by human emotion - where love is never merely love; it also becomes waiting, hesitation, intimacy, and the soft trembling of the soul itself.

In many ways, Bundeli is the regional heartbeat of Jabalpur. Even today, ordinary people in the city continue to speak it in their uniquely Jabalpuri manner. In fact, it would perhaps be more truthful to say that, in everyday life, this is the language Jabalpur truly speaks.

□

After we reached our destination, I asked Ashok Dubey quite casually, out of simple curiosity, "Where is that singing coming from?"

He replied, "There's a temple called '*Bhuteshwar Mahadev*' on the hill beside Devtal. Women sometimes gather there - during festivals, on special occasions, or simply for no particular reason. They're likely the ones singing with the dholak and manjiras." No doubt they must have been singing devotional songs, especially in praise of भोले बाबा Mahadev.

Yet when the heart surrenders itself completely to emotion, it does not merely *sing hymns* - it simply sings. In such moments, words fall away somewhere behind, and only the language of the soul continues to flow through the lips.

And devotion, after all, is nothing but the purest culmination of love. When the heart becomes truly overwhelmed, one does not offer words before Mahadev - one offers feeling. And for Baba, it is never language that matters, but emotion.

That night, even as we returned from that place, the sound of the singing continued to drift toward us very softly, very slowly, lingering in the darkness like something that did not wish to fade away. The melody and rhythm of this song are so sweet, so deeply familiar, that even now, after having lived through seventy seasoned years, its notes stir within me waves of a peculiar and almost indescribable joy. It is as though some very old door suddenly opens, and through it comes a familiar, intimate breeze from a time long gone. The moment I hear the song, so many old memories, so many faces, so many scenes, and so many unspoken emotions begin to stir quietly somewhere deep within me.

This joy can only be felt. To contain it precisely within words is perhaps impossible.

Words may touch an emotion, may point towards it, may give us some sense of its shape, but they can never quite reach its full depth. The language of the mind is very different from the language of the lips. There are no words there, only feelings; no sentences, only vibrations. Waves rise there-not waves of sound, but waves of joy. And sometimes it feels as though an invisible music is playing somewhere within, a music that requires not the ears, but only the mind, to be heard.

Perhaps that is why, as we grow older, certain songs begin to feel even more intimate, more our own. They cease to be merely songs; they become keys to some lost chamber of time. A few notes can suddenly lift us out of the present and carry us back to a time when we once were there-and perhaps, in some hidden corner of ourselves, still are.

If I were to describe it in the language of modern pharmacology, I might say that at such moments fountains of dopamine begin to spring up within me. But whatever name science may choose to give it, for me it remains something much simpler and far more beautiful-an experience that needs neither explanation nor proof. One has only to close one's eyes, listen... and feel it slowly flowing inward.

Much later, I happened to ask my aunt about the song *"Jagaaye Lo, Jagaaye Lo."* At my request, she sang it for me and also wrote down its lyrics.

There is an innocence, a simplicity, an effortless flow and a guileless warmth woven into both the words and the melody of this song that, at least to me, opens the door to a very different kind of purity-something rare, almost untouched.

Just look at the words, and feel the grace with which they flow-

" जगाए लो जगाए लो
मनाए लो सखी बन्ना सोवे री अटरिया
सो बन्ना के सिर पे मोरैं सोहें,
सो मोरन बीच अनार की कली
कचनार की कली बेला फूल की कली
बन्ना सोवे री अटरिया
जगाए लो जगाए लो
मनाए लो सखी बन्ना सोवे री अटरिया

सो बन्ना के माथे खौरैं सोहें,
सो खोरन बीच अनार की कली
कचनार की कली बेला फूल की कली
बन्ना सोवे री अटरिया
जगाए लो जगाए लो
मनाए लो सखी बन्ना सोवे री अटरिया

सो बन्ना के हाथों में कंकन सोहे
सो कंकन बीच अनार की कली
कचनार की कली बेला फूल की कली
बन्ना सोवे री अटरिया
जगाए लो जगाए लो
मनाए लो सखी बन्ना सोवे री अटरिया

सो बन्ना के अंग में पागो भी सोहे
सो बनरस बीच अनार की कली
कचनार की कली बेला फूल की कली
बन्ना सोवे री अटरिया
जगाए लो जगाए लो
मनाए लो सखी बन्ना सोवे री अटरिया"

"Wake him, wake him,
Come, dear friend, let us coax him awake-
Our beloved groom sleeps up there in the attic.

Upon the groom's head,
A peacock feather looks so lovely;
And among those peacock plumes
Bloom the buds of pomegranate,
The buds of the kachnar,
And the tender blossoms of bela.

Our beloved groom sleeps up there in the attic.

Wake him, wake him,
Come, dear friend, let us coax him awake-
Our beloved groom sleeps up there in the attic.

Upon the groom's forehead
His khor adornment shines so beautifully;
And among its delicate ornaments
Bloom the buds of pomegranate,
The buds of kachnar,
And the tender blossoms of bela.

Our beloved groom sleeps up there in the attic.

Wake him, wake him,
Come, dear friend, let us coax him awake-
Our beloved groom sleeps up there in the attic.

Upon the groom's hands
The bracelets gleam so beautifully;
And within those bracelets
Bloom the buds of pomegranate,
The buds of kachnar,
And the tender blossoms of bela.

Our beloved groom sleeps up there in the attic.

And upon the groom's body
Even his pag looks so splendid;
And amid its graceful folds
Bloom the buds of pomegranate,
The buds of kachnar,
And the tender blossoms of bela.

Our beloved groom sleeps up there in the attic.

Wake him, wake him,
Come, dear friend, let us coax him awake-
Our beloved groom sleeps up there in the attic."

The beauty of this lovely Bundeli folk song lies not merely in its literal meaning, but in the affectionate, playful and intimate images it evokes. Its rhythm, repetition, and tender floral imagery do more than simply present this little world before us with the sweetness and natural grace of a living folk tale; they seem to take us gently by the hand and draw us into that world itself.

□

By now, after the journey we have made through so many pages of this book, you must have understood how important songs-their melodies, rhythms and music-have been in my world. They have never been merely a source of entertainment for me. Songs have settled somewhere very deep within my life. They have travelled with me-sometimes like sunlight, sometimes like shade, and sometimes like an unseen, unspoken companion. And if there is any sound that reaches deepest into my memories, it is, more often than not, the sound of a song.

Sometimes I wonder if this is perhaps a gift bestowed upon me by the Creator: that my feelings do not pass through me and emerge as sharp, pointed thorns, arrows or spears. Somehow, they find their own musical translation. It is as though every intense emotion that rises within me first passes through the touch of music, and in doing so, loses some of its harshness and takes on a rhythm of its own. Pain comes, with all its intensity; happiness comes too, with all its radiance and exhilaration. But as either of them passes through me, something about its form changes.

It is not that I feel sorrow any less deeply, or that there is any lack in the fullness of my joy. Sorrow remains sorrow, and joy remains joy. When tears come, they are real tears; and when laughter comes, it is just as spontaneous. The difference, perhaps, lies only in the way these emotions move through me. They do not remain within me as raw, uncontrolled impulses. There is a certain grace in the way they unfold, a rhythm, an invisible grammar.

Perhaps this is what music has given me-the ability to live with my own emotions.

It does not erase them. It does not protect me from them. It does not lessen their intensity. Instead, it gives them a form in which they can be seen, heard and lived. Like a river that does not remove the stones lying in its course but carries them along as it finds its way forward.

When happiness comes, music does not let me be swept away by its noise. Instead, it seems to lift me slowly towards those light clouds of happiness, where the mind floats for a while, almost above the earth. And when sorrow comes, perhaps music becomes even more intimate. It does not take my sorrow away from me, nor does it draw a curtain of consolation over it. It simply takes my hand and leads me slowly into the dark pool of grief. Step by step, deeper and deeper. Until we reach those depths where sorrow lies in its most profound form, and where perhaps even words fall silent before they can reach it.

There, music stays with me.

It does not name my sorrow. It does not pass judgment upon it. It simply sits beside it. And perhaps that is its greatest act of compassion.

That is why, to me, songs are not merely songs that I have heard. They are witnesses to things that have happened within me. My joys have found a home in them and so have my sorrows. So many memories of my life are connected less to an event, a face or a place than to a particular melody. One tune can make time turn backwards. One rhythm can open the door to an old room. One particular note can suddenly take me back to an age when I was not the man, I am today, but that young boy who was experiencing so many things for the very first time.

Perhaps that is why I feel that music has never been something external to my life. It is a form of my own inner language. What I cannot say, a song sometimes says for me. What I cannot explain in words, a melody can make me understand without a single explanation. And

for those things that can only be felt, music is perhaps the most beautiful language that human beings have ever discovered.

For me, therefore, music is not merely something that is heard -

"It happens within me".

□

Colours and lines have been companions of mine since very early childhood.

How? That, perhaps, I shall speak of in another chapter. For now, it is enough to say that whenever we wandered through those hills in the blazing stillness of winter afternoons, I would often carry a cloth satchel slung across my shoulder. Inside it rested all my watercolour supplies.

Many times, I sat there amidst the hills and painted *Madan Mahal* in watercolours upon handmade paper. In those days, some forty or fifty meters in front of that small yet beautiful fort stood the ruins of an old stable. Whether it still exists or not, I cannot say with certainty; I have not climbed up to the fort in many years.

I would lose myself completely in the act of painting, while the others who had accompanied me would drift into pursuits of their own. Some wandered through the fort, some sat gossiping in little groups, and every now and then they would return to me-looking at the painting, offering suggestions, praising a detail, or simply talking about unrelated things. Gradually, the picture would near completion. Sometimes the day would run ahead of us, or my own desire to continue would fade, and I would leave the painting unfinished, to be completed later at home.

Then we would descend the hills leisurely, almost reluctantly. Reaching the spot where our bicycles were kept, we would pick them up, and before dispersing, at the very least, a cup of tea would invariably be shared somewhere. That was how our little picnic would come to an end. We would part ways and return home.

Often, I would stop at Akhilesh's house. We usually had our afternoon meal there together. If there was still enough time left before evening, I would return home in Ghamapur. Otherwise, I stayed on. Our evenings, too, had a rhythm and ritual entirely their own.

This reminds me of another small incident -

One day, four or five of us were roaming through the hills when we came upon a cluster of shrubs with long, broad leaves. One of them had a large trunk-like stem stripped entirely bare of foliage-almost like a stump. Yet its upper portion was smooth, dry, and pale wheat-coloured. It stood perhaps two and a half or three feet high.

Someone suddenly suggested that I should paint something on it.

My Khadi Bhandar satchel was with me, as always. On the upper part of that stump, I painted a colourful face with enormous eyes-something grotesque, almost terrifying in appearance. The others kept adding suggestions now and then, asking me to include one detail or another. Altogether, it began to resemble some savage ceremonial mask. They were delighted at the thought that unsuspecting passersby might be frightened by it, or at the very least startled.

Yet strangely, I could see no terror in it at all. To me, it too was simply a creation.

That day we went searching for more trunks and shrubs, painting upon them one after another. How long those strange little artworks survived there, who can say? Whether they frightened anyone or filled someone with wonder, I never came to know. But I do know this much - they could not have lasted very long. They had been painted in poster colours. The first hard rain must have washed them away completely or at least blurred them into something shapeless and faded.

And yet, the thought itself carries within it a profound quietude-that for a few months, a few days, a few fleeting moments, I had not merely wandered through those hills but had lived as a small part of them.

My breath had mingled with the winds that moved across them. Within their silences, perhaps the faint echoes of my own footsteps, too, had been recorded somewhere.

And today, when I turn back toward those memories, the feeling brings not only solace, but also a strange and gentle thrill from deep within -

as though, in the vast river of time, some tiny particle of my being had flowed alongside those ancient rocks.

Even if only for a little while. Even if only for a few moments.

□

The hills of Madan Mahal are significant not merely from a historical point of view; they also enfold within themselves a deep spiritual and folk-cultural inheritance. Scattered across these hills and their surrounding landscape stand numerous temples, shrines, samadhis, and places of popular devotion. Some are widely known, while others survive only in the memories and faith of local people.

One temple that I have mentioned earlier is the ancient shrine of *Bhuteshwar Mahadev*. Situated near the hills of Madan Mahal, it is regarded as an old Shiva temple deeply rooted in local belief and reverence. The stillness of the hills, the whispering winds, and the scattered masses of black stone-rising and falling in uneven clusters all around-lend the place an aura of haunting mystery. Those dark grey rocks no longer appear to me as mere stones; rather, they seem like ascetic yogis absorbed in eternal meditation around the temple, lost for ages in their penance, yearning to dissolve into Lord Shiva himself. Even today, the atmosphere there feels like a fragment of living folklore-as though time itself moves there at a slower, dreamlike pace, immersed in the carefree ecstasy of Mahadev's own being.

Another important shrine, perched high upon these hills, is *Pisan Hari ki Madiya*, one of Jabalpur's most revered Jain pilgrimage sites.

A deeply moving legend is associated with it. It is said that a poor old woman, who earned her livelihood by grinding grain, devoted the savings of her entire life to the construction of this temple. Hence it came to be known as *Pisan Hari ki Madiya* - "the shrine of the grain-grinding woman." Situated at such a height, the temple is not merely a religious site, but also a place of silence, contemplation, and inward peace. From there, the city of Jabalpur appears extraordinarily beautiful, especially at dusk, when the fading light seems to drape the city in a soft and sacred glow.

Among these very hills stands another ancient shrine dedicated to Goddess Sharda. It is said that Rani Durgavati herself once came here to offer worship. Stone steps now lead up to the temple, and every year, during the Mondays of the sacred month of Shravan, a fair gathers there, filling the hills with devotion, movement, and song.

The tradition of Bhairav worship, too, has existed in and around Madan Mahal for centuries. Kal Bhairav is revered here as a guardian deity. The temple dedicated to him in this region is known as *Bajna Math*. In truth, it is an extremely ancient tantric shrine. There is only one small entrance through which one may enter. Directly ahead sits Bhairav Baba in solemn presence. The towering dome overhead, the absence of windows or openings, and the enclosed darkness together create an atmosphere steeped in mystery. Especially when incense smoke gathers beneath the dome, the temple seems to transform into a realm of enchantment. White clouds of smoke drift and reshape themselves endlessly within that confined space, as though the deepest secrets of creation were slowly unveiling themselves there - if only one possessed the ability to understand them.

Earlier in this chapter, I also mentioned *Devtal*. Situated at the foothills of Madan Mahal, this ancient pond is far more than a mere body of water. The surrounding area has long been associated with folk belief, mystery, and spiritual presence. In earlier times, people often spoke of experiencing something strangely transcendental there after dusk. The many small and large temples around it, along with its

old stone ghats, have made the place for me a living landscape of memory and emotion.

The hills of Madan Mahal, in truth, are not merely a geography of stone.

They are a confluence of history, folk faith, spirituality, adolescent memories, wandering winds, forgotten songs, and the collective heartbeat of an older Jabalpur.

The temples there are not merely places of worship; they are little lamps burning quietly within time itself, still illuminating the faith of generations long gone.

My heart is so deeply entwined with these hills that no matter how much I speak of them, it never feels enough. Every rock here appears to me like a work of art. Like a poem. No matter how many times one sees them, no matter how often one reads them with the eyes of the soul, they never cease to astonish. Each stone seems to utter something new every single time.



Let me place one more thing on record here –

perhaps because when memories sink too deep within us, they cease to remain mere memories. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, they become a silent part of our personality itself.

Around 1995 and 1996, a few of my black-and-white drawings and sketches were published in five or six issues of *Hans*, the literary magazine edited by Rajendra Yadav. In one issue, nearly ten drawings of these dark rock formations appeared alongside stories and essays. Those images were not created while looking at any actual landscape before me; they emerged instead from the dim yet inwardly luminous surfaces of memory. Black ink, poster colours, brush, and pen - those were the only visible tools. The rest of the work, perhaps, was done by the rocks themselves.

Now, when I look back, it feels that those were not merely drawings; they were journeys through an inner geography.

The shapes of those rocks, the silence stretched between them, the changing colours of sunlight, and that strange melancholy glow just before evening descended - all of it already seemed to exist somewhere within me. I was merely giving those buried landscapes a path back onto paper.

Even later, many of my paintings continued to revolve around these dark grey rocks.
Perhaps because the human heart never completely abandons certain places.
They remain within us the way a locked room survives inside an old house - a room which, even after years, still greets us with a familiar fragrance the moment we enter it again.

Whenever I paint these rocks, I often feel that I am not painting them at all; I am conversing with them.
Very quietly.
In an intensely private manner.

Other paintings bring their own kind of satisfaction once completed. But after painting these rocks, a different stillness descends within me... as though I have spent long hours with an old friend after many years - without purpose, without explanation.

Sometimes it feels that neither have these rocks left me, nor have I ever left them.

They still lie within me exactly as they once were - burning under the sun, drenched in rain, slowly dissolving into the mist of evening. Perhaps this relationship between us will never truly come to an end.

And perhaps that is why even today, I do not know how many blank canvases, how many empty sheets of paper, still await to be filled with their stories.

I do not know how long this journey will continue.

But this much I know with certainty -

our conversation is not over yet.
They still have much left to say.

And within me, enough silence remains to listen to them.
Enough space remains to preserve them.

□□□

10

Abhiyantrikee

(From the Drawing Board to the Blueprint of Life)

The place where the final foundation stones of my life were destined to be laid before I stepped into the great battle of existence was the Government Engineering College, Jabalpur-known in those days simply as GEC. Today it bears the name Jabalpur Engineering College (JEC).

It was here that everything my life had gathered until then-my education, values, struggles, triumphs and disappointments-was to converge. Whatever I had seen, endured and learned through childhood and adolescence seemed destined to find its true shape within these walls. Whether I would ultimately become an engineer, an artist, a writer, or merely an ordinary human being, the foundations of that future were to be laid here.

Perhaps every life reaches such a turning point. There comes a place where one suddenly realizes that everything that preceded it was only a long preface. It is as though the author of a novel has patiently introduced characters, circumstances and subtle clues, preparing the reader for the story whose real beginning still lies ahead. Looking back, incidents from childhood that had once appeared ordinary, isolated or even insignificant begin to reveal themselves as links in an invisible chain. One gradually understands that life is shaped not by accidents, but by the quiet and deliberate accumulation of experience.

For me, that place, that moment, and that time were all embodied in this institution.

The years that awaited me-the joys I had yet to discover, the wounds I was destined to receive, the relationships that would blossom and later dissolve, the dreams that would be born and those fated to shatter-were all to have their first chapter written here. I had no inkling of this then. At that time, I was merely an ordinary student, carrying a few textbooks in my hands, a handful of dreams in my eyes, and a heart filled with equal measures of hope and uncertainty about the future.

Today, however, when I look back across the years, I can see with perfect clarity that the real journey of my life began on the day I first stepped across the threshold of this college.

□

I had turned sixteen on 21 April 1972. On the strength of my merit, I was admitted to the only engineering college in Jabalpur. At that time, including the Maulana Azad College of Technology in Bhopal, there were only eight engineering colleges in the whole of Madhya Pradesh.

In those days, most students from the mathematics stream of Model High School gained admission to Jabalpur Engineering College. Only a handful, for one reason or another, chose different institutions. A few of my friends, too, followed different paths. Ravi Gupta, for instance, went to Raipur to study Chemical Engineering. At the time, his decision struck us as both unusual and remarkably adventurous.

Fortunately, most of my close friends from Model High School had also joined Jabalpur Engineering College. Because of them, I never felt entirely alone or among strangers. The warmth of old friendships had travelled with us into this new phase of life. Yet somewhere deep within lingered the feeling that we had left behind an old home and entered a new one whose walls had not yet begun to feel familiar.

The atmosphere of the engineering college, however, was vastly different from that of Model High School. Its scale alone was overwhelming. More than once, I found myself experiencing the same sensation I had felt years earlier on leaving home for school-that I had

once again arrived in a place both unfamiliar and strangely distant from everything I had known.

The Government Engineering College possessed a remarkably expansive campus. Academic buildings stood far apart from one another. The soaring Electrical Engineering laboratories dominated the skyline, while the Civil Engineering building-once the historic Robertson College-resembled a stately British mansion, with its long verandas and lofty windows preserving memories of another century. The imposing Administrative Block stood at the centre of the campus, while behind it stretched a tranquil lake that completed the landscape with quiet grace. At times the breeze carried the faint scent of its waters across the grounds. In the evenings, gazing towards it, one felt that behind all the bustle of college life there existed another world altogether-calm, still and profoundly contemplative.

My first impression of the campus is still as vivid today as it was then: vast playing fields, buildings scattered across great distances, towering laboratories, broad avenues, and, embracing them all, an extraordinary silence.

The campus of Model High School had been beautiful in its own right. The greater part of my childhood and adolescence had unfolded there. It too was spacious and well planned. Yet this new campus was so immense that four or five Model High Schools could easily have fit within its boundaries. It belonged to an altogether different world-different in scale, in stillness, and in the possibilities, it seemed to contain. It felt as though I had stepped beyond the map of everything familiar into a landscape whose boundaries stretched far beyond the reach of my imagination.

This description does not even include the eight hostel blocks and the rest of the residential campus. The hostel complex and the professors' colony stood opposite the college, with the City Superintendent of Police's bungalow situated between them. The principal's residence lay next to the main campus.

Gradually, the unfamiliarity began to dissolve. The roads became recognizable, the buildings got a sense of belonging, and I no longer felt hesitant while walking through those spacious courtyards. I cannot recall exactly when or how this transformation occurred, but one day I suddenly realized that I was no longer a visitor.

I had become a tiny, almost invisible part of that immense campus.

Like a tender new bud quietly appearing upon the lofty branch of an ancient tree-still fragile, still uncertain, yet already inseparably connected to the life of the tree itself.

Perhaps the greatest transformations in life occur in precisely this manner. They arrive without fanfare or proclamation. They settle within us silently, and by the time we become aware of them, they have already become part of who we are.

The college itself had been set up during the closing years of British rule on 7 July 1947. It is the oldest technical institution in Central India and the fifteenth oldest in the country. It also enjoys the distinction of being the first engineering college in India to introduce a degree programme in Electronics and Telecommunication Engineering-a pioneering achievement that occupies an honoured place in the history of Indian technical education.



The Engineering College stood about six kilometres from my home, on the Ghamapur–Ranjhi Main Road, in the locality of Gokulpur. Beyond the college campus lay the township of Ranjhi, a name it still bears today, although the modest settlement of those days has since grown into a full-fledged tehsil. Between Ghamapur and the college lay neighbourhoods such as Kanchghar, Lal Mati, the G.C.F. Estate, Satpula and Vaidyanathan Nagar.

By then, my friendship with Akhilesh Tiwari had become exceptionally close. We travelled to college together every day. I would be ready at home, and around ten o'clock Akhilesh would arrive on

his bicycle. Then, each on our own bicycle, we would set off for college. The first lecture began at half past ten. Quite often, however, we rode together on a single bicycle.

We also belonged to the same circle of friends-the very group that had spent countless afternoons wandering over the rocky hills of Madan Mahal.

Suresh Salunke, Shaligram and Ashok Dubey were all my classmates at the Engineering College. Sometimes they would go with us as well, but instead of entering our lane they would wait on the main road. Only Akhilesh came all the way to my house. Once we joined the others, we would continue together, each on his own bicycle. Talking, laughing and exchanging stories, we scarcely noticed the passing miles before finding ourselves at the bicycle stand beside the Administrative Block. By then, it was already time for classes, and we would disperse to our respective lecture rooms.

In those days, both the First Year and the Second Year consisted of four sections-A, B, C and D-with fifty students in each section, except Section D, which usually had fewer students. The college admitted a total of 180 students every year, and Section D also included a number of repeaters. During the First Year, students were assigned to sections alphabetically by surname. In the Second Year, however, the system changed completely. Sections were reorganized strictly according to academic merit, based on First Year examination results. Students who entered the college after completing a B.Sc. degree were admitted directly into the Second Year and were generally placed in Section D.



My admission to the Engineering College had brought a joy to my father that seemed to shine upon his face like a long-awaited fulfilment. At the time, I doubt I fully understood that this was not merely my achievement. It was also the culmination of years of his quiet hopes and carefully guarded dreams.

Among our neighbours, relatives, and his colleagues at the factory, there was a subtle change in the way he carried himself. A quiet assurance had entered his voice-something too delicate to be captured in words.

Every day, on his way to work, he passed the magnificent buildings and sprawling campus of the Engineering College. The road to his factory branched off from Ranjhi Main Road. A little farther ahead, where the road continued towards the Ordnance Factory at Khamaria, another road diverged towards the Central Ordnance Depot (C.O.D.), forming the busiest intersection in Ranjhi. The principal marketplace of the area stood around that junction.

Looking back today, I often wonder how many times, while cycling past the college gates, he must have said to himself, *"Perhaps one day my son will study here."* When a dream woven patiently over so many years finally came true, it was only natural that no one should have been happier than he.

My father was also a member of the factory's Cooperative Society. When news of my admission spread, several members of the Society, along with its president, Mr. Jain, came specially to our home to congratulate me. They blessed me and offered their warm wishes. That day the atmosphere in our house felt subtly transformed, as though an ordinary afternoon had quietly turned into a celebration.

The happiness of my mother, my maternal grandfather and grandmother was only natural. Yet it was the joy of Kakka Kandhilal Vishwakarma that touched me most deeply. He had loved me ever since I was a child. Now, whenever he looked at me, there was a new emotion mingled with his affection-pride.

It was never expressed through grand declarations. It revealed itself only in the brief sparkle that appeared in his eyes. Whenever visitors came to meet him and I happened to be present, he would introduce me with a warmth that suggested my achievement belonged, in some measure, to him as well. The quiet satisfaction that illuminated his face while speaking of me filled me with a gentle embarrassment.

Those were genuinely happy days.

Looking back now, I realize they were the kind of happiness that makes no noise. It spreads quietly through one's life, unnoticed until it has become part of the air one breathes.

Neighbours, relatives and acquaintances would often speak of my future with complete confidence, sketching before me a life that seemed bright and full of promise. The future, which until then had been wrapped in mist, slowly began to reveal its outlines. The uncertainties had not vanished altogether, but through the thinning fog a few clear pathways had begun to appear.

Even those neighbours with whom I had scarcely exchanged a word earlier now regarded me differently. There was a gentle curiosity in their eyes, as though they were trying to rediscover the same boy they had known for years. Sometimes someone would stop me on the street to ask a few questions. Educated men holding respectable positions would greet me with warm smiles. I would bow respectfully, and they would acknowledge me with a nod.

At such moments I felt that I was still the same person, yet something had undeniably changed-not within me, perhaps, but in the way, others looked at me.

I often find myself repeating this thought:

Those were the days of good people-people of integrity, generosity, and sound judgment.

□

A few days before the college reopened, my father took me to the cloth shop in Ranjhi where he had been buying clothes for many years. It was my first visit there. Perhaps that was because I was no longer merely a schoolboy; I was about to step into a new chapter of life.

It may seem like a small thing now, but in those days, it felt like an achievement in itself. The khaki trousers and white shirt of our school

uniform were finally behind us. For the first time in our lives, we were free to attend classes wearing clothes of our own choosing.

Looking back today, I realize that the clothes themselves were not what mattered.

What mattered was the feeling they represented.

It was as though an invisible boundary had quietly opened, and for the first time the air beyond it brushed gently against my face.

Our bond with Model High School had not been severed. Its buildings, playgrounds, morning assemblies, teachers, and the years enriched by friendship still lived within us as vividly as ever. There was no question of leaving them behind. Yet, from somewhere beyond conscious awareness, a gentle feeling of freedom had begun to hover around our lives. It arrived without announcement. It was like a fragrance-something that could never be seen, only quietly sensed.

All of us, perhaps, stood at the same moment facing two different worlds. Behind us lay a familiar landscape to which we still belonged; before us stretched another, almost unknown, whose mysteries we scarcely understood, yet whose quiet invitation drew us irresistibly forward.

Amid these small but meaningful changes, we gradually learned to adapt ourselves. Sometimes we tried to understand what was happening to us; at other times we simply surrendered to the joy of it without asking any questions. Perhaps some of life's most beautiful moments are those in which change has not yet fully arrived-when only its faint footsteps can be heard somewhere within us.

I chose my own clothes.

The fabric for one shirt was the colour of tea, crossed by long, slender stripes in slightly darker shades, as though the soft sunlight of a tranquil afternoon had settled upon it. It was paired with a pair of deep chestnut-brown trousers patterned with widely spaced, pale stripes. At the time, I thought the combination looked rather elegant.

Looking back now, I feel the trousers would probably have looked better if they had been plain.

The second outfit was dominated by shades of blue. The shirt was woven with checks in several tones of blue, while the trousers were again the same rich chestnut brown. Today, when those clothes return to my memory, I still find myself liking the trousers, but the shirt now seems a little too loud, almost impatient to draw attention to itself.

It was this blue outfit that I wore on my first day at college.

We were all on our bicycles-the same old group of friends that had travelled together through so many years. The road itself was familiar, yet that morning it somehow felt new, for our destination had changed. Laughing, talking and teasing one another, we reached the college as though it were just another ordinary day. Outwardly we appeared perfectly at ease, yet beneath that calm surface there stirred an excitement none of us could quite express. Something was about to begin, although none of us yet knew what shape it would eventually take.

There was, however, another feeling that gone with our excitement-a quiet fear of ragging.

Some of the senior boys from our neighbourhood had frightened us with stories about it, especially the elder brothers of our friends who lived in Bai-ke-Bagiche. Their descriptions had been vivid enough to fill our imaginations with every conceivable horror.

Yet college was a destination that could not be postponed. Encouraging one another with forced confidence, we rode through the gates together.

□

Another memory comes to mind here, and this seems the right place to tell it.

A day or two before college reopened, I dyed my hair for the first time using a product called *True-Tone*. A few strands of my hair had begun

turning grey as early as the tenth standard, although at that age I noticed it far less than other people did.

It was Sukumar Das who suggested that I should use a hair dye. His elder brother used the same product, and perhaps that was where the idea had come from. Sukumar himself, however, had not joined the Engineering College; instead, he enrolled at the Government Science College in Jabalpur.

At the time I had no idea that certain seemingly insignificant decisions continue to go with us across decades.

This was one of them.

Once I began colouring my hair, it quietly became part of the rhythm of my life. Every few weeks, every few months, the same ritual repeated itself. Years passed. Then decades.

Looking back now, I feel that on that day I had changed more than the colour of my hair.

Without realizing it, I had entered into a small private agreement with Time itself-an agreement to postpone, for a little while, the visible signs of age.

One day, however, even that agreement ended.

During Urmila Ji's illness, in 2025, I stopped colouring my hair. Afterwards it no longer seemed necessary. When she left this world and an entire chapter of my life quietly closed with her, I saw my hair return, for the first time in many years, to its true colour.

It is now completely white.

White, luminous, and serene.

Sometimes I look into the mirror and find my father looking back at me-the same hair combed neatly backwards, the same widening forehead, the same quiet dignity of age. I do not know when his face slowly settled into mine.

After Urmila Ji's passing, my head was shaved twice during the funeral rites in February. For a while it stayed completely bare. By June 2026, the hair had grown back again-slowly, gently, carrying with it the fullness of its natural whiteness.

There was once a time when my hair reached almost to my shoulders. Grooming it, colouring it and keeping it carefully arranged were not merely habits; they had become part of the image I carried of myself. There are several stories connected with those long years, and perhaps I shall tell them at a righter place in these pages.

But today, when I see my white hair in the mirror, I feel no desire whatsoever to change it.

It seems to me like a certificate issued by life itself-a quiet testimony to every journey I have travelled.

Whether this acceptance is simply the gift of age, or something that entered my heart after Urmila Ji's departure, I cannot say.

Perhaps it is both.

And perhaps not knowing is itself the truest answer.

□

As we entered through the college gates that first morning, each of us tried to appear carefree. In reality, every one of us was anxious. Thoughts of ragging raced through our minds with alarming speed.

For readers unfamiliar with the term, *ragging* is a deeply regrettable practice in which senior students subject newly admitted freshmen to psychological, physical, or emotional humiliation. It is often introduced under harmless names such as "orientation" or "getting acquainted," but all too often it degenerates into outright harassment.

Even today I find myself wondering what strange distortion of the human mind can fill young people with such almost demonic restlessness within the sacred atmosphere of an educational institution.

Bands of senior students roamed the college corridors like predators searching for unsuspecting prey. Over the years, certain secluded corners of the campus had got an unspoken reputation as ideal places for ragging-places where no lecturer, professor, or member of the staff was likely to appear unexpectedly.

These locations had been silently inherited from one generation of students to the next.

The milder forms of ragging, consisting merely of verbal intimidation or humiliating questions, often took place openly in full public view. From a distance, the exchange appeared perfectly civil-almost like an ordinary conversation between senior and junior students.

Only those standing within that circle knew how much fear could hide beneath such apparent politeness.

During these encounters, the seniors would not only demand an introduction from the newcomers-the freshers-but would also claim to teach them how to address senior students, how to greet them, and how they were expected to conduct themselves within the college. These so-called lessons were usually delivered in a language laced with insults, mockery, and crude, often deeply offensive questions. Before letting the freshers go, they would also inform them where and when they were expected to report for the next session of ragging.

In those days, ragging was conducted primarily by the second-year students. There was a simple reason for this. The classes for the First and Second Years were held in the Administrative Block, while the buildings housing the senior departments were situated much farther away. Students of the Third Year and above therefore visited the Administrative Block only occasionally. That is not to say they never came. Among them were always a few particularly ravenous "zombies" who would arrive in groups of two or three, hunting for easy prey. Whenever they found an opportunity, they would intimidate a few unsuspecting freshers-or sometimes an entire class-and order them to report later to the lakeside, where more elaborate sessions of ragging could be conducted away from public view.

The hostel, however, was where ragging revealed its most grotesque face.

Physical assault, humiliating tasks, and exhausting forms of physical punishment were regarded there as almost routine. Many seniors even justified these acts as a practical initiation into hostel life. The hostel was a world entirely different from the one I knew. If I were to dwell upon it in detail, this narrative would wander into an altogether different direction. That world deserves a chapter of its own, particularly as experienced by first-year students. My own connection with hostel life remained only marginal. I met it directly only two or three times, episodes that I shall recount later in this chapter.

Even today, I find no justification for ragging.

When children enter the sixth standard in school, they too are newcomers. They are younger, more vulnerable, and far less mature than sixteen-year-old college students. Yet no one imagines that they must be humiliated in order to learn manners or discipline. Believe that civilized behaviour can be taught through degradation seems to me a symptom of psychological distortion rather than education.

I saw something else during those years.

The seniors most enthusiastically involved in ragging often carried, quite visibly, an unsettling disturbance in their personalities. Their faces seemed to betray an inner imbalance that sometimes bordered on madness. They were very few in number, yet they exercised a disproportionate influence over others. Many of their own classmates appeared reluctant participants, being still with them either out of fear, peer pressure, or simple unwillingness to oppose them openly.

Even today I remember the names of one or two such individuals from my own time. I shall not mention them here. It would serve no worthwhile purpose, nor do I wish to stain these pages with the bitterness that their memory still evokes.

The consequences of ragging are many and often devastating. Loss of self-confidence, depression, and an inability to concentrate on studies

are among the more common outcomes. In severe cases, students suffer physical injuries or lasting psychological trauma. Some abandon their education altogether, while others, driven beyond endurance, have taken their own lives.

In today's digital age, humiliation has assumed yet another form. Threats of circulating photographs or videos on social media have become distressingly common, allowing cruelty to extend far beyond the physical boundaries of the campus.

Fortunately, the situation has changed considerably over the years. In India, ragging is now recognized as a serious criminal offence. Educational institutions are legally required to set up Anti-Ragging Committees, and those found guilty may face expulsion, substantial fines, or even imprisonment. Students may lodge complaints through the National Anti-Ragging Helpline or the official Anti-Ragging Portal.

College administrations now keep much stricter vigilance. CCTV surveillance has become commonplace, while helplines and counselling services are available to support new students. This understanding is based upon information presently available to me; I cannot claim firsthand knowledge of how effectively these measures function in practice today.

What I can say with certainty, however, is that laws alone can never eradicate ragging.

A deeper change in social attitudes is equally essential.

Senior students must learn that the true meaning of welcoming newcomers lies not in intimidating them, but in making them feel accepted.

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On our very first day, when we reached the bicycle stand in front of the Administrative Block, we found several other boys already there. Their faces bore the same hesitation that must have been visible on

ours. Each parked his bicycle with a curious deliberation, as though leaving his first mark upon unfamiliar ground.

It was impossible to tell who among them was a fellow fresher and who was a senior. Every face was unfamiliar and mingled with that unfamiliarity was a quiet but unmistakable apprehension.

We slowly entered the long corridor of the Administrative Block. A small crowd had gathered before the notice board, where we discovered the details of our respective classrooms and lecture halls. Afterwards, each of us made his way to his assigned room.

Nothing remarkable happened that day.

In fact, it passed with such perfect ordinariness that, when I look back now, no particular incident comes to mind. What I remember most vividly is simply the quiet relief that the first day had ended without any unpleasant experience.

That relief, however, was not destined to last.

The first three or four days passed in a state of uncertain anticipation. We walked through the campus cautiously, as though every corner concealed an unseen possibility. Gradually, the invisible web of ragging began to tighten around us.

Sometimes it happened in a corridor, sometimes near a staircase, sometimes unexpectedly at the turn of a passageway. A few senior students would stop us. The conversation invariably began with harmless questions-our names, our hometowns, our marks in the Higher Secondary Examination-but without warning its tone would change. Embarrassing questions followed. Absurd commands were issued. Occasionally there were threats delivered for no reason other than to remind us of our supposed place in the hierarchy.

During those weeks, the long corridor of the Administrative Block became a curious little theatre where we, the newcomers, were compelled to perform roles we had never chosen.

In time we became accustomed to it.

But during those first days, every morning as we cycled towards the college, an unspoken fear travelled silently beside us.

The stories told by the hostel residents were even more disturbing. Each evening, as they recounted their experiences, we realized that what we had considered serious inconveniences were insignificant compared with what they had endured. Some of them became so frightened that they returned home. Only several weeks later did they reappear on the campus.

At times, an entire class would be assembled and marched up to the roof of the Administrative Block.

That scene still survives in my memory like a faded photograph.

We stood there in neat rows while groups of senior students wandered before us. They forced us to shout meaningless slogans, many of them vulgar, some unmistakably obscene. Physically, the ordeal was rarely severe. Yet it left behind something far more enduring-a profound sense of helplessness.

Humiliation seldom wounds the body for very long.

It lingers far longer in the mind.

Parallel to all this, our studies continued.

Gradually, the college campus was beginning to feel familiar. Near the second gate, beside the main road, stood a tiny tea-and-snack stall that everyone simply called "the canteen." It was slowly becoming part of our daily landscape as well.

I carried my lunch from home. After eating two parathas for breakfast, I would cycle straight to college, and by noon I would be hungry again. My lunch consisted of vegetables and chapatis packed neatly into an aluminium lunch box. Akhilesh rarely brought a tiffin. He usually ate a proper meal before leaving home. Nevertheless, we always sat together at lunchtime. I would open my lunch box while he kept me company, and before long we would be sharing both the meal and the conversation.

After lunch we drank water from the nearby tap and then wandered aimlessly around the campus. Sometimes we walked in front of the Civil Engineering building, sometimes around the Administrative Block. Our conversations seldom had any fixed destination. The future, our studies, new friendships, ragging, our professors-everything found a place in them, each subject surfacing briefly before giving way to another.

On those rare occasions when we happened to have a little extra money, a little spare time, and the inclination to spend both, we would stroll over to the so-called canteen. In reality, it was less an official college canteen than a modest roadside tea stall. Yet generations of students had gathered there, and over the years it had got the unquestioned status of *the* canteen.

Even so, we seldom ventured inside.

It was almost always occupied by senior students. It was easy enough to glance at it while passing by; entering it and sitting there was another matter altogether. Other tea shops were either near the busy Ranjhi crossroads or farther away towards Gokulpur. Cycling there and back before the next lecture was practically impossible.

Thus, the days passed.

Quietly. Cautiously. With an undercurrent of apprehension.

Ragging continued at regular intervals, while in the classrooms we gradually became acquainted with students who had come from other schools and different towns. Slowly, new friendships began to take shape.

□

Before long, we discovered that a new circle of friends had quietly come into being.

There were five of us-Akhilesh, Rajendra Kaushal, Bhanu Prakash Srivastava, Deepak Srivastava, and I.

Bhanu and Deepak came from Yadav Colony, while Kaushal lived in Hathital Colony, Gorakhpur.

From then onwards, we usually travelled to college together. Whenever we had free time, we wandered around the campus as a group.

Those were the final years of our adolescence.

Our conversations and dreams seemed to have neither beginning nor end. They galloped across the limitless sky of our imagination like untamed stallions, powerful and free. At times they soared like spotless white swans across immeasurable distances; at others they floated silently upon the tranquil waters of the mind's own 'Man Sarovar', as though absorbed in meditation.

We spoke to one another about these dreams, these flights of imagination, these invisible journeys.

Those truly were the years meant for dreaming.

We dreamed with open eyes, shared those dreams with one another, and found happiness simply in speaking of them.

It was around this time that Bhanu came across a copy of *Diwan-e-Ghalib*.

Every day he would memorize one or two couplets and recite them to us. A surprising portion of our free time was thereafter devoted to discussing Ghalib's poetry.

In truth, even the greatest scholars have found the poetry of Mirza Ghalib inexhaustible in its depth. What, then, could a handful of teenagers hope to understand?

Yet every age owns its own wisdom.

So did ours.

With the little experience we had gathered and whatever understanding our young minds could offer, each of us sought his own truth within those verses. And that, in itself, brought us immense joy.

One couplet, in particular, has still been with me all these years:

"ग़म-ए-हस्ती का 'असद' किस से हो जुज़ मर्ग इलाज
शम्अ हर रंग में जलती है सहर होते तक।

"Gham-e-hasti ka 'Asad' kis se ho juz marg ilaaj,
Shama har rang mein jalti hai sehar hone tak."

("Asad, what cure is there for the sorrows of existence except death? A candle is destined to burn, in whatever manner it may, until the break of dawn.")

This celebrated verse is the maqta-the concluding couplet-of Ghalib's famous ghazal Aah ko chahiye ik umr asar hone tak. Here Ghalib uses Asad, the pen name he adopted before becoming universally known as Ghalib.

Its philosophy is profoundly simple.

The suffering inherent in human existence, he suggests, has no final remedy except death itself. As long as life continues, pain and struggle remain inseparable from it. Just as the destiny of a candle is to keep burning until dawn, so too is suffering woven into the very fabric of life.

Another couplet of *Ghalib* that has stayed with me reads:

"गो हाथ को जुम्बिश नहीं आँखों में तो दम है
रहने दो अभी साग़र-ओ-मीना मिरे आगे।"

"Go haath mein jumbish nahin, aankhon mein to dam hai;
Rehne do abhi saaghar-o-meena mere aage."

("Though my hands no longer have the strength to lift the cup, my eyes still keep their light. Leave the wine-cup and decanter before me a little longer.")

It is another of Ghalib's deeply moving reflections on growing old.

He speaks of a stage in life when the body has begun to fail. His hands have lost the strength even to raise a cup, yet his eyes are still alive with the ability to see. Therefore, he pleads, do not remove the cup and

decanter from before him. Even if he can no longer drink, the mere sight of them still allows him to savour life.

The verse becomes a meditation on the extraordinary resilience of the human spirit. The body may grow frail, but as long as the eyes can still behold beauty and the heart still longs to live, hope refuses to die.

Interestingly, our own interpretations were never very far from these meanings.

Our vocabulary was certainly more limited, and our explanations lacked scholarly refinement, yet we somehow managed to grasp the essence.

Bhanu would often arrive carrying a small slip of paper on which he had carefully written the meanings of the difficult Urdu words. Sometimes he simply memorized them beforehand. Holding on to those meanings, we would slowly work our way towards the spirit of each couplet.

Then each of us quietly connected those verses with our own lives-with memories already lived, with hopes not yet fulfilled, and with the emotions we scarcely knew how to name.

Much of what emerged from those conversations we shared openly with one another.

Yet a small part always remained unspoken, preserved somewhere deep within.

I cannot speak for the others.

But that is certainly how it was with me.

I have mentioned earlier that in those days my hair was quite long-long enough to brush against my shoulders. It had been fairly long even during my school years, though not quite to that extent. By then I had also begun colouring it regularly. Looking after my hair had become an additional ritual in my daily life, and one that I observed with quiet diligence.

Around the same time, Dhund was released. Directed by B. R. Chopra, the film featured a remarkably powerful performance by Danny Denzongpa in the role of Thakur Ranjit Singh. A few people remarked that, perhaps because of my long hair and a slight resemblance in appearance, I looked rather like Danny Denzongpa in that film.

From that time onwards, Bhanu began calling me "Boss."

Soon the rest of our little group adopted the nickname as well. Only Akhilesh remained an exception. Whenever he addressed the group collectively, he too would say "Boss," but when speaking to me alone, I was always simply "Anil."

There were even occasions when the others would leave the final decision to me.

"Whatever Boss says..."

I cannot now recall whether I truly deserved that quiet confidence. Yet, looking back, I cherish the affection with which they entrusted me with those small responsibilities.

□

Meanwhile, college life continued in its own steady rhythm.

All our classes were conducted in English, which posed a considerable challenge for those of us who had studied in Hindi-medium schools. I cannot speak for everyone, but I certainly struggled during the early weeks.

Fortunately, some of our lecturers understood our predicament. They began by teaching in a mixture of Hindi and English before gradually shifting to English alone as our confidence improved.

Among them, Professor Pillai, who taught us Chemistry, deserves special mention.

On the very first day of his classes, he acknowledged the difficulties faced by Hindi-medium students. His method of teaching was

exceptionally clear, and his handwriting on the blackboard was so elegant that it almost resembled fine calligraphy. Although he came from South India, he spoke remarkably fluent and graceful Hindi. If memory serves me correctly, his wife was also a lecturer at our college.

In the first year, our subjects included Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, English, Workshop Practice, and Engineering Drawing. In the second year, subjects such as Civil Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Machine Drawing, and Civil Engineering Drawing were added to our curriculum.

From the third year onwards, our formal and specialised study of Mechanical Engineering began, and we started delving into the subjects that belonged specifically to our chosen discipline.

□

Before we knew it, our first year at college had almost slipped away.

The first five or six months had largely been consumed by the chaos of ragging. But just as even the fiercest storm eventually spends its fury and falls silent, so too did the frenzy of ragging gradually subside. Occasionally some mischievous senior might revive it on a whim, but by then everyone's attention-ours as well as theirs-had begun to return to academics.

By that time, relationships with many seniors had also softened into something resembling friendship.

There is one thing I should mention here.

My ability to draw spared me a great deal of the suffering that ragging inflicted upon others.

Gradually, word had spread across the college that I was an artist. Many of the senior students had themselves studied at Model High School and already knew about my interest in drawing.

Whenever we were summoned to the lakeside for ragging, it usually meant a more elaborate session. There, away from the campus

buildings, only the seniors and the selected freshers were present. Without lecturers or other students nearby, the proceedings could continue at leisure.

Among us, too, there were a few exceptionally fearless boys. They gave to every command with such complete composure that the seniors were left almost disappointed. Whatever absurd instruction they received, they carried it out instantly, without embarrassment or resistance. In doing so, they denied the seniors the very satisfaction they looked for the pleasure of seeing fear, hesitation or humiliation.

As for me, I had to endure such sessions only once or twice.

On each occasion, fortune seemed to intervene.

Among the seniors present there would invariably be one or two former students at Model High School who knew me. They would announce that they themselves would "take care" of my ragging and quietly lead me away from the group.

A few simple questions would follow-about my studies, my family, or how I was settling into college-and then they would send me back.

Among those seniors, I particularly remember Arvind Srivastava.

Although we had never really known each other at Model High School, he evidently knew who I was. Perhaps my reputation as someone who drew, perhaps the innocence that must still have been visible on my face, or perhaps the unusually large eyes that so many people had commented upon-all these seemed to evoke his sympathy.

Whatever the reason, Arvind Srivastava, along with a few other seniors, spared me much needless humiliation.

There was another reason why the ragging sessions often ended harmlessly for me.

Quite often, the seniors would ask me to draw pictures in the sand beside the lake.

Using nothing more than the forefinger of my right hand, I would begin tracing lines upon the sand until figures gradually appeared.

They seemed delighted.

Soon another request would follow, then another.

Sometimes they demanded rather indecent sketches. I drew them as matter-of-factly as I drew everything else. Amused, they would summon their friends to admire them, who in turn would ask for more.

Others, of a gentler disposition, preferred portraits of India's national heroes. Those too I happily tried.

How accurate those portraits were upon shifting sand, I cannot honestly say.

Yet the seniors invariably appeared satisfied.

While I sat quietly sketching in the sand, many of my classmates were being made to perform ridiculous antics or endure a stream of crude and degrading remarks.

Watching them filled me with quiet discomfort.

But there was nothing I could do.

□

Another memory naturally belongs here.

In those days, the election of the College President was considered one of the most important events of the academic year.

Student politics today has become deeply intertwined with national and state-level political parties. Even in our time those connections existed, though in a far subtler and less visible form.

Nowadays political parties openly find promising students and support them as candidates.

When we entered our First Year, the presidential election was held a few months after the academic session began.

As far as I remember, the contest that year was between the Hostel Panel and the City Panel-the latter standing for the day scholars. The City Panel eventually won.

Politics, however, never interested me in the slightest.

For that reason, most details of those elections have faded from my memory.

I remember only that when we were in our First Year, the office of President was held by a Sikh student whose surname was Shekhon. I no longer remember the name of the student who defeated him in the next election. A few names occasionally come to mind, but I am by no means certain of them, and I would rather omit them than risk recording an error.

Whether elections were also held for the posts of Secretary and two or three other offices-or whether those positions were filled through nomination-I honestly cannot remember.

What I do remember is the voting process itself.

Two or three professors served as election supervisors. A ballot box stood before them, while representatives of the contesting candidates remained present throughout the proceedings. One by one, every student in the college approached the ballot box carrying a small voting slip. Upon it, as I recall, we wrote the name of the candidate we wished to elect before quietly casting our vote.

It was all conducted with a seriousness that, at the time, made us feel we were taking part in something of genuine consequence.

Each student personally dropped his own ballot slip into the ballot box in full view of everyone present. It was a simple, traditional, and trustworthy method of conducting an election.

The votes were counted afterwards, the victorious candidates were declared, and supporters of the winning panel celebrated with unrestrained enthusiasm. Processions wound their way through the

campus, voices rang with slogans, and for a brief while the college belonged entirely to youthful excitement.

If everything went ahead smoothly, then within a day or two the oath-taking ceremony would be held. Following long-established tradition, the outgoing President and the previous Students' Union formally handed over charge to the newly elected office-bearers.

Unfortunately, matters rarely unfolded so peacefully.

Long before the oath-taking ceremony could take place, tempers usually began to flare. Minor and sometimes serious clashes erupted in the hostel and across the campus. Supporters from both factions were occasionally beaten up. The college administration then found itself struggling to restore order before the formal transfer of office could finally be completed.

Even the oath-taking ceremony itself was not always free from disruption. There were occasions when it descended into shouting, pushing, snatching, and utter confusion. Yet somehow, despite everything, the ceremony would eventually reach its conclusion.

Many Engineering College students gathered every evening at Malviya Chowk in the city. There were a couple of modest restaurants and roadside eateries there that served as the regular meeting place of some of the college's more influential senior students.

I never visited that gathering place, nor did any member of my group. Consequently, I cannot claim to know what happened there or how those informal assemblies functioned.

What I do remember is that from around six or half-past six in the evening until late at night, the area was unmistakably dominated by Engineering College students.

There are several names that I still remember quite clearly.

I deliberately choose not to mention them.

Some of those young men eventually rose to prominent positions in state politics. A few even earned distinction in national public life.

Several of my own classmates later campaigned tirelessly on their behalf, travelling from village to village and working through neighbourhood after neighbourhood. Years later, after we had all entered our professional careers, some of those former classmates became my colleagues. From them I heard many stories of those politically charged days.

But those experiences do not belong directly to my own story.

So I shall leave them where they belong and continue with my own journey.

Much of what I have written above about the Students' Union elections comes from what I heard at the time rather than from personal involvement. The only things I know firsthand are these: I cast my vote during my First Year and again in my Second Year, and on one occasion-whether it was during my First Year or my Second, I can no longer say-a violent confrontation erupted almost immediately after the election results were announced.

My friends and I happened to be present when it began.

Within moments, the entire atmosphere exploded into chaos.

People were shouting at the tops of their voices. Abusive language filled the air. Stones began to fly. Students grappled with one another, and soon open fighting broke out.

Like hundreds of other students who had no part in the conflict, we fled through the college gate.

Outside the campus, the police were already waiting.

Naturally, their attention was directed towards those engaged in the fighting rather than towards frightened spectators like us.

Many of us crossed the main road and gathered beside the wall of the Superintendent of Police's residence, watching events unfold from what we hoped was a safe distance.

By then the violence had spread to the area at once outside the main gate.

The police struggled to restore order. Officers shouted repeated warnings, urging the students to disperse, but no one seemed willing to listen.

Then, quite suddenly, one officer drew his revolver and fired several shots into the air.

We were terrified.

For most of us, it was the first time in our lives that we had seen such a scene.

A wild stampede followed.

In the midst of the confusion, two or three cars suddenly appeared. Several students stumbled into them and sped away. Whether they belonged to students from other colleges or to someone else entirely, I never learned.

The remaining students were eventually dispersed by the police, and the area around the college gate was finally cleared.

We quietly collected our bicycles from the stand and left through Gate Number Two, making our way home in silence.

As we rode away, we looked back once.

The entire campus and the Administrative Block lay wrapped in an uncanny stillness.

It seemed wiser simply to go home.

□

Since I have begun speaking about Students' Union elections, there is another incident I must recount.

It belongs either to my First Year or my Second Year. By the time we reached the Third Year, the office of President was no longer filled

through elections but by nomination. Whether that practice continued afterwards or was eventually dropped, I do not know.

In any case, whether this happened during my First Year or my Second makes no difference.

The incident itself stays exactly the same.

Before I tell it, however, there is something else that has been lingering quietly in my mind for several days. It has no direct connection with this story, yet I find it difficult to move forward without first giving it voice.

Some unspoken thoughts stay lodged within our memories like a small stone lying in the middle of an old pathway-not large enough to block the road, yet impossible not to notice each time we pass.

Readers of my earlier book, *Arambh* ("The Beginning"), may have seen that I remember an astonishing number of incidents from my childhood with remarkable clarity. Even today certain scenes return with such vividness that it feels as though a window has suddenly been opened in a long-abandoned, darkened room, allowing an unexpected flood of sunlight to pour inside.

That luminous clarity is still with me through my years in primary school, middle school, and high school.

Then, quite gradually, a delicate mist seems to descend.

Why should that be?

I cannot answer with certainty.

Sometimes I feel that life suddenly became too vast.

Events no longer unfolded one after another in a neat sequence. They began arriving from every direction at once, overlapping and intertwining. Friendships, studies, ambitions, family concerns, and the indistinct call of the future all crowded into the same years.

Perhaps the mind simply no longer owned enough quiet space to preserve every experience in its own carefully labelled compartment, as though filing each one separately for future retrieval.

Yet I do not believe those memories have disappeared.

I feel they still exist somewhere.

They lie hidden in some dark cupboard of the mind, like old letters stored away in a forgotten trunk.

The difficulty is only that the path leading back to them is no longer easy to find.

Sometimes a fragrance, a familiar voice, or a long-forgotten name suddenly unlocks that old trunk for a fleeting moment.

Then, just as quietly, it closes once again.

Perhaps psychologists have a name for this experience.

Perhaps the science of memory offers a precise explanation.

But at this stage of my life, I find myself less interested in the explanation than in the mist itself-that gentle haze which now envelops those years.

Perhaps someday, when time allows, I shall wander into it.

Or perhaps I shall simply continue searching for the one word capable of holding the entire experience within itself.

□

But let us return to where we left the story.

Whether it was the First Year or the Second hardly matters.

The Students' Union elections were approaching.

Those were days before mobile phones, before digital printing, before giant flex banners and instant publicity. Campaigning belonged to a slower, more personal world.

Campaigning in those days was necessarily simple.

Candidates, accompanied by a few supporters, would visit classrooms during free periods. After delivering a brief speech, they would try to persuade students to vote either for themselves or for the candidate they stood for. Before leaving, they often scribbled a few slogans on the blackboard with chalk. That was about the extent of electioneering.

In every class they would find or recruit one supporter, whose task was to continue canvassing among classmates.

There was another popular method of campaigning-posters.

Some were hand-painted on drawing sheets. Others were fashioned from discarded cinema posters. Students managed to collect large posters from the city's movie theatres. These had originally been printed on thick paper and supplied by film distributors to publicize newly released films. Whatever remained unused eventually found its way into the hostel.

There, sheets of paper would be pasted over portions of the film advertisements, and fresh slogans would be painted with brushes and coloured inks. Some were humorous, others highly emotional. They praised one candidate, ridiculed the opposing panel, or appealed passionately for votes. In a curious way, the film stars themselves became unwilling advertising models for student politics.

One afternoon, shortly before college closed for the day, a few seniors approached me and explained-very persuasively-that I would not be going home that evening.

"You'll stay in the hostel tonight," they informed me. *"We'll be working through the night making election posters."*

There was really no possibility of refusing.

Through Akhilesh, I somehow managed to send word home.

That evening, I had dinner in the hostel.

It was there that, for the first time in my life, I met okra cooked as a curry with gravy.

I no longer remember which hostel block it was, though I am quite certain it was not Block Number Six.

When the seniors took me into the dining hall, dinner had only just been prepared. Fresh chapatis were still being baked. Like everyone else, I picked up my metal plate and bowls and joined the queue.

The server lifted the lid from a huge cooking vessel.

Inside floated a thin, watery curry in which a few lonely pieces of okra drifted about almost aimlessly. He ladled two generous spoonfuls into my bowl; one or two pieces of okra came with the gravy. Into the second bowl went the dal, equally thin, more like golden water than lentils, flecked with coriander leaves and scattered red chillies. Rice was available too, but I declined it.

The three or four seniors going with me pointed me towards a table.

"Go ahead," they said. *"We'll bring the chapatis."*

A little later they arrived carrying a stack of freshly baked rotis.

They were small, though not excessively burnt, and far better than I had expected.

I was hungry.

The meal tasted perfectly acceptable.

As I ate, one thought quietly crossed my mind: had they not fed me at all, there would have been little I could have done about it.

Yet the experience turned out to be far less frightening than I had imagined.

Early the next morning I returned home.

Whether I went to college afterwards, I honestly cannot remember.

I do remember, however, that I had to spend one more night in the same hostel block. That evening unfolded almost exactly like the

earlier one. Only the vegetable curry was different. It had potatoes along with something else, though by sheer chance my bowl received little besides the potatoes.

That much, at least, I still remember.

□

Thus, my First Year moved steadily forward-cautious, hesitant, and always alert-until the annual examinations finally arrived.

It was during this period that we also became familiar with an expression peculiar to Engineering College life: the "general go."

Under pressure from the senior students, the Diwali vacation would unofficially begin during Navratri itself and continue well beyond Diwali. According to the University calendar, the Dussehra and Diwali holidays were separate. The students, however, followed a calendar of their own.

Whenever the seniors decided that a holiday should begin, it simply began.

On the first day of such an unofficial vacation, representatives of the senior students stationed themselves at every college gate. Day scholars arriving for classes were politely persuaded, respectfully advised-or occasionally threatened-into turning around and going back home.

This had to be done only for the first day or two.

Soon enough the classrooms emptied.

Lecturers and professors arrived, found deserted lecture halls, and quietly returned to their offices.

The same custom applied to the preparation leave before annual examinations.

It invariably began several days earlier than officially scheduled.

Naturally, most of us were delighted.

Remarkably, these interruptions rarely affected completion of the syllabus. Our lecturers had long grown accustomed to this annual ritual and planned their teaching, accordingly, adjusting the pace of their courses well in advance.

Eventually, preparation leave arrived.

Then came the examinations.

Soon afterwards, the results.

I passed every subject.

Many students, however, failed in one paper, two papers, or even more.

Akhilesh, if I remember correctly, received a supplementary examination in the English subject.

Oddly enough, it was not Akhilesh who seemed most distressed by the result.

It was his father.

I remember one particular evening.

He called me to sit beside him.

Akhilesh was at home as well, but his father neither summoned him nor spoke to him directly. Naturally, since the conversation concerned him, he stayed somewhere nearby. I suspect his father wanted him to overhear every word.

As the conversation unfolded, I gradually realized that while he was speaking to me, his real audience was Akhilesh.

Throughout that entire conversation I felt profoundly uncomfortable.

For reasons I could not fully explain, I sensed that he wished to suggest-without ever saying so outright-that I, too, bore some share of responsibility for Akhilesh's supplementary examination.

Whether that feeling was justified or merely my own imagination, I have never been able to decide.

More than thirty years have now passed since his father left this world.

The question has still been unanswered.

The house, in those days, was still exactly as I had first come to know it.

A small garden stood before the entrance, with a long wooden bench fixed within an iron frame. Beyond it lay the main doorway opening into a central courtyard. To the left stood the lavatory, the bathroom, the storeroom, and beside it the kitchen. Running along their front was a narrow veranda, barely four or five feet wide. Separating the veranda from the courtyard, in front of the storeroom and kitchen, stretched a low brick wall.

Beyond these were four rooms arranged in two pairs.

Attached to the first room on the left was a modest sitting room, perhaps eight by ten feet in size. Its wall facing the courtyard consisted almost entirely of a wooden lattice made of crisscrossing slats, leaving diamond-shaped openings between them. Even the door was fashioned in the same pattern.

The entire lattice had been painted a shade somewhere between parrot green and aqua green.

Inside stood two chairs, an old wooden bench that served almost as a sofa, and a small centre table.

On the front wall and the wall to the left hung several old black-and-white photographs in glass frames, faded by time and worn with age. Among them were large portraits of Babuji and Amma taken around the time of their marriage. They had originally been monochrome photographs, delicately hand-coloured in watercolour and mounted within ornate floral borders.

It was an extraordinarily heavy evening.

He did not switch on the light.

The last daylight filtered softly through the wooden lattice into the room.

An uncanny stillness filled the air.

The old photographs on the walls lay veiled beneath a thin film of dust and passing years. The pale light filtering through the lattice rendered their faces even more indistinct, as though memory itself had settled gently upon them.

Babuji asked me to sit in the chair opposite him. He took the other one.

For a while, he remained silent, his eyes fixed upon the floor. It seemed as though the words had become lodged somewhere deep within him and refused to come out.

From the room inside came the sound of Akhilesh pacing back and forth. Every few moments his footsteps briefly disturbed the stillness before silence settled once again.

At last, Babuji raised his head.

"You know, don't you. . . that Akhilesh has failed?"

I nodded quietly.

For a few moments he looked at me without speaking. Then his eyes drifted away.

"It was only one paper. . . just one."

There was less reproach in his voice than exhaustion.

"I never imagined I would live to see a day like this."

Silence returned to the room.

Slowly, he raised his hand and pointed towards the wall.

"Do you see them?"

I turned towards the photographs.

Several black-and-white faces looked down from old wooden frames. Some wore solemn expressions; others seemed to be gazing into an emptiness beyond the camera. Every one of them was unfamiliar to me.

"This is my father... this is my grandfather... and this is his elder brother."

He pointed to each photograph in turn.

"Sometimes I wonder... what answer shall I give them?"

I said nothing.

His eyes remained fixed upon the portraits, as though he were no longer speaking to me but to those silent figures themselves.

"Strange, isn't it?" he said with the faintest hint of a smile, which vanished almost as soon as it appeared. "A man dies... but his expectations never do."

The footsteps inside suddenly stopped.

Perhaps Akhilesh, too, was listening.

In a softer voice Babuji continued,

"I have three sons... but somehow I pinned my greatest hopes on him."

He paused.

"I still don't know why. There was something in his eyes that always made me believe he would go very far."

For a while he seemed lost in thought.

"When he was a little boy, people used to say, 'This child is different.'"

"I believed them."

His fingers moved restlessly along the arm of the chair.

"I used to imagine him becoming an engineer... and then going to America."

"There... I thought... he would build a great career."

He looked towards me.

"You must think I'm being foolish."

I shook my head.

"No, Babuji."

"Perhaps you should."

He laughed softly.

But there was a profound sadness hidden inside that laughter.

"A father never dreams only for his children."

"He places his own unfinished dreams inside them."

As he spoke those words, his voice grew almost inaudible.

After another long silence, he said,

"Now I wonder... was the mistake mine?"

"Did I expect too much from him?"

"Or did I never allow him to realise that he was slowly being crushed beneath the weight of my expectations?"

For the first time it occurred to me that Babuji was not truly angry with Akhilesh.

He was angry with himself.

Once again, I heard footsteps from the adjoining room.

Babuji looked in that direction, but he did not call out.

"Perhaps he thinks failing in one paper isn't such a serious matter."

He paused.

"And perhaps he is right."

His gaze returned once more to the old photographs.

"But sometimes..."

"The event itself is not what matters."

"It is the sound with which a dream breaks."

A deep silence settled over the room.

The faces in the framed photographs remained as expressionless as ever.

And it suddenly became clear to me that Babuji's deepest sorrow was not Akhilesh's failure in an examination.

His grief arose from something far more fragile.

For years he had quietly nurtured a vision of his son's future, and in a single moment he felt he had watched that future collapse before his eyes.

He was not mourning his son.

He was mourning one of his dreams.

His suffering had long ceased to be merely the disappointment of an examination result. It had become the psychological burden of a father's shattered aspirations, the weight of expectations inherited across generations, and the quiet collapse of dreams he himself had never been able to fulfil.

At that age, however, I believed Babuji was taking the matter far too seriously.

After all, failing in a single paper was hardly life's final defeat.

The college regulations allowed a student to proceed to the next academic year. There would be a few months of inconvenience, certainly, but nothing more than that.

At least, that was how I understood it then.

Looking back now, I realise that while I was seeing only the event itself, Babuji was witnessing the destruction of the dream that lay behind it.

There was another thought quietly troubling me at the time.

Akhilesh and I spent almost every evening together. We wandered aimlessly through the neighbourhood, talked late into the night, and found ourselves far more fascinated by the world beyond our textbooks than by our studies.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I feared that Babuji might consider me partly responsible for what had happened.

Perhaps that was why, even as I sat before him, I found myself silently defending my own innocence.

And perhaps that was also why I carried, however faintly, a sense of guilt.

The truth, however, was simpler than all my anxious speculation.

What had happened had already happened.

There are certain events in life that cannot be undone.

One can only continue the journey carrying their consequences.

Time, in its own quiet way, did exactly that.



A couple of months later, Akhilesh cleared the supplementary examination. College life slipped back into its familiar rhythm. The calm that gradually returned to our home softened the sharp edges of that painful episode. My father, too, never spoke of it again in quite the same way.

Everything appeared normal again - or at least that is how it seemed on the surface.

Looking back now, however, I realize that the true significance of that incident did not lie in Akhilesh's supplementary examination. It lay elsewhere. For the first time in my life, I had witnessed the weight of a father's expectations. At that age I was incapable of understanding it.

All I could see was my father's sorrow; I could not yet see the source from which it sprang.

Years later, when life itself planted within me the seeds of hopes, ambitions, and dreams - only to let many of them wither before they could bloom - I gradually began to understand the meaning of that evening's conversation.

Now it seems to me that my father was not grieving so much over his son's temporary failure as over the future he had long ago built in his imagination.

Such is the tragedy of dreams about the future: when they shatter, only the person who has lovingly nurtured them within can hear the sound of their breaking.

Regardless, I should also mention that Akhilesh eventually fulfilled his father's dreams in many ways. After completing his bachelor's degree in engineering, he earned his master's from the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, and later joined the Bokaro Steel Plant. During his nearly two years there, he was sent to the United States once or perhaps several times as part of a training programme sponsored by the plant. Those visits enabled him to build a few valuable contacts, and before long he moved permanently to America, where he found employment.

Meanwhile, in 1981, he married Kalpana. Their elder son, Ritik, was born while they were still in Bokaro. Ritik must have been three or four years old when Akhilesh was still working there. I visited him once during that period. Within a year or so after my visit, he left for the United States. About eighteen months to two years later, by 1990, Kalpana and young Ritik joined him there. Their younger son, Kartik, was born in America.

Today, Ritik is a doctor, married to an Indian-origin physician. They have a little daughter named Aadya, who must now be about four or five years old. The entire family continues to live in the United States.

In that sense, my father's old dream did come true. His son did indeed go to America and build his life there.

For the past three or four years, however, I have had no contact with Akhilesh.

That, too, is a story.

I shall tell it at the proper time and in its proper place.



In the opening chapter of this memoir, I mentioned that in our part of Ghamapur there were five boys of my age named Anil living either in our lane or within a hundred metres of my house. Three of us were especially close friends, - Anil Dubey, Anil Khare, and I.

There was another Anil Dubey, the elder son of Narayan Dubey, who lived two or three houses ahead of ours in the row directly opposite. Near the far end of the lane lived a Christian boy whom everyone called *Anil Papa*. His hair had begun turning white even in childhood, and perhaps that was how he acquired the nickname.

The two Anils from my own lane are no longer with us. Anil Khare now lives in Ujjain, while Anil Dubey - my closest childhood friend - lives in Bhopal.

Anil Khare and I studied together in the same class at Model High School, whereas Anil Dubey attended the Ghamapur branch of the school.

After completing Higher Secondary, our paths diverged. Anil Khare joined Government Science College, Anil Dubey enrolled at Government Polytechnic, Jabalpur, and I entered Government Engineering College, Jabalpur.

I mention all this because the next story I am about to narrate began at the Government Polytechnic, passed through Ghamapur Chowk, and eventually reached Bai ka Bagh.

□

In those days I wore my hair unusually long - almost touching my shoulders. It was thick enough to cover my ears and the back of my neck. I took good care of it, regularly washing it with shampoo and even using hair dye.

I have no idea whether my hair was actually handsome, but I certainly liked it. Whether anyone else admired it never really occurred to me.

There was, however, one fellow who apparently did not.

He lived somewhere in Bai ka Bagicha. I did not know him. Before this incident I had never really noticed him - assuming I had ever seen him at all. And why should I have?

The incident took place during my first year in engineering college, probably sometime in October or November, or perhaps February or March. We were wearing woollen sweaters, though the cold was still mild. It was around half past seven or eight in the evening.

At that time Anil Dubey was studying at Government Polytechnic. The Polytechnic also conducted evening classes for certain students enrolled in a special programme. Anil had some work to deal with in the administrative office, and he knew that someone would still be present there.

We rode to the college on our bicycles. After entering through the main gate and covering a short distance, Anil stopped, got off his bicycle, and said, "Wait here. I'll finish my work and be back in a few minutes."

I stood there for a while before settling onto a broad stone nearby.

The road on which the Polytechnic stood was almost deserted in those days. It skirted the Collectorate and ran straight towards Naudra Bridge. Another road branched off at a three-way junction in front of the college, passing through Nagarath Chowk and by the Rainbow Bungalow before continuing towards Sadar. The Polytechnic gate opened directly onto that junction.

The layout remains much the same even today. What has changed is the atmosphere. The loneliness has vanished, replaced by showrooms, shops, apartment buildings, and the bustle of urban life. Even now, however, the stretch from the Polytechnic towards Naudra Bridge remains comparatively deserted at night until Tayyab Ali Chowk, largely because it is lined with schools. The difference is that today the road is brightly lit.

Back then, only the dim glow of a streetlamp at the junction reached the spot where I sat. A mercury-vapour lamp fixed above the college gate added just enough light to soften the darkness.

Suddenly, a young man came cycling out from the college building.

I paid him little attention.

He rode towards the gate, but instead of leaving the campus, he abruptly turned back. He stopped beside me, resting one foot on the ground while remaining seated on his bicycle.

For a few moments he simply stared at me.

Then he got off the bicycle, walked closer, and continued staring in silence.

I found the whole situation deeply unsettling. I kept wondering, *what on earth is his problem?*

Then, in a deep, gravelly voice, he finally spoke.

"Get that hair cut tomorrow."

He paused; his eyes fixed on mine.

"After tomorrow, I don't want to see those curls of yours anywhere in Bai ka Bagh. Understood?"

Without another word, he picked up his bicycle, rode out through the gate, and disappeared into the evening.

I could not make sense of it.

Why should my hair bother him so much?

One thought, however, immediately struck me.

He knew that I frequented Bai-ke-Bagicha.

That could only mean he lived there himself.

Sukumar Das lived in Bai-ke-Bagicha, and several of our other friends belonged to the same neighbourhood. We often gathered either at Sukumar's house or somewhere in the open, spending hours talking about everything and nothing. Yet I had never once noticed this fellow.

I was still trying to connect the pieces of this absurd encounter when Anil arrived.

I told him everything.

He too began thinking aloud.

"Who on earth could he be?"

Neither of us could arrive at an answer.

Finally, Anil said,

"I'll try to find out tomorrow. I have a few friends in the Polytechnic Hostel."

"We'll ask there... and we'll ask Sukumar's friends as well."

With that, we mounted our bicycles and began riding home.

All the way back my thoughts circled around that strange incident.

Even during ragging at the Engineering College, no one had ever spoken to me in quite that manner.

Anil, too, seemed unusually quiet.

Perhaps he felt uncomfortable that something like this had happened to me near his own college.

Lost in our own thoughts, we pedalled slowly across Tahsili Chowk and eventually reached Ghamapur Chowk.

The moment we turned right towards home, I caught sight of the same fellow standing beside a paan shop on the right-hand side of the road, lighting a cigarette.

His sweater, his build, and enough of his face were visible for me to recognise him instantly.

Almost involuntarily, I exclaimed,

"That's him!"

Anil glanced at him for scarcely a second.

Then he abandoned his bicycle right in the middle of the road and strode towards him.

His bicycle clattered onto the street.

I stopped as well.

By then Anil had already landed two or three punches.

The fellow was so engrossed in lighting his cigarette that he had no time even to react before Anil grabbed hold of him and continued striking him.

Locked together, the two of them staggered around in circles on the road.

All the while Anil kept shouting,

"So, you'll make him cut his hair, will you?"

"You'll make him cut his hair?"

Within moments a crowd gathered.

People pulled them apart.

The young man was swaying unsteadily.

Someone in the crowd remarked,

"Oh, leave him alone. He's a drunk. Why waste your time with someone like him?"

We picked up our bicycles and rode away.

A short distance later Anil suddenly changed his mind.

"Let's not go home just yet," he said. "Let's stop at Bai-ke-Bagiche."

The place where the incident had occurred lay barely half a furlong from the first lane of Bai-ke-Bagiche.

We turned our bicycles into that lane.

Badri Pathak lived there.

He was Anil's classmate at the Polytechnic College.

Bai-ke-Bagiche consisted of four lanes, numbered consecutively from Ghamapur Chowk. All four met a cross lane running at the far end. Badri lived in one of the houses at the end of the first lane.

Many of the houses there had been built in identical clusters of four flats-two on the ground floor and two above, connected by a central staircase.

Badri's family occupied one of the upper flats.

It was already night, and considering the circumstances, sitting inside the house hardly seemed appropriate.

Instead, we settled on the staircase.

Anil narrated the entire incident in detail.

Then began a discussion about what should be done next.

Badri recognised the fellow immediately.

According to him, he was a student at the Commerce College.

There was every possibility that some Commerce College boys might soon come looking for us.

The fellow clearly knew me, and probably Anil as well.

He was quite likely to know roughly where we lived.

That possibility worried all of us.

There seemed to be only one practical response.

If students from the Commerce College gathered, we too would need boys from our own colleges.

Of course, this was an era before mobile phones.

Landline telephones existed, but very few people had easy access to them.

Because of my work on the election posters, I had become acquainted with a number of senior students in the Engineering College hostel.

How Badri managed to spread the word that evening I honestly no longer remember.

As far as I can recall, he sent some of his own friends by bus to both the Polytechnic and Engineering College hostels.

In those days, one custom was common to almost every college.

If any student found himself involved in a quarrel or some serious difficulty, word spread quickly, and groups of fellow students would immediately arrive to support him.

How many came depended entirely upon the seriousness of the matter.

Every hostel seemed to have a handful of young men who were perpetually ready for precisely such emergencies.

Meanwhile, we remained seated on Badri's staircase.

An hour passed.

Then another half-hour.

The lane lay wrapped in complete silence.

Inside us, however, everything was in turmoil.

One anxious thought followed another.

Again and again, we tried to justify what had happened.

Badri generally agreed with us, though from time to time he would remark,

"You should have thought for a moment before hitting him."

Each time Anil dismissed the suggestion almost impatiently.

Then, quite suddenly, a large three-wheeled tempo drew into the lane carrying a group of Engineering College students.

In those days, before autorickshaws became common, these larger three-wheelers carrying eight or ten passengers served as the city's shared taxis.

The newcomers listened to the whole story.

Soon afterwards another tempo arrived, followed by a motorcycle carrying still more students.

Within minutes nearly thirty young men had gathered in the narrow lane.

Badri's family, who had already been uneasy about our presence, now became genuinely anxious.

He somehow persuaded them to go upstairs.

Doors in the neighbouring houses opened one after another.

People peered outside, quietly assessed the situation, and then shut themselves indoors again.

We were instructed to remain seated on the staircase.

The fellow who had wanted me to cut my hair stood some distance away in the darkness, trying unsuccessfully to identify us.

The senior students from both sides gathered together.

There was a heated discussion.

Voices rose.

Tempers flared briefly.

Then someone called us forward.

The other fellow was summoned as well.

After listening to both sides, two or three senior students-representing each group-summed up the matter.

"What happened today was wrong on both sides."

"There is no point allowing this to go any further."

"Shake hands."

"Apologise to one another."

"And from now on, whenever you meet, meet as friends."

"We don't want to hear another complaint."

That settled the matter.

The seniors dispersed.

The crisis, which had sprung up so suddenly, came to an unexpectedly peaceful end.

We breathed again.

Later that night we rode to the small hotels near Platform Number One of the Jabalpur Railway Station, which remained open throughout the night.

There we drank excellent cups of tea.

Then, at last, each of us went home.

□

Those were the years of becoming.

Not of becoming *something-*

but of becoming oneself.

At that age, the future has no clearly drawn map.

No one knows what he will one day be called, where life will eventually take him, or by what identity the world will remember him.

Yet all the while, an invisible process is quietly unfolding within.

It is like entering a silent workshop where, to an outsider, nothing appears to be happening. But somewhere inside, an unseen craftsman patiently chisels a rough block of wood, smoothing its coarse surfaces, slowly revealing the form that has always been hidden within.

Without our knowing it, that unseen craftsman is shaping us.

And only much later, looking back across the years, do we realise that those ordinary days-filled with friendships, anxieties, youthful impulsiveness, laughter, and even small quarrels-were never ordinary at all.

They were the days in which our true selves were being made.

Perhaps something very similar was happening to me during those years.

Whatever occurred in the world outside did not remain outside for long. It quietly found its way within. A casual remark from a teacher, a friend's gesture, a single sentence in a book, the face of a stranger, the melancholy of an afternoon, the fading light of an evening-everything found a place somewhere in the landscape of my mind.

At the time, one never realizes how significant such small moments truly are. They seem no more than passing fragments carried along by the current of life. Yet years later, when one looks back, it becomes evident that those very moments had been silently shaping the soil of one's inner being.

Sometimes I feel that a human life is formed less by great events than by countless small experiences that scarcely attract our attention when they occur. They do not announce themselves. They do not arrive with the weight of history. They enter quietly and settle somewhere deep within us.

They are like a nail driven into a wall. From the outside it appears insignificant, almost invisible. Yet, in time, it becomes the very point upon which an astonishing weight comes to rest.

What I was learning in those years extended far beyond the knowledge contained in textbooks. More importantly, I was learning how to read life itself.

I was learning to observe people, to recognize the subtle distinctions in their temperaments, to understand the emotions concealed behind success and failure, and to become aware of my own hopes, fears, ambitions, and uncertainties. These lessons were never consciously taught; they unfolded of their own accord. Perhaps the most important part of education is precisely that which never appears in any syllabus.

The architecture of my life was taking shape invisibly.

One experience would arrive like a bolt, tightening some loose joint within me. A setback would shatter an illusion and quietly replace it with a fragment of understanding. A word of praise would add a slender strand of confidence, while a failure would fasten another piece of humility into place.

At the time none of this was visible.

Today, however, it seems to me that an invisible work of construction was constantly underway. Bricks were being laid, joints carefully sealed, and the entire framework of the future was slowly rising, unnoticed.

Those were the years of gathering.

Every day seemed to arrive carrying a small bundle filled with experiences, questions, dreams, and uncertainties. By evening, some of its contents would already have revealed themselves, while others remained unopened, quietly stored away in some hidden corner of memory.

Years later, at an unexpected turning in life, one of those forgotten bundles would suddenly open, releasing an old lesson, a forgotten courage, or a warning that had long lain dormant.

Looking back now, I realize that the road into my future was actually being built during those very years.

We believed we were merely passing our days-attending lectures, making friends, preparing for examinations.

In reality, the foundations of the future were already being laid.

The person I was gradually destined to become was quietly taking shape.

And all this happened with such profound silence that one could not even hear the sound of its making.

Just as a tree adds a new ring within its trunk with every passing season, though no one ever hears it grow, so life was quietly growing within me during those years.

When I look back today, I no longer feel that those days have passed.

They are still alive somewhere within me-in the way I think, in my hesitations, in my convictions, and in my memories.

Those were the days that did not make me into *something*.

They slowly introduced me to myself.

□

Our Engineering College stood adjacent to Ranjhi, Jabalpur's military and industrial township.

In 1974, a new cinema hall named 'Navneet Talkies' was built in Ranjhi's commercial district. Those were the golden years of the single-screen cinema. Since Ranjhi lay a considerable distance from the city's principal entertainment areas, such as Malviya Chowk and the Cantonment, the new theatre was warmly welcomed by the local

community. For the residents of Ranjhi, it soon became one of the area's most cherished centres of recreation.

For the employees of the Ordnance Factories and for the local families who lived nearby, Navneet Talkies was nothing short of a cultural lifeline.

The theatre belonged to the well-known Jaiswal family of Jabalpur. Its principal owner and proprietor were Shri Navneet Lal Jaiswal, after whom the cinema was named. The Jaiswal family had long enjoyed a distinguished reputation throughout Jabalpur and the Mahakoshal region for their involvement in film exhibition, distribution, and several other business enterprises.

The very first film screened at Navneet Talkies was *Pran Jaye Par Vachan Na Jaye*.

That film shared a particularly intimate connection with Jabalpur.

Starring Sunil Dutt and Rekha, several of its important scenes and songs had been filmed amid the world-famous marble gorges and the spectacular Dhuandhar Falls at Bhedaghat.

Since a substantial part of the film had been shot in and around Jabalpur itself, it was chosen to inaugurate the new theatre at Ranjhi.

For local audiences, seeing their own city on the silver screen while experiencing a brand-new cinema hall was an occasion of genuine celebration.

One morning show at Navneet Talkies was reserved exclusively for the students at Government Engineering College-and admission was entirely free.

Watching a film together in such circumstances was an experience altogether different from today's world of personal screens and multiplexes.

There is something uniquely memorable about a shared experience.

That morning, not only my closest friends but virtually the entire Engineering College sat together beneath the same roof. Away from the discipline of classrooms, surrounded by our entire batch, watching a film without buying a ticket-it felt like a college adventure in the truest sense.

Experiences like these never remain merely memories of a film.

They become stories that friends continue to recount with affection throughout their lives.

Today people watch films alone on mobile phones, wearing earphones that shut out the world around them. Entertainment survives, certainly.

But the joy of shared experience has quietly faded away.

That special screening at Navneet Talkies, arranged solely for the students of G.E.C. Jabalpur, was one such unforgettable occasion.

To children growing up in today's digital age, it would probably sound like a story from another world.

By the closing years of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, cable television and CDs and DVDs had entered almost every household. The golden era of the single-screen theatre slowly began to fade. As audiences dwindled, maintaining these grand old cinema halls became increasingly uneconomical.

There was a time when Jabalpur boasted more than twenty cinema theatres.

One after another, they disappeared.

Navneet Talkies was among them.

Today it survives only in memory.

The old building has since been demolished, and the site has almost certainly been transformed into commercial or residential property. Yet many older residents of Jabalpur continue to identify that neighbourhood by saying simply,

"Near Navneet Talkies."

Sometimes a place vanishes from the landscape long before it disappears from memory.

□

One particularly bitter memory is also associated with Navneet Talkies.

Among those of us who were students at the Engineering College at the time, it is remembered simply as the 'Karondi Incident'.

Karondi was a small village situated immediately behind our college hostel campus. Beyond the hostel boundary wall stretched a patch of open ground-uneven, partly rocky, partly covered with scrub and wild grass. Beyond that lay the village itself, a cluster of modest houses, some built of brick, others of mud. From the rear windows of several hostel rooms, this open land was clearly visible.

The villagers alleged that whenever the women and young girls of Karondi came to this open ground to relieve themselves, some hostel students teased or harassed them.

How much truth there was in this allegation-or whether it was entirely unfounded-I cannot say, nor would I wish to speculate.

What is certain is that the issue had assumed serious proportions.

As a result, students encountered in the Ranjhi market or sitting in local restaurants increasingly found themselves confronted by angry villagers. Without making any attempt to identify the actual offenders, they often picked quarrels with any Engineering College student they happened to encounter, and these arguments frequently escalated into physical assaults.

When such incidents became more frequent, the student leaders decided that the entire student body would march together through the Ranjhi market and on towards Karondi village on a predetermined day and at a fixed time.

The idea was to demonstrate unity and strength.

There would be speeches, stern warnings to the villagers, and perhaps a little shouting and intimidation to impress upon them that Engineering College students could not be bullied with impunity.

On the appointed day, a massive procession of hostel residents and day scholars set out together towards Ranjhi.

The atmosphere was almost festive.

Students walked in groups, laughing, chatting, and exchanging jokes. Those at the front raised spirited slogans. A few hostel boys carried the wooden or iron poles normally used to support mosquito nets.

No one had the faintest idea of what awaited us.

Ranjhi was not far from the college.

Even at a leisurely pace, we reached it within ten or fifteen minutes.

According to the programme, a public meeting was first to be held inside the spacious compound of Navneet Talkies.

Its gates stood open.

Students streamed through them and gradually filled the large open courtyard.

As I recall, a pathway from behind the cinema also led towards Karondi village.

The meeting had scarcely begun when everything changed.

From the rear approach-or perhaps from places where they had been lying concealed beforehand-the villagers suddenly emerged.

Many carried sticks or whatever objects they could use as weapons.

Without warning, they launched a full-scale assault.

The Engineering College students had expected nothing of the sort.

The attack was so sudden and so completely unforeseen that panic swept instantly through the gathering.

We had assembled only to demonstrate solidarity and establish our collective presence.

No one had come expecting an actual battle.

Nor were we equipped to defend ourselves.

There was only one possible response.

Run.

Leave the place as quickly as possible.

Hundreds of students rushed towards the main gate of Navneet Talkies.

Then came another shock.

Both gates had already been shut.

Inside the compound stood policemen equipped with riot-control gear.

Only then did many of us realise something we had failed to notice earlier.

As our procession had entered the cinema compound, those policemen had been standing in formation outside the Ranjhi Police Station across the road. Their presence had seemed merely a routine administrative precaution, and neither the student leaders nor the rest of us had paid it much attention.

Now we found ourselves trapped.

Those students who had remained outside escaped immediately after sensing the danger.

But the three or four hundred who had entered the compound were effectively imprisoned.

The situation turned desperate.

Cries echoed everywhere.

Students ran blindly in every direction.

Some stumbled.

Others slipped and fell.

Many lay groaning in pain.

The beating continued mercilessly.

A few managed to climb over the boundary wall with the help of friends.

I too ran frantically from one side of the compound to the other, searching for some means of escape.

Then someone discovered a large breach in the boundary wall.

Immediately students began squeezing through the opening.

I ran towards it.

One boy was halfway through the gap when a stick struck him violently from behind.

The blow hurled him completely through to the other side.

Two or three others were preparing to climb over.

I reached them, thrust myself into the opening, and slid through the breach as quickly as I could.

Beyond the wall ran a drainage channel thick with mud.

Students landed heavily in the sludge as they jumped down.

Four or five of us somehow gathered together and struggled through the marshy drain, taking a long detour in order to avoid the main road.

Eventually we reached the swampy edge of the reservoir belonging to the water-treatment plant situated beside the police station.

Many other students were already making their way through the same stretch of sticky mud, slipping, stumbling, and helping one another forward.

It felt as though we had entered an entirely different world-a world governed not by reason but by fear.

Only one thought occupied every mind:

Get away.

As far away from here as possible.

As best as I can remember, we supported one another all the way.

At times we held each other upright.

At other moments we leaned upon whoever happened to be nearest.

Our clothes and our bodies became coated with wet clay.

The back of one student's shirt tore away completely when another, trying to steady himself, clutched at it. Both fell into the mud before the rest of us helped them back to their feet.

Eventually, exhausted and covered in muck, we reached the lake behind the college.

Even then we feared being seen.

So instead of taking the direct route, we made an even wider detour and finally arrived at the bicycle stand.

Akhilesh, Deepak Gupta, and, if memory serves me correctly, Deepak Srivastava were with me.

By then the mud covering our clothes had begun to dry.

Without saying much, we collected our bicycles.

Then, through Gate Number Two, we quietly rode home.

□

By evening, fragments of news-some reliable, others little more than rumour-began to circulate.

We learned that many students had been arrested by the police. Quite a few had sustained injuries, and one or two had been seriously hurt.

All the injured students had been admitted to the Victoria District Hospital. Since there were not enough beds, mattresses had been spread across the floor, where doctors and nurses dressed their wounds as best they could.

That evening we gathered at Akhilesh's house and then went together to the hospital.

The students who had suffered serious injuries had been placed in separate wards. Those whose injuries were less severe lay on mattresses spread across the floor. Some had even been accommodated in the verandas outside. A few of the injured day scholars had their families with them.

It was not a scene one remembers with any pleasure.

Cries of pain echoed through the corridors. Voices rose in anger. Students bitterly blamed the college administration, and, as one might expect from young men still shaken by fear and pain, the air was heavy with resentment, harsh words, and profanities.

Later that evening, the principal arrived with several senior professors and lecturers to visit the injured students.

Some of the more agitated boys greeted them with slogans and angry accusations.

After remaining there for a while, we quietly returned home.

For several days afterwards, the newspapers carried sensational accounts of the incident, each version embellished a little more than the last.

If memory serves me correctly, the college itself remained closed for some time.

For many months afterwards, students avoided going to the Ranjhi market or anywhere in that part of the town.

How the administration ultimately handled the entire affair, I neither tried to discover nor was I in any state of mind to investigate.

Why?

That is another story.

I shall come to it later in this very chapter.



It often happens-perhaps *often* is too small and inadequate a word-that we weave for ourselves a delicate, almost transparent fabric of expectations, believing that the sunlight of tomorrow will gently filter through it.

Yet time has a strange and often merciless way of moving.

Without warning, everything changes.

Sometimes it changes so completely that nothing standing before us bears even the faintest resemblance to what we had imagined. No familiar colour remains. No recognisable shape. Not even the lingering scent of what once seemed certain.

It is as though one were suddenly put off at a railway station whose name had never appeared on the timetable.

At such moments an extraordinary silence descends within us-a silence that goes beyond surprise and leaves us standing in an empty, desolate landscape.

There is little left to do except look down at one's own hands and wonder at what unknown turning the lines upon one's palms lost their way.

People are fond of saying, "Accept what has happened."

But acceptance is never so simple.

It is not something one can purchase in a marketplace and drape over oneself like a garment.

It demands a long, exhausting struggle-a battle fought not against the world, but against that part of us which still refuses to leave yesterday behind.

To kill one's own desires.

How cruel that expression is.

It feels like quietly burying a living part of oneself, and then setting out upon an unfamiliar, thorn-strewn road while pretending one has always belonged there.

The effort to adapt is enough to weary the spine itself.

And then begins the mourning for all that never came to be.

It is a peculiar kind of grief.

There is no final farewell.

No immersion.

No ritual of release.

It settles upon one's shoulders like an invisible bundle whose weight never quite disappears.

One continues to walk, to drink tea, to laugh with friends, to carry on with ordinary life.

Yet somewhere beneath it all, the burden remains, quietly reminding us of its presence.

There is another companion in such loneliness.

It lingers in some hidden corner of the mind like an obstinate mist-a map of endless imaginary possibilities.

If only that had happened...

If only life had turned differently...

If only I had not arrived at that particular crossroads...

It is a map of places that never truly existed.

And yet we spend years searching for roads that were never built.

That labyrinth of imagined alternatives inflicts its own peculiar pain-subtle, persistent, almost invisible.

The eyes may be fixed upon the reality of the present, yet the heart continues to stare at an impossible *if* buried somewhere in the past.

And when the event that altered the course of one's life was no trivial disappointment but a decisive turning point-an unfinished love, an abandoned vocation, the loss of someone irreplaceable-its ache becomes like an old wound.

It returns unexpectedly with the changing seasons, at dusk, or while waiting for a train at some forgotten station.

Thereafter it walks beside us for the rest of our lives.

Like a shadow.

Not one cast by sunlight - but one that is seen most clearly in the darkness within us.

□

Something very much like that happened to me on “8 August 1973”.

I had successfully passed my First-Year examinations.

Not a single subject remained uncleared.

As a result, I was promoted to the Second Year, Section ‘A’, which consisted of students who had passed every subject or, at most, had failed in only one paper.

How that first year had slipped by, I never quite knew.

Life was moving forward with effortless ease.

Everything appeared orderly, balanced, and undisturbed.

Then, without warning, fate led me to a turning I had never imagined.

That afternoon, during the lunch break, Akhilesh, Bhanu, Kaushal, Deepak, and I were returning from the little tea stall near Gate No. 2 -the place everyone grandly referred to as the "canteen."

On the way, one of our classmates stopped me.

"Anil," he said, "you've been rusticated from the college."

I stared at him in disbelief.

What on earth was he talking about?

For a moment I could not make sense of his words.

All I managed to say was,

"What?"

"Go and look," he replied. "There's a list on the notice board."

We hurried there.

It was true.

Six or perhaps eight names had been posted.

Mine was among them.

According to the notice, we had all been expelled from the college for failing to pay our fees.

But I *had* paid my fees.

And I had paid them well before the deadline.

How could this possibly have happened?

The next lecture was about to begin.

I told my friends to attend the class while I went into the administrative office.

There I approached the clerk responsible for fee records and asked him about the matter.

His reply was blunt.

"You never paid your fees."

"I did," I insisted. "I paid them a long time ago."

He looked at me without the slightest trace of sympathy.

"Then show me the receipt."

I was so shaken that I made my decision almost instinctively.

I rushed to the bicycle stand, mounted my bicycle, and rode home as fast as I could.

I needed the receipt.

Nothing else mattered.

When I reached home, Bai was startled to see me return in such haste. She asked what had happened.

I explained everything in a few hurried sentences, found the receipt, and immediately set off again for the college.

Our house lay about six kilometres away.

In my anxiety I covered those twelve kilometres-the journey there and back-as quickly as I possibly could.

I found myself standing once again before the same clerk.

I handed him the receipt showing that my fees had indeed been paid.

He turned it over carefully, examining it from both sides, almost as though it were some curious object that had unexpectedly appeared before him.

Then, without saying a word, he looked up at me and nodded, silently acknowledging that I was right.

He pulled towards himself a large ledger.

Opening it, he began searching through the handwritten register in which the names of students who had paid their fees had been entered over several pages in blue ink.

After checking the entire list, he looked at me and said,

"Your name isn't here."

I drew the register towards myself.

In my anxiety I hurried through the pages.

My name seemed to be nowhere.

"When I have paid the fees," I asked, "why isn't my name in this register?"

He replied, but I scarcely heard what he said.

My mind had already begun racing ahead.

- What is going to happen now?

I started searching the register again, this time slowly and carefully.

On the second page I found it.

My name was there.

I pointed it out.

The clerk looked at it, displayed the most casual surprise imaginable, and said,

"Oh. . . yes. Strange. How did I miss that?"

How could I possibly explain to him why he had missed it?

He glanced once more at the entry and then offered a remarkably absurd explanation in his own defence.

"The 'L' in Lakhera looks rather like a 'C' in cursive writing. I was checking in a hurry, so I overlooked it."

The register had been arranged alphabetically by surname, followed by the first and middle names.

Mine appeared as Lakhera' Anil Kumar.

The cursive capital **L** had indeed been written in such a way that it resembled the letter 'C'.

While scanning the list, he had failed to find any surname beginning with 'L', concluded that I had never paid my fees, and accordingly included my name among the defaulters.

Acting upon the instructions of the college administration, he submitted that list.

The principal signed the order.

It was pinned to the notice board.

And by virtue of that single document, I had been rusticated from the college.

□

"What should I do now?" I asked.

"There isn't anything I can do," he replied matter-of-factly. "You should meet Mr. N. L. Jain. He's acting as Principal at the moment. He'll issue another order. You'll be admitted to Section 'D'."

"Section 'D'?" I stared at him.

"Why Section 'D'? I'm already in Section 'A'."

He smiled, almost indulgently, as though explaining something perfectly obvious.

"At the moment," he said, "according to the official order, you've been rusticated. Since you'll now be admitted again, your admission will naturally be in Section 'D'."

- *For a moment everything before my eyes dissolved into confusion.*

  Red, yellow, and blue flashes seemed to dance before me.

  Dark shadows drifted across my vision.

  A shrill ringing filled my ears.

"Please..." I said almost helplessly. "None of this is my fault."

He answered with complete finality.

"I can't do anything. How can I alter the principal's order? Meet Mr. N. L. Jain. If he wishes, he may allow you back into Section A."

□

“Life is full of extraordinary ironies”.

It is astonishing how the very same event can unfold as two entirely different realities for two different people.

For me, that moment was about to alter the whole landscape of my life.

For the clerk, it was little more than an ordinary office error-a trivial mistake, the sort of thing that happens every day.

He could not possibly imagine what that "correction" would eventually cost me.

Nor could he foresee that it would quietly divert my future into an altogether different course.

Life is perhaps the strangest bundle of contradictions one can imagine.

We believe that we inhabit the same world.

In truth, each of us lives imprisoned within a world of our own.

There is something profoundly unsettling in the realization that a single event, occurring at precisely the same instant, can produce two entirely different echoes in two different human beings.

Between those echoes there may exist no bridge at all.

That damp, dimly lit office on that ordinary afternoon was, for me, the place where my familiar world was about to come apart.

My surroundings, my aspirations, and everything I had quietly begun to believe about my future stood on the verge of irreversible change.

For the clerk sitting behind his small desk, however, it was simply another tedious interruption in an uneventful working day.

To him, the order was merely another sheet of paper-one among hundreds that passed through his hands.

A routine human error.

Something that Mr. N. L. Jain could correct with a signature or perhaps even a brief verbal instruction.

He may well have glanced at the clock afterwards, sighed wearily, and wondered when he would have his afternoon tea.

But that seemingly simple correction-that so-called rectification-was about to open the door to years of hardship, humiliation, and uncertainty for me.

How could anyone else have known?

How could anyone else have understood?

To an outsider, another person's ruined future is often no more than a statistic.

The kingdom collapsing inside me made no sound audible above the rustle of office files and the monotonous drone of the ceiling fan.

That "correction" would quietly shift the entire course of my life into a dimension I had never imagined-a future in which I did not even know whether I would still recognise the person I was destined to become.

The deepest irony was that, in that silent office, no one but I could sense the terrible emptiness opening before me.

There were only files.

The slow turning of the fan.

And I stood there alone-

facing the ruins of my own future.

□

Perhaps, at this moment, no one-not even you, the reader-can fully understand the pain concealed within what appears to be such a simple administrative mistake.

You may well be wondering:

-The college remained the same.

-The course remained the same.

-The teachers remained the same.

Then what difference could it possibly make?

The answer lies elsewhere.

It lies in a dream I had quietly cherished.

In a plan I had patiently built for my future.

Only when I tell you about that dream will the true meaning of this seemingly ordinary incident become clear.

It scarcely needs repeating here that I had been drawing ever since childhood.

Craftsmanship came naturally to me, and many people had often advised me that I ought to study Architecture. They believed my gift for drawing would find its fullest expression in that profession.

Perhaps it was during those years that, almost without my realizing it, the desire to become an architect quietly took root within me.

There was, however, one obstacle.

At that time, Government Engineering College, Jabalpur, did not offer a course in Architecture.

To the best of my knowledge, it was available only at "M.A.C.T., Bhopal".

Long before all this had happened, I had made careful enquiries. If I could pass my Second Year with sufficiently high marks, I would become eligible for admission to the First Year of Architecture at M.A.C.T., where I could finally pursue the dream that had silently accompanied me for so long.

Then, in a single stroke, that dream seemed to fall apart.

Naturally, one may wonder what my transfer to "Section D" had to do with such a dream.

As I have mentioned earlier, Section D was regarded as the section where students who had carried over several failed papers were placed. Alongside them were repeaters who had remained in the same year for two, three, or sometimes even more years. Many among them appeared less interested in academics than in extending their college life, cultivating a reputation for intimidation, or immersing themselves in student politics.

Academic work in that section existed more in theory than in practice.

Regular classes were infrequent, and the atmosphere bore little resemblance to that of the other sections.

Most importantly, all my close friends-the ones who genuinely studied-would remain in the other sections, while I would find myself completely separated from them.

Even the pace of instruction in Section D usually lagged behind the rest.

I knew all this only too well.

It was therefore perfectly natural for a disturbing question to arise in my mind.

Could I continue to study with the same discipline in such an environment?

And if I could not, would my dream of going to Bhopal to study Architecture come to an end before it had even truly begun?



That, however, belonged to the future-or rather, to an anxiety about the future.

What happened that very day deserves to be told separately, for it was not merely a day of disappointment. It was a day that left me shaken to the core.

Leaving the administrative office, I went directly to the principal's room.

There I learned that Mr. N. L. Jain, who was officiating as Principal, was still in his office in the Mechanical Engineering Department, where he served as Head of the Department. I was told that he would come to the principal's office a little later.

I hurried to the Mechanical Department.

Even there I failed to meet him.

Someone advised me to wait outside the principal's room instead.

So, I returned and sat down on a wooden bench outside his office.

By then it was around half past four in the afternoon.

After some time he arrived.

I sent in a slip requesting an interview.

A few minutes later I was called inside.

I explained everything in detail and placed before him the receipt proving that I had paid my fees on time.

He listened patiently.

But his answer was no different from the one I had already received from the clerk.

My admission, he said, would certainly be restored.

However, I would have to join Second Year, Section D.

I pleaded with him.

I tried to explain that I would not be able to study in the atmosphere that prevailed there.

Calmly, he replied,

"Whether you study or not is entirely up to you."

For a moment I found myself speechless.

How could I explain that the issue was not my willingness to study?

The real question was whether one could continue studying in isolation, surrounded by an environment where academic seriousness itself seemed almost absent.

It struck me that if I attempted to explain any further, I would probably receive nothing more than another well-meaning lecture.

I appealed once again.

"If possible, Sir, please allow me to remain in Section A."

He gently dismissed the request.

"No section can accommodate more than fifty students. The roll lists have already been finalised. No further changes are possible."

After a brief pause, he added,

"Besides, I am only holding charge as Principal. If you wish, you may meet Mr. Khanna. He went on leave today. The rustication order was issued under his authority. If he wants, he can amend it. I cannot alter an order issued by him."

Then, almost as an afterthought, he said,

"You may still find him at his bungalow."

The moment he uttered those words, it seemed as though, behind a door that had almost completely closed, a tiny window had suddenly opened somewhere far away.

The hope it offered was exceedingly faint.

Yet at that moment it was the only hope I had left.

□

"A drowning man catches at a straw."

The Principal, Mr. R. K. Khanna, lived in a bungalow not far from the college.

I almost ran there.

The security guard at the gate agreed to carry my request inside. I asked him to tell the principal that I wished to see him on a matter of utmost urgency.

The answer came back almost immediately.

Mr. Khanna would not see me.

I pleaded with the guard.

He could only shake his head helplessly.

What else could he do when the refusal had come from the principal himself?

There was nothing left for me but to turn away.

Defeated, I slowly walked back.

By then it was nearly five o'clock.

Both the college and its offices had closed.

The entire campus lay deserted.

That evening it seemed less like a college than the ruins of my own hopes.

My future appeared to be dissolving into an immense silence, and there was nothing I could do to prevent it.

Just then I noticed one of the senior professors from the Electrical Engineering Department walking towards his scooter at the bicycle stand.

For reasons I cannot fully explain, a faint flicker of hope stirred within me.

I hurried after him.

Almost running, I caught up with him.

He looked at me but did not stop.

I continued walking beside him, struggling to keep pace, and breathlessly poured out the whole story.

It seemed to me that he listened patiently.

Yet he said nothing.

By then we had reached his scooter.

He wheeled it off its stand, gave it a kick, and mounted it.

Before riding away, he looked at me once-long and searchingly.

Then he started the engine and drove off.

Not a single word passed his lips.

In that moment, I felt that, if nothing else, he might at least have offered me a few words of sympathy.

Instead, there was only silence.

Looking back now, I sometimes feel that those were strangely unforgiving days.

Wherever I turned, disappointment seemed to be waiting for me.

Perhaps it was then, for the first time in my life, that I discovered how indifferent time itself can appear when one is standing at the edge of despair.

There was nothing left for me to do except return home.

With heavy steps I walked back to my bicycle.

I knew that Akhilesh had probably taken my notebooks home with him, but at that moment I could not bring myself to care. When it seems that one's entire world is collapsing, the fate of a few notebooks becomes insignificant.

By the time I reached home, Babuji had returned from the factory.

I told him everything in detail.

The moment he heard what had happened, he changed his clothes without a word and asked me to accompany him. Together we set off once again for Mr. R. K. Khanna's bungalow.

The same security guard was still on duty.

This time, seeing Babuji with me, he carried our request inside once more.

We were invited in.

Mr. Khanna was seated comfortably in a cane chair.

Two or three other chairs stood empty nearby, yet he did not ask Babuji to sit down.

That small omission wounded me more deeply than I could express, but there was nothing to do except remain silent.

Babuji worked in an Ordnance Factory, where military discipline governed everyday life.

The moment we entered, he stood erect and saluted Mr. Khanna with impeccable formality.

Even today, whenever that image returns to my mind, something within me grows unbearably tender.

Babuji's salute was not merely an official gesture.

It carried hope.

It carried faith.

There was the humility of a father pleading for his son, and in his eyes I could see the quiet desperation of a man who had come believing that justice would surely prevail.

Mr. Khanna asked why we had come.

I explained everything once again, placing before him the receipt proving that my fees had been paid.

He took the receipt, glanced at it briefly, handed it back, and said in a detached voice,

"I am on leave from today. I can do nothing about this now."

Almost in tears, I tried once more to explain my helplessness.

He responded only by explaining his own administrative helplessness.

Babuji saluted him again.

Then, with folded humility, he pleaded with him once more.

But nothing moved Mr. Khanna.

Instead of offering even the faintest assurance, he simply repeated,

"I cannot do anything."

There was nothing left to say.

Defeated, Babuji and I turned back.

We walked home in silence.

□

By then everyone at home knew what had happened.

A deep sadness had settled over the house.

An unusual silence filled every room.

Each member of the family tried, unsuccessfully, to occupy themselves with ordinary chores, as though routine alone might lessen the weight of the day.

Night gradually descended.

Our little house consisted of barely two and a half rooms.

Every evening we spread our bedding on the floor before going to sleep.

That night my own cot was laid out as usual.

It was the rainy season.

From time-to-time rain fell outside, and I could not help feeling that it was falling upon my dreams as well.

Neither Bai nor Babuji seemed able to sleep.

As for me, I did not sleep at all.

Perhaps it was the first completely sleepless night of my life.

I lay awake until morning.

Again and again, I tried to reason with myself.

Joining Section D is not the end of life.

I shall work harder.

What if I have to make a greater effort than others?

Hard work had never frightened me before.

Why should it frighten me now?

If this is the test God has chosen for me, then let Him test me.

I shall not lose courage.

Akhilesh and Kaushal are still there.

Their notes will help me.

If necessary, I shall approach the professors myself and seek their guidance.

All through the night I continued making plans like these.

I kept trying to steady my own heart.

I knew that circumstances had changed.

Now I would have to change with them.

And so the whole night passed in that silent struggle between despair and resolve.

Morning finally arrived.

By then I had regained at least a measure of composure.

I ate breakfast and left for college at the usual time.

For reasons I cannot fully explain, I left a little earlier than usual and went alone that day.

I simply did not have the courage to walk beside my friends.

I wondered how I would look them in the eye-

especially when none of this had been my fault.

As I write these lines today, I am reminded of a talk by 'Osho' that I happened to hear only last night.

He argued that there is no such thing as fate; it is our own choices that eventually bring us to circumstances that may turn against us.

To illustrate his point, he spoke of Karna and explained, with striking logic, how Karna's own decisions ultimately led him towards his tragic end.

Throughout his life, Karna believed that destiny had treated him unjustly.

As I think back upon my own experience, I cannot help asking myself:

What decision of mine had brought me to this point?

Which choice had placed me before such an ordeal?

Perhaps a philosopher or a psychologist could discover some hidden logic within it.

But what else could an anxious, inexperienced teenager like me have believed except that fate itself had devised some inscrutable trick against him?

Be that as it may, I found myself once again wandering through the long corridor of the Administrative Building.

Aimlessly.

Restlessly.

The same dark thoughts continued to circle through my mind.

At around half past eleven, Mr. N. L. Jain entered the principal's office.

Once again, I sent in my slip requesting an interview.

A little later I was called inside.

He looked at me with a long, searching gaze.

He was signing some official papers.

Before I could utter a single word, he said,

"I've already signed your readmission order."

"Now go and attend your classes in Section D."

Once more I tried to plead with him.

This time, however, he seemed slightly irritated.

In a tone that was noticeably sharper, he said,

"Go and meet the Vice-Chancellor. He's the only one who can do anything now."

I understood immediately.

There was no hope left here.

I would have to walk the road I had never chosen-

the one that destiny, or circumstance, had quietly chosen for me.

For a fleeting moment I considered going to the University.

Almost at once I dismissed the thought.

If nothing could be done within the college itself, what hope was there elsewhere?

It would be wiser to accept the inevitable.

To join Section D.

To study there with complete dedication.

To do whatever lay within my own power.

With that resolve slowly taking shape within me, I returned home.

Inwardly, I had already accepted that the battle before me could no longer be avoided.

The following day, I would step onto that new and unwanted path.

□

The following morning, apart from the turmoil within me, everything outside seemed astonishingly normal-so normal that it was as if nothing had happened.

There was a quiet, weary sense of relief on Bai's and Babuji's faces. At least my readmission had been secured. As always, they left for their respective workplaces-Bai to her school and Babuji to the factory. My aunt had packed my lunchbox amid the familiar sounds of the kitchen, just as she did every day.

As for me, I had already arrived at a cold, silent resolve. I had to continue my studies. Whatever lay ahead, however difficult, I would have to endure it without complaint.

Section D held its classes on the first floor of the Administrative Building.

Making my way through the damp-smelling staircase and asking for directions more than once, I finally reached the classroom.

It was a large, melancholy room, occupied by no more than ten or twelve students.

Without attracting attention, I walked to one of the front benches and quietly took my seat.

When the lecture began, it did not take long for me to realise that even the teaching here followed the peculiar, sluggish rhythm of Section D.

It seemed as though the lecturers themselves had long accepted that little more than a token formality was expected in this classroom.

Something inside me quietly gave way.

The students listened with an air of complete indifference, while the lecturer, standing behind the podium, appeared to be discharging his duty with much the same weary detachment.

I scribbled a few disjointed notes into my notebook, drew a long, cold breath, and resigned myself to that dusty silence.

One period followed another.

Gradually a few faces came close to my solitude.

In truth, they came to me.

They asked my name, and one or two of them spoke with a sympathy that resembled condolences offered at a funeral.

In the course of conversation, they gently warned me that studies in Section D moved only by fits and starts-if they moved at all.

They casually mentioned a few names, students who had spent years repeating the same class.

Repeaters.

According to them, those senior students came to college only on the days they intended to organise what everyone called a *General Go.*

A *General Go* was an unofficial holiday imposed through intimidation rather than declared on any academic calendar.

Whenever the college announced a two- or three-day vacation, these self-appointed leaders would, by little more than threats and coercion, stretch it into an entire week-or sometimes ten or twelve days-during which the classrooms stood deserted.

The administration seemed almost unaffected by it.

Perhaps it had long ceased to expect otherwise.

The professors came as required, glanced at rows of empty desks, and quietly returned to their departments.

Even when a test had been scheduled, some students from Section D would ensure beforehand that the entire period was boycotted.

Within barely eight or ten days, I could feel my confidence slowly draining away.

But what could I possibly do?

How could I, alone, confront those repeaters who had virtually occupied the college for years, together with the unruly boys who followed in their footsteps?

Amid that atmosphere of uncertainty, whatever little education was still available seemed like a broken fragment.

I gathered it carefully into my hands, grateful even for that.



I tried my utmost to bring my studies back on course with the help of Akhilesh's notes.

Yet every passing day made that effort seem more futile.

By the time his Section A had completed a chapter, ours in Section D had not even begun it.

His notebooks lay open before me like a glimpse of a future that receded farther away each day.

Our classes moved with a rhythm that can scarcely be called movement.

It was stagnation.

Cancelled lectures had become an ordinary part of life.

Sometimes the lecturer never arrived.

Sometimes he came only to leave a few minutes later.

On several occasions I found myself sitting alone in the entire classroom.

The lecturer would enter, pause briefly upon seeing me as the sole student, and then begin teaching.

At such moments I felt grateful.

At least that one hour had been saved.

Yet even this small blessing carried its own price.

Some students resented the fact that, because of me, the class had not been cancelled.

I listened to their threats in silence.

There were days when the simple desire to study began to feel like an offence.

Gradually the classroom ceased to resemble an institution of learning.

It became something closer to an arena where rules no longer possessed any authority.

Some students would casually rise from their seats and walk out in full view of the lecturer, as though his presence-or absence-made no difference whatsoever.

One incident remains etched in my memory with astonishing clarity.

The lecturer was teaching as usual.

Without warning, one student rose from his seat and leapt through the classroom window.

A heavy thud echoed from below.

For a brief instant the entire class froze.

The lecturer hurried outside.

The boy had already picked himself up and was calmly walking away without once looking back.

The lecturer watched him for a few moments, returned to the classroom without uttering a word, and resumed the lecture exactly where he had left off, as though nothing at all had happened.

That was perhaps the first time I realised that there are defeats so complete that the only thing left is to accept them.

From time to time a senior professor would visit our classroom.

With genuine sadness he would plead with the students not to destroy their own future.

His words invariably struck the walls and returned unanswered.

Not a single face changed.

Eventually, even those who wished to persuade us abandoned the effort.

Life continued in that atmosphere until the festival of Dussehra approached.

A few domineering students-self-styled leaders of Section D-circulated a sheet of paper and collected everyone's signatures.

The decision had already been made.

From Dussehra until after Diwali, no one would attend college.

No lectures.

No practical classes.

No concern for attendance.

No one possessed the courage to oppose them.

I signed the paper as well.

Sometimes one does not sign out of agreement.

One merely signs one's own helplessness.

The situation had deteriorated to such an extent that even our practical sessions were no longer being conducted regularly.

Compared with the other sections, we had fallen hopelessly behind.

And whenever my thoughts drifted towards Section A-the place where I truly belonged-a quiet ache rose within me that words cannot adequately describe.

It seemed as though we had not merely lost a few lessons.

We had lost an entire year.

It felt as though recovering that distance would require not one year but perhaps two or three.

By the end of the academic session, the figures themselves told the story.

While Section E had attended well over one hundred and fifty mathematics lectures, our Section D had managed only eighteen.

English had been taught for a total of six periods throughout the entire year.

Nearly every subject presented the same dismal picture.

Today these facts sound almost unbelievable.

Even I sometimes find them difficult to believe.

Yet memory possesses a truth of its own.

It neither exaggerates nor diminishes.

It simply remembers.

□

During those days, I lived with a strange, unspoken pain deep within me. It often seemed as though I was watching my own future slowly slip through my fingers while remaining utterly powerless to hold on to it. At times, I even felt sorry for myself. My mind kept asking, *why is this happening? And if it must happen, why to me?*

I had no answer then.

I have none even today.

There is, however, one thing I can say with certainty. Amid all those contradictions and cruel ironies, I never stopped studying. I did whatever little I could. Perhaps this is the greatest act of resistance available to a human being-to keep the small lamp within oneself burning even while everything around it is collapsing.

That was all I could do.

□

Whenever a class was cancelled, I never knew where the other students disappeared. I simply wandered about the campus without purpose, without destination. Sometimes I would sit alone on a bench, open a book, and try to read-but my mind refused to settle. Those were truly difficult days.

Every morning I left home with Akhilesh and the others. Whether classes would actually be held was always uncertain. If they were, at least part of the day acquired some structure. If not, I was left once again to drift through the same corridors and pathways, aimlessly retracing familiar routes.

One day, Vishwas Bhave noticed me. He had been my friend since our days at Model High School.

"I've been watching you for several days," he said. "You keep wandering around."

Then he added, "I know there's no certainty about classes in Section D."

Without another word, he placed the key to his hostel room in my palm.

"Go there whenever you feel like it."

And thus began a new routine.

Each morning after reaching college, he would hand me the key. If our classes were cancelled, I would spend the day in his room. There were books there-books we never carried ourselves, since we came to college with little more than our notebooks. Surrounded by those books, I tried to study. Sometimes I actually managed to.

I doubt I shall ever be able to repay Vishwas Bhave for that simple act of kindness. He understood my suffering without my ever having to explain it. Without being asked, he stepped forward and quietly gave me something I desperately needed-a place where I could belong, if only for a few hours.

Another friend, Shaligram Agrawal, did something equally generous.

He too had been part of our circle since our Model High School days. One of his cousins, employed with the Military Engineering Services (MES), lived alone in a house at Ranjhi, and Shaligram kept a spare key.

"Take it whenever you need it," he told me.

The first time he accompanied me there himself and showed me the house. Afterwards, whenever college remained virtually closed for long stretches because of cancelled classes, I would spend the day there in quiet solitude.

At home, no one knew anything.

Nor did I want them to worry.

So, I continued leaving for college every morning and returning at the usual hour, while carrying within me a struggle no one could see.

Gradually, I surrendered myself to the current of time.

I would not call it acceptance.

But I certainly grew accustomed to living within altered circumstances.



The year slowly drew to its close.

By the time February arrived, the atmosphere in the other sections of the college had changed completely. Everyone was anxious to finish the syllabus and, if time permitted, begin revision.

Section D, however, seemed to exist outside the normal flow of academic life.

No one appeared to be in any hurry to complete the course. Revision was a luxury beyond imagination-something the very atmosphere of our classroom seemed incapable of accommodating.

Among us were also a few transfer-course students.

They carried hesitant faces and uncertain hopes when they joined our class.

But what could they possibly do?

Their eyes revealed a silent helplessness that spoke more eloquently than words.

Our studies somehow continued-jerking and lurching forward like an old bullock cart on a broken road.

There was no real momentum.

Only interruptions.

Only jolts.

Then one afternoon, when the sunlight filtering through the windows itself seemed strangely weary, the self-appointed strongmen who had virtually taken control of Section D made another announcement.

Without consulting anyone, they declared the beginning of *Preparation Leave.*

It was an utterly unreal decision.

The college administration had not even hinted at the official preparatory holidays before the annual examinations.

Yet the moment those boys announced it; an extraordinary silence settled over the classroom-a silence that instantly rendered every official rule meaningless.

We dispersed to prepare for examinations without having completed the syllabus.

Since this was the academic session of 1973–74, attendance regulations were perhaps not as strict as they would later become.



The annual examinations, however, still had to be conducted according to university regulations.

Our self-styled leaders could exercise no authority there.

Had it been, otherwise, they would probably have set the question papers themselves-and marked them as well.

There was, however, one thing they occasionally managed to control.

They could force an examination to be postponed.

Their method was astonishingly simple.

They would throw heavy iron chains across the electrical supply lines feeding the hostel.

The power would fail.

Then, throughout the night, they ensured that electricity was not restored.

The following morning, they would gather outside the principal's office and argue that since the hostel had remained without electricity all night, the students had been unable to study, and the examination should therefore be postponed.

Remarkably, their demand was often accepted.

That year, however, nothing of the sort happened.

Every Second-Year examination was conducted according to schedule.

I studied with every ounce of effort I could summon.

Whenever I encountered difficulties, I approached several lecturers and professors personally, requesting their guidance.

I also sought help from exceptionally gifted classmates like Sharat Jethi, who invariably stood first in the class.

Yet the examination results delivered precisely the blow whose seed had been planted on 8 August 1973.

Fate seemed determined to unfold the script it had written for me long before I became aware of it.

Everything unfolded upon the stage of my life exactly as though it had already been rehearsed.

I received compartmental results in Mathematics Paper II and English Paper.

Every other subject I cleared comfortably.

After all these years, what explanation can I possibly offer for those two papers?

I have already told the whole story.

What happened was no longer unexpected.

□

What had happened was not merely an incident.

It was the first great compromise my heart was compelled to make-a moment when dreams and destiny confronted one another for the first time. It is a memory that deserves to be explored less through outward events than through inward experience, through the mist of recollection and the eloquence of silence. Perhaps that is the only way either you or I can hope to find our bearings within the bewildering labyrinths life so often forces us to enter.

That year, life taught me for the first time that defeat does not always arrive with noise and spectacle.

Sometimes it comes quietly, sits down beside us without a word, and only much later do we realise that the road we believed we were travelling had long since disappeared beneath our feet.

It was the first-and the last-time in my life that I received such an examination result.

When I held the mark sheet in my hands, the first emotion that arose within me was not despair but a strange and lingering regret.

Again, and again the same thought returned:

Had I studied just a little harder... had I remained awake for a few more nights. . . had I turned a few more pages... perhaps the story would have ended differently.

Gradually, however, I began to understand that the matter was not quite so simple.

It had not been merely a question of effort.

It seemed as though some invisible hand had arranged the sequence of events long before I became aware of them. Tiny oversights, unforeseen circumstances, unexpected turns in time-everything appeared to have been woven together with uncanny precision, as though an unseen conspirator had quietly prepared the entire design in advance.

The very conspiracy that had long been gathering around me had slowly but inexorably pushed me towards that inevitable outcome.

The fear that had lived within me for months finally stood before me as reality.

The path to admission at M.A.C.T. had almost closed.

By then I had become so exhausted by circumstances that, strangely enough, I felt no great turmoil that day.

No conflict.

No grief.

No fresh wound.

Nothing had happened that I had not already anticipated.

After the months I had spent in Section D, the real surprise would have been if I had passed every paper with distinction.

Perhaps that was why I made no further struggle.

Neither within myself nor in the outside world.

I made no attempt to seek admission to M.A.C.T.

I visited no offices.

I sought no recommendations.

I did not even try to discover whether some faint possibility might still exist.

Something inside me had already broken.

Sometimes we do not surrender because every road has been closed.

We stop because the voice of hope within us has grown too faint to hear.

That was what had happened to me.

Without my even realising it, the result had quietly wounded my confidence so deeply that I no longer possessed the courage to knock upon another door.

Yet life never comes entirely to a standstill.

It always leaves behind some narrow footpath for us to follow.

So, I enrolled in the Third Year of Civil Engineering at my own college.

It was a decision born more of necessity than enthusiasm.

The hands that filled in the admission form were mine, but my mind seemed to be wandering elsewhere.

It felt as though I were making the decision not for myself but for someone else.

And yet, despite everything, a tiny flame somewhere within me had refused to die.

I kept telling myself that perhaps another opportunity would appear someday.

If circumstances became even slightly favourable, perhaps there might still be a path leading towards architecture.

The dream had not perished.

It had merely wrapped itself in a dense curtain of mist.

It stood stunned into silence, bewildered perhaps, but still alive.

Looking back today, I often feel that while we are busy making plans for our future, someone-or something-quietly continues writing an entirely different plan of its own.

Whatever the explanation may be, one fact remains undeniable.

That was the day the direction of my life changed.

My future was already waiting for me in another dimension, another world altogether.

I had been seated, without knowing it, upon a train destined to halt only at the station where fate had chosen to take me.

□

I found myself in the Faculty of Civil Engineering.

The building itself resembled an old Government House-majestic, dignified, carrying the quiet weight of another era.

I had entered the third year of engineering.

I was now officially a student of Civil Engineering.

During my ordeal in Second Year, I had repeatedly been told that no section could accommodate more than fifty students.

Yet the classroom before me contained seventy-two.

Seventy-two students squeezed into a room designed for fifty, shoulder pressed against shoulder.

The irony itself disturbed me before anything else.

When my own future had been altered because accommodating a fifty-first student had supposedly been impossible, here sat not fifty-one or fifty-two, but a full seventy-two.

Then I began looking around me.

I write these words with genuine regret towards those few sincere, hardworking students who happened to be there, but I cannot honestly say that the atmosphere seemed much better than that of Section D.

The truly dedicated students were very few.

My instinct-not merely warning me but almost shaking me awake-told me something was terribly wrong.

Nearly all the serious students had gone to Mechanical, Electrical, or Electronics Engineering.

Of the five friends who had formed my closest circle during First Year, three had entered Mechanical Engineering, one had gone to Electronics, and I alone found myself stranded in Civil Engineering.

The first day passed.

Then the second.

By the third day my resolve had begun to collapse once again.

I quietly accepted that perhaps I was destined to become an architect only in another lifetime.

The thought of transferring to Mechanical Engineering slowly took complete possession of my mind.

Almost every student I admired for his scholarship-and nearly all my closest friends-had chosen Mechanical Engineering.

I somehow endured the third day.

On the fourth, I drafted an application addressed to Professor N. L. Jain, Head of the Mechanical Engineering Department, requesting permission to transfer from Civil to Mechanical Engineering.

Carrying the application in my hand, I went to meet him.

He recognised me immediately.

"Why do you want to come to the Mechanical Department?" he asked.

This time I concealed nothing.

I told him the whole truth.

Perhaps because he had been unable to help me earlier-or perhaps for reasons known only to himself-he agreed to accept me into the department.

"There is only one formality," he said.

"Get Professor Khanuja's signature on this application. Tell him you have already spoken to me."

Almost running, I made my way to Professor Khanuja, the Head of the Civil Engineering Department.

I handed him my application and requested a No Objection Certificate.

I did not reveal the real reason for wanting to leave.

Instead, I offered another explanation, unwilling to hurt his feelings in any way.

Besides, with seventy-two students already enrolled in the class, the departure of one student could hardly make any difference.

He listened quietly.

Then he wrote a few words of approval upon the application, signed it, and handed it back to me.

And just like that, I left the Civil Engineering Department and entered Mechanical Engineering.

Whatever official procedures followed inside the college office, I neither witnessed nor enquired about them.

Soon my name appeared on the attendance registers for all the Mechanical Engineering subjects.

Another student, Prabir Chakraborty, had also transferred into the department from another branch.

The two of us became the fifty-first and fifty-second students of the Third-Year Mechanical Engineering class.

Those numbers became our new roll numbers.

The moment I arrived there; I experienced a feeling I have never forgotten.

It was as though, after enduring a long and lonely exile in a wilderness, I had finally found my way home.

□

Only then did it begin to feel as though life had finally returned to its proper course.

By then I was no longer possessed by the obsession of becoming this or that. All I wanted was to study in the kind of academic environment I had been deprived of for an entire year.

I felt like a bird that had become separated from its flock and, after wandering alone through changing seasons, had miraculously found its way back.

I began my studies afresh.

The difference is clearly visible even today in the notebooks I maintained during those years. No longer did I scribble rough notes

into a single notebook. I now kept a separate class notebook for every subject. My notes became far more detailed and systematic.

For the first time in a long while, studying became a source of genuine pleasure again.

Sometimes I even felt as though I had only just entered college.

Mechanical Engineering, to my mind, was a fascinating new world born from the union of Physics, Chemistry, and Mathematics.

Perhaps I should say a little more about it.

Mechanical Engineering is one of the oldest, broadest, and most enduring branches of engineering. At its heart, it is concerned with the design, manufacture, operation, and maintenance of mechanical systems through the application of the principles of physics and materials science.

Its domain extends from the tiniest mechanisms-such as the gears inside a watch or microscopic nanobots-to vast machines like aircraft, automobiles, elevators, and thermal power plants. Mechanical engineers work with the fundamental principles of motion, force, energy, and thermodynamics.

In the modern age, however, the discipline has expanded far beyond traditional machinery. Robotics, mechatronics, aerospace engineering, and renewable energy have all become integral parts of its ever-growing landscape.

Simply put, almost everything that moves-or uses energy in any form-owes something to Mechanical Engineering. From a sewing needle to an aeroplane, its influence is everywhere. Few branches of engineering have contributed more profoundly to making human life safer, easier, and more dynamic.

□

Our Mechanical Engineering Department possessed everything required to educate and shape a competent mechanical engineer.

There were well-equipped laboratories for Materials Testing, Heat Engines, and Fluid Mechanics, an excellent workshop, and above all, a remarkable faculty of learned professors, readers, and lecturers.

The dedication, patience, and sincerity with which they taught us remain worthy of my deepest admiration.

Even outside their scheduled classes, they were always available in their offices to guide us, answer our questions, and patiently explain whatever we failed to understand.

It is both a pleasure and a duty to record their names here with gratitude.

Foremost among them was Professor N. L. Jain, Head of the Mechanical Engineering Department.

Although he never taught our class directly during those three years, it was he who opened the doors of the department for me.

Then came Dr. Kamal Kishore , Dr. Dave, Professor Wakhaloo, Professor Ghai, Professor S. P. Pandey, Professor I. K. Khanna, Professor L.M.Saxena, Professor Manish Chaube, Professor G. S. Yadav, Dr. Neeraj Dubey, Professor Nigam, Professor Gaurasia, Professor Gulati, Professor Paranjape, Gujral Sir, Dhapu Sir etc.

I know I am unintentionally omitting a, few names.

At least two faces remain vividly before me, although their names now escape my memory.

One of them taught us *Machine Design* in the Fourth Year and later *Strength of Materials* during our Final Year. He had also authored an excellent textbook on Machine Design, which many of us used throughout the course.

The other had served as Workshop In-charge before Dhapu Sir, but unfortunately, I can no longer recall his name.

Since I have arrived at the workshop, this seems the appropriate place to mention something else.

Our workshop housed an Aerodynamics Laboratory.

In earlier years, Government Engineering College, Jabalpur, had offered a degree programme in Aeronautical Engineering. For reasons unknown to me, that department was eventually transferred elsewhere, but the Aerodynamics Laboratory continued to occupy one of the workshop's large halls.

The college also possessed an actual aeroplane, which stood permanently within the workshop premises.

Adjacent to our Heat Engines Laboratory stood a working Babcock & Wilcox boiler.

Under the guidance of Professor S. P. Pandey, we not only lit its fires but also operated it successfully, producing superheated steam at the prescribed pressure and temperature.

There was also a Lancashire boiler, as well as a double-stage steam engine-better known as a compound steam engine-which remained fully operational. We had the opportunity to run that machine ourselves.

Inside the same laboratory stood an out-of-service double-stage air compressor.

Under Professor Pandey's supervision, our project involved restoring that compressor to working condition and conducting its complete performance testing.

I shall narrate that story in detail later.

For now, I wish to conclude this section with a profound sense of gratitude.

To every teacher of the Mechanical Engineering Department, to every instructor, technician, workshop employee, and laboratory attendant, I offer my heartfelt thanks.

Without distinction or reservation, they invested their knowledge, patience, and labour in shaping me into the engineer I eventually became.

Whatever heights I was later able to be including serving as "Executive Director" of the Madhya Pradesh Power Generating Company-rest, in no small measure, upon the foundation they so generously helped build.

As I have mentioned before, life in my third year was slowly beginning to find its rhythm again. After a long time, it felt as though college life had truly reopened its doors to me. Every morning arrived with a renewed sense of anticipation. New classes, new subjects, the laughter of friends, the lively bustle of the canteen, the quiet refuge of the library-everything gradually began to feel familiar once more. It seemed as though the bitterness of the past had finally been left behind and I had found my way back to the path from which I had once wandered.

Yet a splinter remained lodged deep within me.

It was buried so deeply that no one could see it, but the slightest turn of my thoughts towards it would awaken a dull ache. The two papers I had failed in the second year-whose supplementary examinations were to be held in August or September-continued to inhabit some dark corner of my consciousness.

At times I felt that while my third-year life was moving smoothly along a broad, well-paved road, another rough and lonely track ran silently beside it-a path that I alone had to walk. There were no companions on that path, no laughter, no reassurance. There was only myself and my apprehensions.

I would be sitting with my friends, laughing heartily at some joke, when suddenly the memory of that unfinished Mathematics paper would return without warning. It was as though someone had extinguished a lamp inside me. The noise around me would fade into the distance. My friends continued talking, but their voices no longer reached me. Occasionally someone noticed the change in my face;

more often than not, no one did. Yet within, I would begin to tremble, as though a bolt of lightning had struck my consciousness.

At such moments I would quietly excuse myself and leave my friends. I would find some deserted corner of the college campus and sit alone, trying to reason with my own mind. One person within me would ask questions, while another struggled to answer them. But counselling one's own heart is perhaps the hardest task in the world. Only those who have seen fear and hope living side by side within themselves can truly understand it.

Whenever I opened the books for those two subjects, it felt as though an unseen fear came and sat beside me. The formulas and the printed words remained exactly where they were, yet an invisible anxiety seemed to occupy every page. I wanted to study, but my mind wandered again and again.

Even asking my friends for help filled me with an inexplicable hesitation. It felt as though I would be admitting my weakness. And so, for the most part, I chose to fight the battle alone. I kept telling myself,

"This is a battle you must fight by yourself. No one else can carry you across it."

Alongside the regular demands of my third-year studies, I continued preparing for this second battle as well. Holding my ground on both fronts was far from easy, but I persevered with whatever strength I possessed.

My friends never stopped encouraging me, especially Akhilesh. There was something quietly reassuring about his words that restored my confidence, if only for a little while. Kaushal, too, constantly stood by me and lifted my spirits. Sitting with them, I often felt that perhaps everything would eventually be all right. But the moment I found myself alone, I realised that something within me was still broken-like an earthen pot that has been carefully mended, yet whose crack remains forever visible.

Time waits for no one.

Unaffected by my fears, it continued its relentless journey, and before I knew it, the supplementary examinations had arrived.

Armed with nothing more than my friends' good wishes, whatever preparation I had managed, and the small measure of hope still left within me, I appeared for both examinations.

After so many years, I no longer remember the exact details, but I believe the results were declared within ten or fifteen days.

There it was.

I had cleared English paper.

But Mathematics II...

had failed me once again.

For several moments I simply stared at the result, as though my mind refused to grasp its meaning. Slowly, painfully, the reality sank in. It felt as though every ounce of strength had drained from my body. My limbs grew heavy and lifeless.

What now?

The same question rose before me again and again.

I did not know what the future held, but dark shadows of uncertainty gathered around me from every direction. They kept whispering that perhaps there was no escape this time. Little by little, they began feeding upon my confidence.

At college, this situation was known as "ATKT-Allowed to Keep Terms". It meant that a student was permitted to move on to the next academic year, but only on the condition that the failed subject had to be cleared at the earliest opportunity.

To others it was merely an academic regulation.

To me, it became another name for constant anxiety.

Along with my third-year annual examinations, I now had to clear Mathematics II at any cost. I simply had to pass. Otherwise, I would lose an entire academic year and be forced to continue my studies with my juniors.

A new uncertainty now stood before me.

Would I even make it to the fourth year?

Looking back today, I often wonder why destiny subjected that quiet, simple boy-who loved colours, shapes and lines, who found joy in words more than in numbers-to one ordeal after another.

Perhaps life wished to make him older than his years.

At the time, however, I had no answer.

There were only questions. . .

and with those questions came many long, painfully lonely nights.

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By this point in my story, these pages have absorbed more than their share of sorrow. Perhaps it is time to leave this landscape of anxiety behind for a while and wander into another corner of memory-one where a few cheerful recollections are still waiting to tell their stories.

Before I do that, however, I should remind the reader of something I have already mentioned.

During my third year, Professor N.K.Sharma of the Civil Engineering Department-who was probably a Reader at the time-arranged a solo exhibition of my paintings during the college's annual function. A large number of my watercolour and oil paintings were displayed there. The exhibition was visited not only by students but also by almost all our teachers.

My paintings were far from strictly realistic. They were visibly influenced by modern art.

Professor S. P. Pandey, who taught us Automobile Engineering and Internal Combustion Engines, also visited the exhibition.

Sometime afterwards, during one of our classes, he made a remark about my paintings that pierced me deeply.

As I have already confessed elsewhere, in those days I became extremely uncomfortable whenever I found myself in such situations. Before I knew it, something impulsive and inappropriate would escape my lips. Today I understand that no teacher is greater than honest criticism itself. But I was far too young then to appreciate that truth.

When Professor Pandey made his comment, a few students burst into laughter.

That laughter only poured oil on the fire.

Feeling embarrassed, cornered, and eager to defend myself, I replied with something I should never have said. Once again, I heard a few muffled laughs around the classroom.

Over the years, however, I have worked hard to overcome this weakness. I have learnt, to a great extent, to remain calm in such moments. Even today, if I occasionally lose my composure, I do not hesitate to acknowledge my mistake openly and apologise.

For I know from experience that every careless word spoken in anger leaves behind a far deeper wound in oneself than in anyone else.

In those days, after saying something I later regretted, I would remain restless for days, replaying the incident in my mind long after everyone else had forgotten it.

After the incident I have just described unfolded so unexpectedly, Professor S. P. Pandey abruptly silenced the class with a sharp rebuke and immediately resumed the day's lecture, as though nothing unusual had happened.

But for me, nothing was normal after that.

I remained deeply disturbed throughout the rest of the period, and for many days afterwards. In truth, I should have gone to Professor Pandey and apologised. Yet I hesitated. Part of me felt that the matter had already subsided and was best left undisturbed. Another part reassured me that perhaps he had not taken my impulsive remark very seriously. At the same time, I feared exactly the opposite-that if I went to apologise, I would only remind him of the incident and provoke a resentment that might otherwise have faded away.

Caught between these conflicting thoughts, I did nothing.

Days passed.

Among the students, too, the matter never became a subject of gossip. There were no whispered conversations in the corridors, no debates over who had been right or wrong. It was as though the incident had dissolved into thin air.

Everyone seemed to have forgotten it.

Everyone except me.

I continued to live with an unspoken fear.

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But the truly amusing part of the story had not yet arrived.

That comes now.

As part of our final year, every student was required to undertake a project. It was, in many ways, a modest version of a research thesis. The project had to be carried out under the supervision of a Lecturer, Reader, or Professor. Two, three, or sometimes even four students could work together on a single project. Within a stipulated period, the work had to be completed, documented in the form of a bound report, and finally defended before an external examiner through discussion and questioning. The marks awarded formed part of the final-year examination, making it an important milestone in our academic journey.

Even today, I believe only a psychologist could explain why I chose Professor S. P. Pandey as our project supervisor.

It had already been decided that Akhilesh, Kaushal, and I would work together. The only question was who would guide us. For reasons I still cannot fully understand, I found myself quietly deciding upon Professor Pandey.

He was known as one of the strictest teachers in the department. Whether inside the classroom or outside it, he spoke with an unmistakable sharpness, often seasoned with irony or dry wit. He was also among the senior-most members of the faculty.

One day I saw him in the college administrative building.

Without giving myself time to reconsider, I walked straight up to him and requested that he supervise our project.

He looked at me for a few moments with an expression somewhere between a scrutinising stare and a faint smile.

Then he asked,

"Why me?"

His surprise was understandable.

Most students preferred to avoid working under his supervision.

I no longer remember my exact reply, but whatever I said seemed to satisfy him.

"Are you working alone, or are there others with you?"

I told him that Akhilesh and Kaushal would be joining me.

He asked all three of us to meet him in his office.

When I informed Akhilesh and Kaushal of my decision, they stared at me for quite some time, unable to believe what they had heard. They thought it over carefully, but, like true friends, eventually agreed without complaint.

When we met Professor Pandey in his office, he wasted no time in making his expectations perfectly clear.

"You still have time to change your minds," he said. *"Working with me will demand hard work, commitment, and, above all, punctuality. I won't tolerate one student turning up while the other two are absent, or vice versa. The moment that starts happening, I'll withdraw from the project."*

We assured him that he would never have cause for such complaints.

Without another word, he asked us to accompany him to the Heat Engines Laboratory.

Once inside, he led us to a large, idle two-stage air compressor that had long been out of service.

Pointing towards it, he said,

"Your job is to repair this machine, make it operational again, and then carry out its performance testing. That will be your project."

The three of us looked first at the silent, lifeless compressor, then at one another, and finally back at Professor Pandey.

Almost in chorus we replied,

"Yes, Sir."

"No problems?" he asked. *"It will require a great deal of hard work."*

"We'll do the hard work, Sir."

The matter was settled.

Before long, the entire class-and, in fact, almost the whole department-came to know that we had chosen Professor Pandey as our guide.

For the next couple of days, many students looked at us with expressions that were a curious mixture of surprise and sympathy.

It was as though we had knowingly walked into a storm.

But by then, we had already crossed the point of no return.

There was another reason for everyone's reaction.

Almost every student, guided by the advice of seniors, wanted to undertake a project under Professor Dave. He was cheerful, easy-going, and every bit the image of an ideal professor. Having his name-and the long list of his academic degrees, honorary distinctions, and consultancy appointments-printed on the cover page of a project report itself lent it an air of distinction.

More importantly, as we had often heard, he shouldered much of the hard work himself, leaving comparatively less for the students. During the project viva voce, he was usually present alongside the external examiner, which naturally proved advantageous to the students under his supervision. He often guided several project groups simultaneously.

We, however, belonged to Professor Pandey.

I do not say this to compare one teacher with another.

In fact, working under him gave us something far more valuable than examination marks.

Along with our project, we learnt discipline, commitment, and self-confidence.

Those lessons have remained with me far longer than the marks ever could.

Even after regular college hours, the three of us could often be found in the Heat Engines Laboratory. Whenever we had a free period, we would return to the compressor. Gradually, we became good friends with the laboratory instructors and attendants as well.

For us, it was an opportunity to work with our own hands rather than merely read about machines in textbooks.

Whenever the timetable allotted us two project periods, our destination was invariably the Heat Engines Laboratory. After a while Professor Pandey would join us. Sometimes we worked with tools, dismantling various parts of the compressor. At other times we

immersed ourselves in reference books that he had asked us to borrow from the library.

As we worked, he would pause now and then to explain the engineering principles involved. The project gradually became an education far richer than we had expected.

There was another unexpected benefit.

Since he also taught us Internal Combustion Engineering, he used those sessions in the laboratory to explain countless practical aspects of the subject that no classroom lecture could have conveyed.

We had now reached the point where the truly amusing incident begins.

One day we had our usual two project periods. Professor Pandey assigned us a mathematical equation related to the compressor's performance analysis and asked us to work through it. Leaving us occupied, he stepped out for a while.

On the table, however, he had absent-mindedly left behind a rolled bundle of papers.

That, in itself, was unusual.

He was normally meticulous about keeping all his papers with him.

The three of us noticed this small but unusual detail.

I no longer remember which one of us finally picked up the roll and unwrapped it.

Inside were pages covered with strange symbols-odd-looking characters, sweeping curves, dots, and mysterious strokes that resembled no ordinary handwriting.

The moment Akhilesh glanced at them, his face lit up.

"OH, well!! he exclaimed, *"this is shorthand!"*

Akhilesh took the sheets into his hands, studied them for a moment, and then looked at us with eyes wide open.

"Good Lord!" he whispered. *"This is our Automobile Engineering examination paper!"*

What followed happened almost instinctively.

Akhilesh immediately sat down and began copying the questions into his notebook. I stationed myself at the entrance of the Heat Engines Laboratory to keep watch, while Kaushal remained near the table, ready to help Akhilesh should any emergency arise.

Fortunately, none did.

By the time Professor Pandey returned, the operation had been completed with perfect composure. The roll of papers lay exactly where it had been, looking as though no one had ever touched it. The three of us were equally absorbed in our assigned work.

Professor Pandey took his seat and looked at us with a faint smile. Then he picked up the roll of papers, unrolled it, and asked,

"Do you know what these are?"

We looked at him with carefully rehearsed innocence.

He smiled again.

"These are your Internal Combustion Engineering question papers for the annual examination."

He even unfolded the sheets and showed us the shorthand in which they had been written.

The three of us stared at the pages with exaggerated astonishment, mouths slightly open, as though we were seeing them for the very first time.

Professor Pandey continued smiling.

So did we -

though only inwardly.

Later, the three of us made a solemn pact that this secret would never be revealed to anyone else.

When the annual examination finally arrived and the Automobile Engineering paper was placed in our hands, it was exactly the same paper that Akhilesh had copied from Professor Pandey's shorthand notes.

Word for word.

Of course, we had prepared thoroughly for the examination as a whole; we did not wish to depend upon a single unexpected discovery. Yet those particular questions had been revised so many times that they had become almost impossible to forget.

□

Two loose ends still remain.

The first concerns – "shorthand".

The second, "the fate of our project".

Let me begin with the shorthand.

Back when we were in the eleventh standard, Akhilesh's father had, for reasons known only to him, enrolled his son in a shorthand course. In those days, shorthand and typing were considered highly valuable skills for government employment. Perhaps he had the foresight to believe that his son should acquire an additional qualification alongside his formal education.

As a result, Akhilesh spent about an hour every evening attending shorthand classes.

At that age, however, neither of us possessed the wisdom to appreciate such foresight.

To me, shorthand looked like an inscrutable secret code-a strange script made of curves, loops, dots, and strokes through which people somehow managed to record entire conversations.

I had no interest in learning it.

Nor, for that matter, did Akhilesh.

He attended the classes largely out of respect for his father's wishes.

To both of us, it felt like an unnecessary burden, one that seemed to have absolutely nothing to do with engineering.

But life has a mathematics entirely of its own.

It does not always make two and two equal four.

Sometimes a tiny seed planted years earlier unexpectedly bears fruit at precisely the moment when it is needed most.

What had once appeared almost useless suddenly became our greatest asset in the Heat Engines Laboratory.

Perhaps no experience in life is ever truly wasted.

Every lesson we learn, every skill we acquire, and every seemingly insignificant experience quietly waits for the day when an unforeseen circumstance will call upon it.

Whether you choose to call what happened cheating, or simply the intelligent use of an unexpected opportunity, I shall leave for you to decide.

As for me. . .

I cannot help thinking that Professor Pandey himself had. . .

. . .Well.

Perhaps it is wiser to let that thought remain unfinished.

Now for the second matter.

Our project was, in the end, a complete success.

After days of hard work, repeated failures, endless discussions, calculations, and practical experimentation, we finally succeeded in restoring the long-abandoned two-stage compressor to working condition.

The first time it sprang back to life and began operating smoothly, an indescribable sense of satisfaction filled us.

It felt as though life itself had returned to something that had long been lifeless.

We then carried out its performance tests, analysed the experimental data, prepared graphs, documented our observations, and incorporated everything into our project report.

By then, the compressor had ceased to be merely a machine.

It had become a repository of our labour, our curiosity, and our perseverance.

Our viva voce also went reasonably well.

The examiners questioned us thoroughly and tested our technical understanding from several angles, but overall, we were able to answer with confidence.

When the viva finally ended, it felt as though an invisible burden had been lifted from our shoulders.

Looking back today, I realise that although the technical achievement of the project was undoubtedly important, the most vivid memory that survives is not of the machine itself, but of that unforgettable shorthand episode.

The old two-stage compressor has long since disappeared into history.

The project report itself has probably been lost forever.

But that tiny adventure remains as fresh in my memory today as it was then.

Time has a curious way of choosing what it preserves.

It does not always treasure life's greatest achievements.

Sometimes it lovingly keeps alive a small act of youthful mischief, an unexpected coincidence, or a fleeting smile.

At least for me, the most memorable chapter of that entire project will forever remain...

the Shorthand Incident.

□

This final chapter of the second part of my story is now drawing to its close.

Before bringing it to an end, however, there are a few things I should mention.

Alongside my third-year annual examinations, I finally cleared the mathematics II paper from my second year.

With that, I was free to enter the fourth year without any difficulty.

The shadow of ATKT had finally disappeared.

By the time we reached the fourth and final years, the academic work had naturally become more demanding and intellectually rigorous. Looking back now, those two years seem to have passed almost unnoticed, consumed by lectures, laboratories, assignments, and examinations.

Yet our friendship remained untouched.

We continued to travel together, spend time together, and, of course, watch films whenever we could.

Life somehow found room for everything.

There is little point now, after all these years, in pretending otherwise.

The truth is that my most serious studying usually took place during the preparatory leave before examinations, and in the precious three-day intervals between successive papers.

That is not to say I neglected my studies during the rest of the year.

Far from it.

The classroom lectures demanded regular attention, and there were periodic class tests that could not simply be ignored.

I was meticulous about preparing my own notes, and I had developed a genuine fondness for consulting reference books.

Those habits ensured that whenever I eventually settled down to study in earnest, the subjects never felt entirely unfamiliar.

There was another advantage that I only recognised much later.

My love for drawing often became an unexpected aid to learning.

It helped me remember difficult formulas and complicated technical concepts with surprising ease.

Many graphs, engineering drawings, and mechanical sketches were carefully redrawn by me on large drawing sheets using coloured sketch pens, almost as though I were creating paintings rather than study notes.

Those colourful visual compositions became powerful memory maps, helping me retain not only the diagrams themselves but also the theories that lay behind them.

The final year had scarcely concluded when the written examination for the recruitment of Assistant Engineers by the Madhya Pradesh Electricity Board was held. Like many of my classmates, I appeared for it. Around the same time, a group of us also travelled to Bhopal to sit for the engineering recruitment examination conducted by BHEL. Those experiences deserve a fuller telling, and I shall return to them in the third volume of this memoir.

□

Two significant episodes, however, still remain to be narrated before I bring this chapter to a close.

Both belong to my third year. The first was so harrowing that even today, whenever I recall it, a faint shiver passes through me. Looking back, I sometimes feel that my second and third years at college were among the most testing periods of my life. Perhaps only an astrologer could explain what strange alignment of the stars prevailed then, for it seemed that before one crisis had ended, another was already waiting at my doorstep.

When I transferred from the Civil Engineering Department to Mechanical Engineering, all the necessary administrative formalities were duly completed. My name, along with that of Prabir Chakravarty, who had transferred with me, was entered into the attendance registers of every subject by the respective professors. Only one formality, for reasons I can no longer remember, remained incomplete. Our names were never entered into the roll register maintained by the professor of Production Engineering.

His method of recording attendance was rather unusual. Instead of calling the roll, he simply noted down on a small slip of paper the roll numbers of those who were absent in each class. Everyone else was automatically considered present. Since our names had not been entered into his register during the first few months, when he finally added them later, he inadvertently marked us absent for the entire earlier period. It appears that he himself never realized the mistake.

Meanwhile, the university had begun to enforce, with unusual strictness, a new regulation: any student whose attendance fell below the prescribed seventy-five percent would be barred from appearing in the annual examination.

One day, the professor entered the classroom and, in an entirely matter-of-fact tone, announced that both Prabir and I had attendance below the required seventy-five percent in his subject. Consequently, we would not be permitted to take the examination.

For a moment, we were stunned into silence. The announcement seemed almost impossible to believe. We had attended his lectures with complete regularity. Our attendance was not merely above seventy-five percent-it was nearly perfect.

As soon as the class ended, we went to his office and explained the entire matter. His reply, however, was disarmingly curt.

"I can do nothing now. Only the Vice-Chancellor has the authority to grant permission."

His words seemed to sweep the ground from beneath our feet.

Then, quite suddenly, something occurred to me.

"Sir," I said, "I have maintained complete lecture notes for your subject in separate notebooks. If you wish, I can bring them today-or tomorrow."

He looked at me thoughtfully for a few moments before replying,

"Bring them tomorrow."

The following day, I carried three or four notebooks to his office. Those notebooks, in a sense, spoke for themselves. Every lecture had been recorded in chronological order, carefully dated and systematically arranged. Each page faithfully reproduced the concepts, examples, and explanations exactly as he had delivered them in class. Anyone looking through them could immediately see that they could not possibly have been prepared overnight.

He spent a long time turning their pages in silence.

Gradually, the expression of doubt on his face gave way to one of quiet conviction.

Finally, he acknowledged the mistake. He corrected the attendance register and changed all the days on which I had mistakenly been marked absent to present.

Once again, I had escaped a major crisis by the narrowest of margins.

I no longer remember exactly how Prabir proved his attendance. Perhaps he adopted a similar course. What I do remember is that, in the end, both of us received permission to appear for the annual examination, and this ordeal too faded away, as so many others eventually did.

At the time, I felt nothing but immense relief. Today, however, when I look back across the years, I realize how astonishingly fragile the course of a life can be. Sometimes an entire future hangs upon something as trivial as a clerical oversight. Had those notebooks not been lying safely in my cupboard that day, my academic journey might well have taken a completely different direction.

□

The second is not so much an incident as an account of our educational tour.

It was organized during our third year, in the interval between Dussehra and Diwali, and participation was compulsory for all students. To accommodate the entire group, the college had reserved a complete second-class railway coach at concessional rates. Educational tours in those days possessed a charm and excitement quite unlike anything students experience today.

Professor S. P. Pandey served as the chief tour supervisor. Since he travelled in First Class, he would appear at different points along the journey, sometimes accompanying our train and at other times joining us at the next halt. The direct responsibility for our coach rested with Professor I. K. Khanna, who travelled throughout the journey with us. His wife accompanied him as well. If memory serves me correctly, the small compartment at one end of the coach had been reserved exclusively for the two of them.

Rail travel in those days was far less comfortable than it is today. There were far more students than sleeping berths, and improvisation became a necessity. Some of us had been instructed to bring our drawing boards, while others carried the woven webbing used for traditional wooden cots from home. These simple items became the foundation of our makeshift beds.

The old second-class coaches had a generous space between the two upper berths. The woven cot webbing was tightly fastened across this gap, exactly as one would weave a village charpoy, creating an additional sleeping platform. Between the two facing lower seats, drawing boards were securely wedged into place, forming yet another improvised berth. With a little ingenuity-and, one might say, a touch of engineering-we succeeded in creating enough sleeping space for everyone in the coach.

Looking back now, I am struck by how naturally we transformed limited resources into workable comforts. We possessed little, yet we never felt deprived. Necessity simply invited invention.

After so many decades, I can no longer recall the precise itinerary of the entire tour. What remains vivid, however, is that our journey took us across the south-eastern region of India. We travelled eastward as far as Visakhapatnam and Hyderabad–Sikanderabad, and farther south to Madras, as Chennai was then known. On our return journey, we passed through Bangalore and Nagpur before finally arriving back in Jabalpur.

During the tour, we visited several major industrial establishments, among them the factories of Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL), Hindustan Machine Tools (HMT), Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), and the Visakhapatnam Shipyard. Besides these, we explored museums, engineering colleges, places of historical interest, and other tourist attractions in the cities we visited.

The tour was far more than an academic requirement. For many of us, it was our first journey beyond the boundaries of Madhya Pradesh, our first opportunity to encounter another landscape, another culture, and another rhythm of life. It widened our horizons in ways no classroom ever could, leaving us with memories that have endured far longer than many of the lessons we studied from our textbooks.

□

Living as one member of a team for an extended period was, in itself, a valuable experience.

Although I write here that I remained simply a member of the group, the truth is that it has never come naturally to me-not then, and not even now. My zodiac sign is Leo, and whether or not one believes in astrology, I have often felt that I am inclined either to lead a team or to walk away from it altogether. I have always found great satisfaction in identifying problems, discovering solutions, and then guiding others along that path.

Yet those days passed happily enough, largely because I was surrounded by my closest friends. I enjoyed cordial relations with almost everyone else as well. There were several classmates who were not particularly close to me but wished to become so. I, however, was perfectly content within my small circle of friends.

I had carried with me my poster colours, brushes, sketch pens, sketchbooks, and drawing sheets. Whenever time permitted, I made sketches at different places, though there was rarely enough leisure for painting. My sketches were warmly appreciated by many, especially by Mrs. I.K.Khanna, who admired them generously. As far as I remember, she mentioned that she herself was a painter.



There is one delightful memory that nearly slipped away in the telling. It deserves a place here.

One of our closest friends was Man Singh, who remains a dear friend even today. Years later, he became my colleague in the Madhya Pradesh Power Generating Company, and we still speak to each other on the telephone from time to time.

I have countless memories associated with him, most of which belong elsewhere. For the moment, it is enough to say that he possessed an abiding passion for automobiles and everything connected with them. His fertile mind was forever occupied with new ideas and curious inventions. During our college years, he was undoubtedly the liveliest spirit in our group.

A few months before our educational tour, Bobby, Raj Kapoor's blockbuster film, had been released. One of its most popular songs was *"Jhooth Bole Kauwa Kaate..."*.

Man Singh, with his characteristic sense of humour, transformed the song by setting its words to the devotional tune of *"Om Jai Jagdish Hare."* The result was so irresistibly funny that it acquired an entirely new identity within our group.

Throughout our journey, whenever the train halted at a major station for five minutes or longer, we would be the first to jump onto the platform. Gathering in front of our reserved coach, more than fifty young engineering students would clap rhythmically and sing our mock *aarti* in perfect unison.

The familiar devotional melody echoed across the platform, carrying instead the playful words of *"Jhooth Bole Kauwa Kaate..."*.

By the time we finished, the entire platform would have fallen silent. Passengers stopped in their tracks, railway staff turned to watch, vendors paused midway through their calls, and curious faces gathered around us. I often wonder whether some of them quietly found themselves humming the tune long after our train had departed.

Even today, whenever the boys of the Class of '77 gather for a reunion, that mock *aarti* is sung without fail. The moment its familiar melody begins, the years dissolve, and for a few precious minutes we find ourselves wandering once again through the sunlit lanes of our youth.

□

On the day of Diwali, we were in Madras, as Chennai was then known. We stayed there for three days. Our railway coach had been detached from the train and parked on an isolated siding in the railway yard. It stood beside an open platform without any roof, and at night we slept under the open sky.

Some of our friends arranged a simple Lakshmi Puja that evening. We performed the worship together on the platform, shared sweets and fruits, and celebrated the festival as best we could. Firecrackers, however, were strictly prohibited in the railway yard, and so that customary joy had to be sacrificed.

It was, perhaps, the first Diwali that almost all of us had spent away from home.

Outwardly, everyone was cheerful. We laughed together, shared food, and celebrated as though nothing were missing. Yet somewhere

beneath those smiles, each of us must have been quietly missing our families. That silent ache was present in every heart, though no one gave it words. Perhaps we were trying to soften our homesickness simply by sharing each other's company.

Even so, it remains one of the most memorable Diwalis of my life. I doubt that any of us ever celebrated the festival in quite the same way again.

Madras itself offered far more than the industries we had come to study. Besides visiting factories, we explored the city both as a large group and in smaller circles of friends. During our industrial visits, Professor Pandey and Professor Khanna accompanied us, but at other times we wandered freely through the city on our own.

One memory, seemingly insignificant yet strangely enduring, returns to me often.

Every morning we would visit a particular coffee house. Whenever one ordered a cup of coffee, a plate laden with an assortment of freshly baked biscuits was placed on the table, free of charge. One could help oneself without hesitation, and whenever the plate began to empty, it was quietly replenished with more biscuits. To young students travelling on limited means, such generosity felt almost magical.

We also visited the famous Marina Beach.

Stretching along the shores of the Bay of Bengal, Marina Beach is one of Chennai's greatest landmarks and among the longest natural urban beaches in the world. Developed in the late nineteenth century during the British administration, it owes its name to the Italian word *marina*, inspired by the Governor's admiration for the coastal promenades of Italy.

We sat for a long time upon its golden sands while our other friends wandered somewhere nearby.

It was the first time in my life that I had seen the sea.

Before me stretched an immeasurable expanse of water. On the distant horizon, the sky and the ocean dissolved so completely into one another that no boundary remained between them. The sea shimmered in changing shades of blue touched faintly with green. At one moment it appeared perfectly tranquil; at the next, it seemed alive with some deep and unspoken pulse. Wave after wave rolled ashore, kissed the sand, and retreated, leaving behind a glistening silence that endured only until the next wave arrived.

I kept gazing at that immense horizon.

Gradually, I felt as though I were descending, not into the sea before me, but into the depths of my own being. Layer after layer of accumulated thoughts and burdens loosened quietly before that vastness. For the first time, I understood that the world was infinitely larger-and infinitely more beautiful-than I had ever imagined. In the presence of nature, human beings seem so small, and yet the memories they carry within them can be immeasurably vast.

Then, without warning, thoughts of 'her' entered my mind.

There was no particular reason.

Perhaps, when confronted with such overwhelming beauty, the heart instinctively searches for the one it has loved most silently.

I bent down and traced her name upon the wet sand with my fingertip.

A moment later, a wave arrived.

Without the slightest sound, it gathered the name into itself and withdrew.

Nothing remained except the damp sand, as though nothing had ever been written there.

I wrote the name again.

Another wave came.

Once more, it disappeared.

I do not know how long this quiet ritual continued.

Each time I wrote her name, the sea carried it away.

Strangely, I found comfort in watching it vanish.

It seemed to me that the sea was not erasing the name at all. Rather, it was preserving it somewhere within its own immeasurable depths. Upon the sand, the name survived only for a fleeting moment; within the waves, perhaps, it would remain forever.

For a long time, I sat wondering whether there are certain names in life that we hide from the world. They are written nowhere, yet they never truly fade away.

Memory, I thought, is much like the sea.

Every new wave wipes away the visible traces upon the shore, but in its unfathomable depths nothing is ever really lost.

Akhilesh was sitting beside me.

He looked once at me, then at the name that kept appearing and disappearing upon the wet sand.

He said nothing.

Perhaps there are moments whose enchantment dissolves the instant words attempt to explain them.

We remained seated in silence while the sea continued to breathe before us in its endless rhythm.

After a while I turned to him and said,

A line of poetry has just come to me -

'लहर ले गई नाम तुम्हारा बाकी है बस गीली रेत. . .'

'The wave has carried away your name; all that remains is the wet sand. . .'

I searched for a matching line with the same intensity for a long time.

But that poem was never meant to be completed.

Only that single line remained with me-

'The wave has carried away your name; all that remains is the wet sand. . .'

Even today, my heart grows moist whenever I remember it.

And yet this stubborn heart never truly surrendered.

All through life, it kept returning to the shore,

writing that same name upon the sand,

again,

and again

and again. . . .

□□□

And now, one more thing . . .

As this long procession
of stories moves forward,
we have arrived at a point-
a milestone, perhaps-

when, in the year 1977,
I had formally become an engineer
and had already spent
twenty-one years and a few months
upon this earth.

Which simply means that,
as of today,
after more than seventy years
of my life have slipped by,
there are still nearly fifty years' worth
of stories left to tell . . .

And you, my dear,
will simply have to listen to them too . . .

As for me-
well, I am certainly going to tell them !

"सीधी सी बात न मिर्च मसाला
कह के रहेगा कहने वाला . . ."

"Straight and simple, without spice or embellishment-
the storyteller will say what he has to say . . ."

So then, I shall return-
and hopefully, very soon-
*with **AAKAAR,***
the third part of
"Kuch Yaad Raha, Kuch Bisar Gaya"
Until then . . .

For now,
this is all . . .