

R's Journey

***The Wounded Elephant***

***A novel about India, its challenges and its treasures, its wounds and its generosity, its mysteries and its spirituality.***

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## PROLOGUE

Climbing off the train in New Delhi, R recalled how his memorable journey had started three weeks ago in the same railway station. "But I am not exactly back to square one," the young man mused. "Indeed, I have changed so much in the last three weeks."

His eyes swept the crowd as he walked towards the exit. The people waiting on the platform did not look very different from three weeks ago. However, they *felt* different. Now, he saw something else in them ... through them.

Pushing and shoving his way through the colorfully garbed and noisy crowd, his nostrils assailed by a wide range of fragrances and odors, R smiled as he realized how much his attitude had changed. Now, he felt content, calm and in control. By contrast, just three weeks ago, in the same station, he felt irritated by the clamor fuelled by hundreds of men, women and children chatting and shouting; nauseated by the competing smells; and exasperated by the long wait in line.

His thoughts then wandered to his girlfriend Mohini. She was the first person he wished to meet. He wanted to talk to her about their cherished project ... and about his transformation. He was no longer sure that he wanted to leave his country for America after this three-week journey through India—Bharat as he now preferred to call it. Bharat was his country's real name, and that was just one of the many things that he had discovered about his country, about his culture, about his identity during this extraordinary voyage of discovery.

However, Mohini had always been there for him, cheering him up during his long search for that first job that never came; a job that would have allowed their young love to blossom freely, unfettered by parental constraints. Month after month, she had sustained his spirit with her light talk and her cheerfulness. Encouraged by the success of friends and relatives who had successfully emigrated to the United States, they had nurtured a common, beautiful American dream. Moving there and finding a job, they thought, would allow them to escape the highly competitive Indian job market, where only those who had the right connections landed the best positions.

Moving to America was initially a dreamy, far-fetched Plan B. Gradually, as R's hopes of finding a good job in New Delhi dwindled, Plan B replaced Plan A. Then onwards, their desire to move to America, where the grass was greener—at least for those who had a green card like R's brother Ashok—just kept growing and growing.

So how would Mohini feel if he now told her that he was re-thinking his future ... and consequently hers? What would she say? She might insist on pursuing their dream ... and he would give in; or she might just accept that he was no longer the person she had last seen three weeks ago.

He dismissed those thoughts, then smiled, savoring the new, better person he now was. His physical journey had brought him back full circle to New Delhi, but he now felt so different from the day he had started. He felt confident, not anxious; contented, not frustrated; proud of himself, not ashamed.

## **Part 1**

### **Despair and Hope in New Delhi**

## CHAPTER 1

Three weeks earlier R was unquestionably a different person. It was a frustrated and depressed young man who trudged along the dusty streets of New Delhi, unable to find that golden first job that he needed so much. Facing unemployment in the city in which he grew up was tough. "After all, this is New Delhi, the nation's capital, where teeming millions live ... or rather survive," he wondered.

Six months ago, R earned his Bachelor of Commerce degree with high honors. Disappointingly, that had not led him to a job offer yet. Reflecting upon that made him sourer by the day. "Ashok was so much smarter," he felt. Indeed, his elder brother had chosen Computer Science. Then, six years ago, his bachelor's degree in hand, Mr. and Mrs. Sharma's eldest son flew over to America on a scholarship. There, after completing his master's degree, Ashok joined a Los Angeles company as a programmer.

R took in a deep breath, trying to shake off his somber mood through a special *pranayam*<sup>1</sup> exercise that his guru had taught him. He did not pay much attention to the color of the sky that morning, although he might have if it had been blue; but New Delhi's sky was the same hazy, light tan color as always. As usual, dust and fumes seeped into his lungs at every breath. "Although it's still so early, Delhi's air is already laden with dust from the surrounding arid countryside, factory smoke and exhaust gases from thousands of antiquated motor vehicles," he pondered. Later on, when all the cars and the overloaded buses and trucks would race or crawl along the capital's roads, it would be much worse, though.

"The worse polluters are those *autoriskhas*." R hated those three-wheeled, two-passenger scooter-taxis. However, they were very popular with those who did not want to travel by bus but could not afford the luxury of the capital's 1950s Ambassador cabs.

Although it was not rush hour yet, thousands of vehicles already snaked their way through the streets of New Delhi, challenging pedestrians' eardrums with their jazz concerto of horns and poorly maintained mufflers.

"Those scooter riders believe that they can just thread through traffic and crowd alike," R cursed as he narrowly avoided being hit by one such vehicle, driven by a harassed-looking dad taking his son to school. The plump little boy sat sandwiched between his parents, both white-collar workers from their attire.

For a split second, R imagined himself and Mohini under those helmets, then shook his head in disbelief. "I would need that job first ... and even then, Mohini would never travel on a scooter. That's not her style. She would expect us to drive to work in a car; one of those boxy, subcompact Marutis at the very least."

Standing at the bus stop between an elderly man who occasionally spat out some saliva reddened by an early morning *paan*<sup>2</sup>, and a middle-aged woman draped in a red and green sari, R thought about the upcoming lunchtime meeting at his former university campus with Professor Vikram Varma.

Varma had been his mentor during his first year on the Commerce course. His guidance and advice had been invaluable to the young man, who had then pursued his studies with increasing confidence, easily earning his degree.

That day, R was on his way to meet his former professor with high hopes. Vikram Varma was not content with being a good teacher. A generous man, eager to spread happiness as well as knowledge, Varma tried his level best every year to help his students find good jobs by leveraging his contacts in industry. That year, some of R's friends had already been whisked off the unemployment lists through his efforts. After six months of knocking on all kinds of doors, R was running out of patience and his confidence was on the decline. He therefore welcomed the Professor's help.

"Why don't you just walk into one of those call-center recruitment offices?" his father once questioned indignantly. "It would be better than sitting at home and waiting. What kind of job are you expecting, anyway? Don't you know that I started my career as an office cleaner?"

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<sup>1</sup> Yogic breathing techniques.

<sup>2</sup> Chewing gum-equivalent, chewed to clean the mouth and teeth especially after meals taken outside the home; made with a mixture of spices with antiseptic properties, and wrapped in an aromatic leaf.

R had not replied; it was safer not to do so when his father started fuming like that. However, the last thing he wanted was to end up in a call-center. He knew that he would not be able to use what he had learnt at university; instead, he would have to learn skills that he did not care much about.

Indeed, one late afternoon, R was walking Mohini back from university when they met Anupama. Mohini's friend and neighbor had recently joined a large, overseas call-center. She was on her way to work, but she stopped for a quick chat, glancing nervously at her watch every ten seconds. R paid little attention to their conversation until the anxious-looking young woman started complaining about her job.

"Initially I was so excited ... their commercials were so appealing, Mo. They portrayed their company and the careers as being so 'hip', you know."

"So what's wrong Anupama?" Mohini asked her teasingly. "You haven't met an exciting young man there yet? You aren't making enough money?"

"Not funny, Mo! First, there are those late shifts, because we work for clients on the other side of the world. Then, we are practically chained to our desks; we have to ask permission to go to the washroom! We cannot take a day off when we need to—even when we are sick—or we could get fired. Even worse, we have to 'localize' our names! I have to tell customers my name is Ann, not Anupama! And I had to learn an American accent from the 'Deep South'. It feels so weird to provide service over the phone while pretending to be a local call center agent."

R walked away from that chance meeting enlightened. Prior to that, he had shared the general belief that call-center jobs for overseas clients were cool. Times were hard, though. There were loads of unemployed Commerce and Arts graduates in Delhi. And R's parents, both public servants with no connections in the private sector, could not help with his job search efforts.

Her heart overflowing with maternal anguish at her son's growing frustration—and on her elder sister's advice—R's mother had consulted a *gyotishi*<sup>3</sup>.

"Don't worry, Moonna<sup>4</sup>," Mrs. Sharma announced soothingly, "the *gyotishi* says that you will find the path leading to your career within a year!"

"Nonsense," R had reacted, shaking his head. "Besides, Delhi's air is so thick with pollution that I would need a magic lamp to find such a path ... if it exists."

That morning, he had another good reason to travel all the way from Sarojini Nagar, where he lived in his parents' high-rise apartment, to Nehru University. That reason's name was Mohini. "Even if the Professor does not have any good news for me, his daughter will undoubtedly cheer me up," the young man thought. His girlfriend's never-ending chatter about Bollywood<sup>5</sup>'s latest movies, and her views on the latest fashion always filled him with positive vibes ... or at least, made him forget his pessimistic thoughts for a while.

Images of his charming girlfriend flashed through the love-struck young man's mind: the long, silky black hair that swayed around her shoulders; her dark, almond shaped eyes veiled by those never-ending eyelashes; her full red lips; ... and all the gorgeous rest. He could almost hear her frequent, crystalline laughter; and he knew that her contagious cheeriness was exactly what he needed.

Courteously, R stepped aside to let the sari-clad woman climb on the bus. However, as the vehicle was jam-packed, he joined the men hanging on to the bus's windows from the outside. "Too bad for my white shirt," he regretted. "By the time I reach university, it will look brown with all the dust and smoke collected along the way."

Then, he mused, "No one will notice, though. In Delhi, colorful garments are usually worn by women, while khaki or brown seem to be the men's favorite colors."

Just at that moment, he noticed a group of schoolgirls walking in line on the sidewalk. "Wearing the same old British-style uniform from our pre-independence days," R observed. "We brag about becoming the world's leading IT outsourcing 'tiger', but we can't even free ourselves from the psychological shackles of our colonial past and design our own school uniforms!"

R had previously breached that subject with Professor Varma, an obdurate Marxist. The academic's opinion had sounded strangely conservative.

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<sup>3</sup> Indian astrologer using the sidereal zodiac.

<sup>4</sup> Affectionate nickname often given by women to their (extended) family's younger boys.

<sup>5</sup> The Indian version of Hollywood, located near Mumbai (Bombay).

"Why should we let materialism drive us, when we have so few resources that need to be distributed among so many? We should be content with what we have, and we should not waste any time, effort or money making frivolous and unnecessary changes to perfectly functional consumer goods. Such cravings for better products will only benefit rich capitalists ... and our country is still so poor."

R did not share the Professor's opinion. The young man knew that demand for consumer goods was the economic backbone of wealthy countries like the United-States, creating jobs and multiplying opportunities for social progress. "Consumer demand drives companies to hire talented immigrants like Ashok." Indeed, he was well aware that his elder brother was enjoying a much better life in Los Angeles than he would have if he had stayed in India.

As the bus sped southward along Aurobindo Marg, fast approaching the intersection at which it would turn right towards Nehru University, R's thoughts turned to his girlfriend once more. "Mohini will be so impressed if I can talk about the latest movie," he thought, craning his neck to peer at the closest roadside billboard. Fortunately, the garishly colored poster made it easy to guess what the story was about. "How original! The plot looks just like a dozen others. A rich heiress is kidnapped by the villain and his gang; a scantily dressed nightclub dancer tries to seduce the hero; the girl's rich father looks grateful; and the names of the lead performers. I already know the first few lines of the movie's best songs; they are on the radio all the time these days. Mohini is an expert in Bollywood movies, actors and songs, but today, I will certainly impress her!" he thought, sighing with boyish glee.

As the bus turned, R's eyes caught the outline of the Qutb Minar, located about a mile further south. The cylindrical structure of over 200 feet in height, crowned by a bulbous roof pointing arrogantly skywards, stood as a monument to the conquest of Delhi in 1193 by the Afghan chief Qutb-ud-din. That highly religious conqueror built India's first mosque at the base of his tower of victory. The *Mosque of the Almighty Islam*, as it was named, was erected upon the foundations of a razed Hindu temple. R also recalled that a sign on the monument proudly proclaims that it was built with materials obtained by demolishing over 20 neighboring Hindu temples.

Recollecting this episode of history led R to another painful thought. Three weeks ago, after an intense bout of frustration, he had emailed his elder brother Ashok, asking for help. Mohini had been pressing him to do that for months, but he had resisted until then. Being so bright, R felt that he could make it on his own. But as the months went by, his confidence melted like *ghee*<sup>6</sup> in Delhi's summer sun. Eventually, he reached out to his brother for help—albeit reluctantly, pinning all his hopes on a positive reply.

But Ashok's reply email was shockingly curt. "Forget about emigrating to America, Chotay<sup>7</sup>. Although I have a green card and I earn many greenbacks, I can tell you this: the grass is not much greener here! If you think that coming to America will solve your problems and make you happy, then think again. You are chasing a shadow."

As he read those lines, R felt as if an icy hand had grabbed his heart and squeezed it. "I never wanted to believe our parents when they said that Ashok had forgotten about us, but it may just be true," he complained to Mohini afterwards. "I don't understand; we always got along so well. What could have happened to make him say no?"

However, the young man did not give up. Undeterred, he continued researching about scholarships and job opportunities in America, spending hours on the Internet, exploring the websites of places that seemed nice to work and live in. Gradually, both Mohini and he became hooked to their American dream.

The bus's brakes squeaked like a dying vulture, jolting R out of his daydream. He jumped off the antique vehicle as soon as it was safe to do so and massaged his stiff forearms. It had been a long, unpleasant ride hanging from the bus window, inhaling all the fumes and dust of Delhi's morning traffic. "And yes, I cannot claim that this shirt is white anymore," he thought, glancing down.

The young man made his way towards the university's main library, planning to sit there in relative comfort and wait until the end of lunchtime. He was not feeling hungry, and did not want to spend a whole hour with Professor Varma.

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<sup>6</sup> Clarified butter used in food preparation.

<sup>7</sup> Young one.

Much later, a drowsy R emerged from between the bookshelves, nudged his way through the throng of students streaming in and out of the building and proceeded towards the Professor's favorite spot. Mohini's father was already there, sitting in the shade of his favorite mango tree. From time to time, he lifted his nose from his *dibba*<sup>8</sup> and peered through thick, black-rimmed glasses at the noisy crows perched in the branches above him.

"*Namastay*<sup>9</sup>, Uncle."

R found the last word hard to pronounce. After Vikram Varma found out about R's relationship with his daughter, he had insisted that the young man call him 'Uncle', probably to make their relationship more socially acceptable. After all, R and Mohini were not officially engaged.

"R! Come and join me, *Baytay*<sup>10</sup>. There is some shade over here," the jolly professor chuckled, pointing his *masala*<sup>11</sup>-stained fingers to a lonely-looking patch of drying grass. "Just warn me if you see a crow above me, Son. My lunch is spicy enough as it is and I don't feel like a *chutni*<sup>12</sup> of crow's droppings."

The young man complied, first checking the grass to make sure that he was not sitting on anything dirtier.

"How are your parents? And your brother?" the Professor asked genially.

As his mentor was not the type to beat around the bush, R guessed that Varma did not have any good news for him.

"They are fine, thanks. Ashok is probably doing well too, although we have not exchanged emails for several days."

"You don't say? Because of those blasted power outages, I bet. Wait a minute! We live in the same neighborhood, and, as far as I know, we have had uninterrupted power for a whole week—which is surprising, by the way."

"Ashok must be working on an important project," R replied tersely. He felt Varma's small, squinting eyes peering into his own, but he looked away.

"Be patient and you will find a job here, *Baytay*. Once they land in America, many of our friends and relatives seem to forget where they came from and who they left behind."

"Ashok is not like that," the young man affirmed, although his tone betrayed his doubts.

"Talking about work, I am still hoping to set up a meeting for you with one of my contacts at PPsoft," the bulky academic puffed as he got up.

Varma rinsed his right hand with some water that R poured for him, then put away his *dibba* in an old cotton bag strewn with colored beads and tiny mirrors.

"I am sorry that things are not working out faster for you, Son. I know how much Mohini and you look forward to a bright future together, but don't lose hope ... or faith in yourself."

The Professor undulated elephant-like towards the university building, wiping the sweat off his brow with the old beige scarf that never seemed to leave his shoulders. "We'll talk some more later. I have to give a lecture in five minutes."

R took leave of his mentor outside the main entrance. They knew that they would be seeing each other soon, as R usually accompanied Mohini home and spent an hour or two at the Varmas' apartment in the evenings.

As the young man turned away, he smiled. Now was the moment he had been waiting for all morning. As he stepped faster towards the other side of campus, his heart pounding, R remembered his first meeting with his girlfriend.

It happened at the university about a year ago, during the festival of Holi. In the neighboring villages, Holi celebrates the end of the harvest. On that day, men and women, old and young mingle freely, singing and dancing in the streets to the sound of *jhal*<sup>13</sup> and *dholuck*<sup>14</sup>, laughing and teasing while spraying each other with colored water. In the cities, Holi has no connection with the harvest but people still enjoy celebrating it. It is a great opportunity to have some honest family fun, to make new friends and to let off some steam.

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<sup>8</sup> Food container usually made of metal, with a tight lid secured by metal straps.

<sup>9</sup> Respectful greeting.

<sup>10</sup> Son.

<sup>11</sup> Combinations of (ground) spices.

<sup>12</sup> Spicy sauce made from fresh herbs, nuts, vegetables or fruits.

<sup>13</sup> Indian-style cymbals.

<sup>14</sup> Long drum.



In universities, it is an excellent excuse for boys and girls to overcome cold feet and social barriers ... and get better acquainted.

That particular day's events were forever imprinted in R's memory. With a few of his friends, he had been touring the campus, sprinkling professors and students alike with red and blue water when he saw Mohini for the first time. She was pretending to hide behind three girlfriends unrecognizably drenched with blue, green and red colored water. Although the young women shrieked loud and shrill, doing their best to ward off jets of colored water sprayed by R's friends, everyone knew that they were enjoying the moment. The colors used for Holi are easily washable, and people dress appropriately for the occasion, avoiding new or expensive garments.

R knew nothing about Mohini then. She was petite and very pretty, with something in her eyes that set her apart from her girlfriends. When they dispersed to avoid another spray of colored water, R caught a glimpse of her shapely body, revealingly clad in tight jeans and a buttoned-up denim jacket.

As he stood there, pretending to shield her, their eyes met. She looked surprised. Her arms, which she had raised to guard her pretty face from the spray, fell to her sides briefly. That was the moment R had been waiting for. He threw two handfuls of colored powder, one red and one yellow, on her head and her shoulders.

The young woman shrieked, then broke out laughing, with that same laugh that he had come to cherish over the past year. They both confided later that it had been a case of love at first sight. "Just like in a Bollywood movie," according to Mohini.

R soon learnt that she was the only child of his first-year political science professor. Then in his final year, R was not taking any of Varma's courses. He was grateful for that; he would have felt embarrassed sitting in the Professor's classes after becoming 'close friends' with his daughter.

As their relationship strengthened, the young lovers dared to dream of a common future together. But for that shared future to materialize, they both knew that R needed to find a suitable job as soon as possible after graduating.

Encouraged by her Marxist and egalitarian father to always speak out her mind, Mohini had told the Professor all about her love and hopes. As a caring and responsible father, the academic had asked to meet R.

"Son, I am happy for you and Mohini. I was young too, you know," he smiled encouragingly, sensitive to the apprehension that R tried hard to mask. "However, I would like to ask you ... no, I would like to beg you not to disappoint her. You see, she was only eight years old when her mother died. On the surface, my daughter may appear bubbly and always jovial, but I know too well how emotionally frail she really is."

They spoke openly, man to man, and R promised the concerned father that he would keep Mohini happy, always.

R parents' reaction could not have been more different. One afternoon, his aunt Deoki spotted the young couple walking back from university. She promptly phoned her younger sister.

"Yashoda, I have already made some inquiries about this girl. Our Moonna deserves a much better match." Deoki maintained such an impressive network of contacts in that part of the city that R's father joked sarcastically that his sister-in-law's informants made the National Intelligence Service look like amateurs.

"Don't you think that you should at least complete your studies and find a job before embarking on *grihast*<sup>15</sup>? I thought that our family guru, Pundit<sup>16</sup> Doobay explained the *four stages of life* to you during your last trip to Varanasi," Mr. Sharma yelled.

Concerned that her husband's blood pressure would rise dramatically if he lost his temper, Mrs. Sharma sidetracked the conversation towards Mohini.

"How can you be sure that she is the right girl for you, Moonna? Did you consult a qualified *jyotishi*? You know that divorces are on the rise, and you know that it's because of this silly 'love-marriage' trend."

"That's not the point! When you are a *bramhachari*<sup>17</sup>, you should focus on your studies. To become a *grihasti*, you should first be able to support a family!" R's father thundered.

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<sup>15</sup> Under Hindu tradition, this second stage of life is characterized by adulthood, self-reliance, marriage and family life.

<sup>16</sup> Title of a Hindu priest.

Once again, his wife tried to change the topic. "Besides, what do we know about this girl's family?"

R had never mentioned his parents' views to his girlfriend. He did not want to hurt her feelings. As soon as he found a job, he planned to ask his parents whether they would prefer him to marry Mohini with or without their blessings.

R's reminiscences were abruptly interrupted as Mohini tugged at his sleeve.

"I hope you were thinking of me, Hero."

R could see that she was tense, in spite of her casual greeting.

"What's wrong, Mo? You did not get a good grade for your paper?" he guessed.

Frowning, she did not reply right away. They took a few steps together, arms locked, away from the swarm of students ... and under the disapproving glare of a white-haired, bearded academic.

"R, I need a breath of fresh air; I need a break. Take me away from this place."

"Where would you like to go, Princess? Dubai, Singapore, the moon perhaps? This genie is at your service," he joked.

She looked up at him as they strolled casually towards the bus stop, hand in hand. Her friends were right to envy her. R was handsome. Tall and athletic, he used to smile a lot before his fruitless job search weighed him down. His face could turn hostile so fast, though. She remembered when those boys wolf-whistled at her once. R had turned around with his 'hard' face ... and they silently melted away into the crowd.

"Let's go to Connaught Place ... then take a walk downtown, perhaps."

He said that he kept fit by practicing *hath yog* and *pranayam*! Mohini could not comprehend how someone who lived in modern-day India and who planned to move to America could indulge in such weird and archaic practices. However, her cousins, who now lived in San Francisco, wrote that *yog* practice was becoming popular again in America.

"The Americans will probably get over this fad by the time we get there," she wished.

"Then, R will practice body-building in one of those modern gyms ... like Ahmed Khan, Bollywood's top star."

Mohini loved R ... and she liked the idea of moving to America as his wife. Over the past three months, she had repeatedly suggested to R that he should consider emigrating to the United States. "My cousins live there, and so does your brother Ashok."

The young woman dreamed of driving around Beverley Hills in one of those super-sized American cars, 'Tadillac' was the brand her cousins had mentioned once. Or was it 'Radillac'? She was not sure anymore. "I'll stop from time to time to collect autographs from American stars, like Leonardo ... what is his surname again? Anyway, Ahmed Khan and those repetitive Bollywood movies will just seem like a bad dream then!" she imagined gleefully.

She glanced sideways at R's drawn features. "He is having such a hard time finding that first job. I nearly hope he does not find it. Then, he would have no other choice but to emigrate to America," she speculated. "On the other hand, if he does find a position here, we'll buy an apartment in Soondar Nagar, the best residential area in town, right between the Yamuna River and the golf course, just a few minutes away from India Gate, the symbolic center of New Delhi."

Mohini grabbed her boyfriend's arm tightly. Here, among all the students, no one would frown at such an intimate gesture.

"R, I feel my luck is changing already. Here comes our bus," she chuckled.

## CHAPTER 2

As always, Mohini chatted all the way through the bus ride. As for R, he was simply glad to be with her, to gaze at her cheery face and to listen to her. From time to time he would just smile approvingly.

"You know, R, I asked Dad if he would buy me the latest ..."

The tiger-like roar of a goods truck overtaking the bus censored the rest of her sentence. Pretending that he had heard what his girlfriend had said, R swayed his head from side to side, in the typical Indian gesture of agreement.

"... then he gave me his standard lecture on the ills of materialism, and of course he refused to buy it," she sighed. "When you settle down in America, I ..."

This time, R was grateful that the bus's loud engine noise drowned her words. He turned away, staring through the window. America! It seemed such a distant, impossible dream; a dream that they might have to give up, now that Ashok had refused to help him.

Mohini paused, sensing her companion's doubts. It was hard to compete against the roar of the bus's engine and the din of the surrounding traffic, so she allowed herself to float onto a cloud of sweet reverie. It was one of her favorite daydreams, in which she saw herself in a luxurious Californian villa.

Her maternal cousins, who had settled on the West Coast ten years ago, fed her imagination with tantalizing facts about their seemingly idyllic life over there. As a result, Mohini had compiled an ever-lengthening wish list of what she wanted to own and accomplish if she ever reached that fantastic land of opportunity. She dreamed of a villa with a swimming pool; a red convertible; a widescreen plasma TV; a cell phone with a built-in camera; fashionable jeans, tank tops; and those mini-skirts that she could not wear in an India that seemed so slow, so reluctant to step into the twenty first century.

"It's a good thing that Indian movies are nearly all shot in exotic locations like Mauritius or Switzerland. The actors wear nice western clothes and some of the women even color their hair blond. For a couple of hours those movies whisk you far away from India's grime and indigence ... and, for a while at least, you don't feel Indian at all." She turned towards her boyfriend, her black eyes glowing intensely under inch-long eyelashes. "If only he could do it."

R knew how passionately his girlfriend felt about emigrating to America. Once, he had expressed some doubts about the project ... and she had burst out, "We all want a successful life, R. We all want to grow to our full potential. Those who settle in America have a much better chance of attaining those goals. On the other hand, those who stay in India usually end their lives in mediocrity and poverty. Your brother and my cousins are living their lives fully in America. They work in excellent conditions and they accomplish a lot more than if they had stayed here. And they are handsomely rewarded for their hard work. Here, they would have had to beg for a job, and even after a lifetime of polishing their bosses' shoes for a miserable salary, they would have barely been able to make ends meet."

Her outburst had left R speechless. However, he knew that Mohini was right; the hurdles and humiliations he had faced while searching for work during the last few months were proof enough.

Later that day, in Connaught Place, the young couple sat in their favorite American-style fast food outlet and shared a slice of pizza and a soda. Like other Indian patrons, they enjoyed going there to sniff the magic aroma of American food, providing some substance to their migratory dreams.

R glanced around at the foreigners sitting in the restaurant. "They are probably enjoying a respite from corrosively spicy Indian food, or, after enduring a bout of 'Delhi belly', they could be recovering on a safer diet," he speculated.

Although this was an expensive place for an unemployed young man whose mother occasionally slipped him an allowance, R dared not suggest to his girlfriend that they should try an Indian eatery instead; he did not want to look cheap. In addition, Mohini's tastes and views were turning increasingly 'western'. She wore jeans and t-shirts most of the time, and she listened to Hindi rap songs peppered with English. These days, she exclusively watched Indian movies shot outside the country.

"That emigration project has really grabbed hold of her. She wants it to happen so much that she is tuning out anything Indian and soaking in as much western culture as she can," R concluded.

As they walked out of the restaurant a few minutes later, Mohini smiled, her academic worries forgotten. "That was great. Now let's go to the Jantar Mantar, Hero. It's such a weird place, but I like it so much."

The Jantar Mantar observatory in New Delhi was built by Maharaj<sup>18</sup> Jai Singh II. This previous monarch of Jaipur—the capital of the state of Rajasthan—had a passion for astronomy. The building of a monumental sundial in Delhi, along with many other stone instruments used to measure the movement of celestial bodies and to predict eclipses, was an extravagant idea of his.

The young couple had visited the site several times before, but R had given up trying to explain the workings of the oversized instruments to Mohini. She just seemed to enjoy walking around those large stone structures surrounded by greenery in the heart of the Indian capital.

"Mo, what is there between you and this place?" R had asked her during their last visit.

Smiling nostalgically, she had then revealed, "My mother brought me here several times, R. She was a painter, as you know. She would stand over there, sketching various angles of these stone structures while I climbed and played on them."

That day, they ambled along Rajiv Chowk until they reached Palika Bazaar. Mohini insisted—and R accepted—to escort her inside. A few minutes later, he gasped for air as they emerged from the crowded passageways of that famous market. R hated crowds and always did his utmost to avoid them. "One more reason," Mohini had once pointed out smugly, "to move out of this overcrowded country." The persistent solicitations of peddlers of *champal*<sup>19</sup>, *jooti*<sup>20</sup>, essential oils and *agarbati*<sup>21</sup> irritated the young man. His girlfriend, however, seemed to enjoy the attention. "It's probably because of Mohini's sunglasses and her western clothes," he thought. "She is flattered that the merchants think of her as a tourist."

But the young man's relief was short lived. He soon found out that he was expected to follow Mohini along Janpath Marg. There, she strolled along the open-air street market. Fortunately for R, the Janpath market, though noisier, was much less crowded. The sellers, mostly women clad in colorful saris, sat on rugs that shielded their neatly stacked merchandise from the dirt as they haggled with customers.

Mohini took all her time, absorbing the shapes, colors and sounds of the folkloric trading place while R plodded along resignedly through the sparse crowd of tourists and local buyers, keeping an eye on his girlfriend's purse, ready to thwart off any thief. Thankfully, she soon tired of the saris, the cushion covers embroidered with intricate patterns and mirrors, the hand paintings depicting scenes of Krishna's life, the brass and copper utensils, and the cheap but eye-catching jewelry.

But then it was the Tibetan market's turn ...

"Mohini, we would have reached Jantar Mantar by now if we had taken Sansad Marg instead," R said, exhaling impatiently.

She smiled at him. "I was feeling lousy earlier, R. But not anymore. Thanks so much for bringing me here."

A short while later, seated next to each other on a stone step at the ancient observatory, the young couple finally enjoyed a few precious minutes, their murmured words of love punctuated by the occasional cry of a New Delhi crow.

Then, once again, R expressed his doubts about the future. "I don't know if we'll ever reach America, Mo. Ashok does not want to help, and on my own it won't be that easy."

"Don't let that bother you, Hero. And above all, never give up. So many people have achieved their American dream. I am convinced that we'll succeed too."

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<sup>18</sup> Great King.

<sup>19</sup> Traditional, flat, leather sandals.

<sup>20</sup> Lavishly embroidered traditional Indian-style shoes.

<sup>21</sup> Indian incense—various fragrances including the popular sandalwood.

Framing R's face with her dainty hands, she forced him to look into her eyes and fervently added, "You must insist. Tell your brother that life is terrible here; that you can't find a decent job. That's true anyway! Tell him that you are desperate ... that you don't know what you might do next if things don't get better. He will give in and accept to help us."

Her eyes conveyed her trust in him. "He must not waver; he cannot!" she wished with all her heart.

"Hey, Hero. Don't *think* about it anymore. *Do* it! This evening, send him an email. Now let's go home. I will make you a nice dinner and you can have another heated debate with my dad. If that does not cheer you up, I don't know what will."

"I can think of a few other things ... Mo, " he replied, smiling mischievously and looking deep into her eyes.

"I am afraid those 'other things' will have to wait until you are ready to ask my father for my hand, Mr. Sharma," she replied primly as she got up and dusted her jeans.

R smiled. He enjoyed his soirées at the Varmas, debating with the Professor about politics and social issues, while savoring Mohini's company ... and her tasty food. Attractive and jovial, the young woman was also a superb cook. Mohini's only weakness was an uneven academic performance, and he frequently had to console her as she struggled to obtain decent grades.

In addition, R appreciated the Professor's egalitarian attitude. Vikram Varma was about the same age as his father but at least the academic treated him with respect, not as a 'child with little experience of real life', as Mr. Sharma did.

All the way to the Varmas' apartment, having clearly found her old self again, Mohini pummeled her boyfriend with movie gossip. "The current fashion in Bollywood movies these days is western-style jeans, jackets, tank tops, and even mini-skirts. What do you think, R?" she babbled. Before her boyfriend could reply, she added, "In the 80s and 90s, actresses wore those awful *salwar kamiz*<sup>22</sup>, and before that it used to be saris. Can you imagine! How could anyone expect them to dance in musical scenes, or run during romantic chases. No wonder those poor dears were always easily caught by the actors. It was not fair. Thankfully, those movie directors finally came to their senses. Now, with mini-skirts ..."

His girlfriend's words seemed to drift away as R slipped into the protective cocoon of his own thoughts. "Bollywood is indeed a well established dream weaving machine, shaping as well as reflecting Indian tastes and fantasies, decade after decade. These days, movie producers all seem to be making American-style movies ... maybe because we all fantasize about becoming American."

The Varmas lived in a spacious apartment; much too big since Mrs. Varma's death. However, it held many dear memories for Mohini and her father. The late Mrs. Varma taught visual arts at Nehru University and was a prolific painter. On his first visit, R found the apartment walls covered with her work. In the entrance hallway, there was a painting showing Vikram Varma. "Younger and much slimmer," R had thought cheekily. A large child portrait of Mohini dominated the living room. It was a vivid painting showing her as a little girl sitting on a rug, surrounded by a tribe of colorful, folkloric wooden dolls. "Adorable," R felt each time he gazed at it.

That evening, R sat in the living room, sipping an excellent cardamom-flavored chai. He shared a few *bhajia*<sup>23</sup> with Vikram Varma, who preferred some ginger-flavored tea. "It soothes the bouts of cough that grip me at dusk, when the air cools down," the Professor explained to a sympathetic R.

Mohini's father was a firm believer in social equality, so he defended his Marxist views fiercely; but once R understood that his first year political science professor did not take any criticism of his doctrines personally, he regularly challenged his mentor's views.

That evening, Mohini kicked off the debate from the adjoining kitchen. "But Dad, the only communist country left on the planet is Cuba. Even Russia gave up years ago."

"At least they were able to shake off the age-old shackles imposed by the aristocracy on poor peasants. They got rid of a feudal system and instituted an egalitarian society. In our country, the great majority of people still suffocate under injustices of all kinds. That's why Communism flourishes in so many of our states."

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<sup>22</sup> Women's attire of Afghan origin, consisting of a long tunic worn over baggy pants, and a scarf covering the head and shoulders.

<sup>23</sup> Fried tidbits made with chick pea flour, onion and herbs.

"But Naxalites<sup>24</sup> are bandits, Uncle," R spewed out contemptuously. "Initially they claimed to support land reform in favor of poor peasants. Now they just roam about in rural areas, kidnapping, maiming and killing randomly."

"I neither support nor defend the actions of those bandits," Varma defended, raising his hands in protest. But the ideals of Marxism ..."

R interrupted, "Communism is said to be progress-oriented but its results seem contrary to that goal. Look at the Soviet Union ... or even India under previous socialist governments. Both societies were stifled by sluggish material progress. Only recently did our government start to deregulate, opening up this dusty economy to progress. Indians and Soviets lived with only a few models of automobiles for decades. ... But then, most people could not afford one, anyway."

As Varma nearly choked on a *bhajia*, unable to suppress his laughter, Mohini's worried face poked out of the kitchen. "Are you okay, Dad?"

The Professor wiped his eyes and replied, "Children, thanks to all those years of socialist rule and state intervention, India was able to eliminate famine and return to self-sufficiency in food. Taxes and massacres during several centuries of Moslem rule bled our country dry. Things got worse when the British replaced the Moguls and systematically pillaged India's resources. As diversified farmlands were forcibly converted to monoculture to satisfy the Empire's needs, famines became increasingly frequent."

Varma paused emphatically, squinting deep into R's eyes through his thick glasses, "As for the cars, R, as long as they do the job, why should we change them? Why do we need ten or twenty different models of cars when hundreds of millions of Indians still live in abject poverty? We should be content with what we have and not be tempted by ego-gratifying consumer products. That's the only way India will free up resources to make much-needed investments ... so that we can *all* have a decent life someday."

Unabated, R challenged his host again. "Many believe that the governments of communist Indian states swept away our ancient culture and values to make way for their atheistic doctrine. In doing so, they created spiritual and cultural voids that are now being filled by imported materialism, or by foreign evangelists laughing at our stupidity."

R knew that he was merely echoing views held by his parents and their friends. Personally, he did not have an opinion on that subject, but he wanted to hear the Professor's views.

"It's six o'clock, R. Don't forget to call home and let your mom know that you will be late," Mohini yelled from the kitchen.

"I'll be back in a minute, Uncle," R mumbled as he stood up.

After speaking briefly with his mother, R hung up, exhaling a sigh of relief. Mrs. Sharma's icy tone had conveyed her disapproval more effectively than a volley of hot words. Getting angry was not her style; she had always been the cooler half of the Sharma couple.

R's parents had never approved of his choice for a life partner—the daughter of a widowed, Marxist university professor, not wealthy by any measure. However, after R had refused to stop seeing Mohini, they avoided that subject as much as possible.

As soon as R hung up, his mother rang her elder sister for moral support. "Deoki, my Moonna was such a darling growing up; a model son, always so obedient and studious," she complained, sobbing. "I am at a loss to explain to his father how his upbringing went wrong. ... I wonder what he sees in that Varma girl."

"Don't worry, Yashoda. I am making all necessary inquiries. When I find out anything about her that could change R's feelings, I'll let you know right away."

"My son would be such a prize for a girl from a good family, Deoki. The kind of girl who would come with a sizeable *dahe*<sup>25</sup>, I mean. Of course that can only happen when he finds a good, stable government job, or even a position in one of those foreign call-centers that pay such princely salaries."

In the Varmas' apartment, sitting on a thick, hand-woven rug, R rekindled his friendly verbal duel with the Professor, "What bothers me with this ideology, Uncle, is that it needs to destroy in order to grow. It just cannot co-exist with existing cultures. Take China and

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<sup>24</sup> Local term for Communists.

<sup>25</sup> Dowry.

Russia for example; communism wiped out most of their cultural heritage. That's why I am surprised that it still has so many supporters in India."

"Why is that?" an irked Varma asked.

"Because our country, our civilization has been such a great example of tolerance over so many millennia. This is why so many ethnic, linguistic and religious groups were able to co-exist peacefully in India—until the Moslem invasions, that is." Again, R was merely echoing what he had overheard in his parents' social circles. Personally, deep down inside, he could not care less. His only concern was to pave his way in life—preferably in America.

The bulky professor breathed in deeply and slowly to keep calm; his daughter's boyfriend had such a knack for switching from one argument to another.

"Socialist ideology was perceived by many of our great independence-era leaders as being essential for unifying India after the British-induced separation of Moslem Pakistan and Bangladesh. So, while our country is still divided in many ways, Marxist and socialist ideas originally generated the glue that holds together today's India."

R finished his cup of chai and swallowed the last *bhajia*. Although cold now, both remained delicious. "As usual," he thought. "An equal mix of milk and water, and the right amount of tea leaves gives Mohini's chai that ideal caramel color and strong flavor."

Varma, sensing an advantage in the young man's silence, carried on passionately, "Our country could have made as much progress as China if only .... Over there, an elite group of leaders impose their decisions on the population; and the people comply in the nation's interest. They believe that discipline and sacrifice will ultimately pay off. The leaders know that a western-style democratic system imposed on such a huge population would bring paralysis, chaos—as it has done here. Their authoritarian approach and the 'one child per couple' policy allowed them to subdue the dragon of population growth. Here, in the 'largest democracy in the world', a prime minister who had the courage to promote a voluntary sterilization program faced prosecution after failing to get re-elected. Now, guess what? Within a few decades, we will overtake China as the most populated country in the world."

As the chubby professor paused to catch his breath, R replied, "I agree with you on one point: democracy makes our overpopulated country hard to govern. Successive governments don't last long enough to make a difference in the lives of people, as they struggle to survive a few months on the shaky foundations of conflicting alliances and coalitions. Besides, it seems that, as a nation, we still have a dynastic penchant. How else can we explain that we elect inexperienced political leaders just because their mothers or their grandfathers were politicians? I think that the absence of stable, firm and inspiring political leadership may explain why this country is so slow to take off economically. However, in my opinion, communism is not the solution. Our inclination to favor monopolies over free market competition, so evident during the *Licence Raj* of the last few decades, has stifled the necessary entrepreneurship needed to extract us from the poverty trap. Today, while our East Asian neighbors liken their progress to the rise of roaring tigers, what image can we invoke?"

"Dinner is served!" Mohini announced cheerfully, bringing in plates of steaming food and ending R's lengthy rant.

Silence dominated the meal, as R and Varma were too appreciative to pursue their conversation. Every now and then, Mohini lifted her pretty nose from her *thali*<sup>26</sup>, taking pleasure in the results of her culinary efforts. Indeed, both men proved that her *naan*<sup>27</sup> and *muttur-paneer*<sup>28</sup> curry were literally finger-licking good.

At the end of the meal, as they rose to wash their hands, R thanked his girlfriend with a smile and a prolonged look that spoke volumes. She averted his gaze bashfully, a telltale smile nonetheless brightening her pretty face.

After dinner, the Professor resumed their conversation. "You see, Son, we should also add our national passion for religion to the list of impediments to our socio-economic progress. If economists could evaluate the resources we Indians squander on religious practice, it would explain, in my opinion, a large part of the economic gap between our country and China. Over there, the political class frowns upon religious practice. Just think

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<sup>26</sup> Stainless steel plate.

<sup>27</sup> Flat bread, leavened with yogurt.

<sup>28</sup> Peas and soft, white cheese.

about it, all the time that the Chinese don't spend in temples, mosques or churches like we Indians do, they invest in work," the atheistic Varma explained with a snigger.

Stealing a look at the kitchen, where Mohini was, he lowered his voice. "And that's not all. We also have Bollywood! If Karl Marx was still alive today, he would probably say that movies and soap operas are the opium of our people," the plump academic concluded, his belly shaking with stifled laughter. Wiping his eyes and glasses with a red and white handkerchief, the Professor carried on. "In fact, both of these factors have now combined through television. People waste so much time watching TV-series of religious myths like the Ramayan<sup>29</sup> or the Mahabharat<sup>30</sup>," Varma exclaimed indignantly.

R thought of his own parents, who were among those millions who glued themselves fervently to TV sets every week to watch, teary-eyed, their favorite Hindu epics. For some unknown reason, he felt the need to defend their right to spend time in that way.

"There are millions of people who firmly believe that what *you* call 'myths', Uncle, are actually historical events. Besides, are they really myths, or is that what others would like us to believe? You see, a few years ago, archeologists discovered the submerged ruins of Dwarka, the fortress city built by Krishna and his people on an island off the coast of Gujarat thousands of years ago. As narrated in the Bhagwat pooran<sup>31</sup>, shortly after Krishna's death, an earthquake caused the island to collapse into the ocean. For the last few years, researchers have been diving there to amass artifacts; there is even a website now. And the bridge that was described in the Ramayan—the one that was built by Ram and his army to cross into Lanka. Well, satellite photos show a string of submerged landmasses linking India and Sri Lanka. During the last ice-age, these islets may well have been above the ocean's surface ... the famous 'bridge' in other words."

"Don't tell me that *you* believe in legends and fairy tales, R. I would be so disappointed," Varma sneered.

"Dad, R can believe whatever he likes!" Mohini protested, poking her head out of the kitchen.

"And it's time for me to leave. Thank you both for such great company and delicious food," R said.

It was eight and a half sharp when R left after a last wink at Mohini on the doorstep of the Varmas' apartment.

Later, back in his room, he remembered his conversation with his girlfriend at the Jantar Mantar. "How passionate she is about leaving for America. I guess I'd better take it seriously too."

He sat down in front of the old family computer and typed an email to his brother Ashok, giving it the pathetic, near-desperate flavor that Mohini had suggested. "These old 1950s tragedies that my parents like to watch are so saddening, but today I have to thank them for the inspiration. If Ashok does not capitulate after reading this, I promise to change my name," he thought, sighing with satisfaction as he clicked on the 'send' button.

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<sup>29</sup> The story of Ram, an exemplary king and person, his wife Sita and many other protagonists, originally written by rishi Valmiki several thousand years ago.

<sup>30</sup> Ancient Indian epic.

<sup>31</sup> Ancient Hindu sacred text describing the life of Krishna as an incarnation of Vishnu.



### CHAPTER 3

The following morning, R sat at the dining room table, pleasantly inhaling the pungent aroma of the *masala*-flavored noodles that he had just prepared. Feeling hungry, he started to gobble it down, although the food was steaming hot.

"If I am ever able to leave this poor, dusty and polluted country and settle in rich, beautiful and lively America, I should be accustomed to fast-food. That's how Americans find time to do so much more and live their lives to the fullest extent," he thought.

Mr. Sharma stared peevishly down his long, beaky nose at the younger of his two sons, while savoring a *dosa*<sup>32</sup> wrap filled with coconut *chutni* and potato curry. "He insists on having a traditional Indian breakfast," R mused, "although it must have taken Sunil over an hour to prepare this."

"What you are eating has little nutritional value, R. I wonder what you can hope to accomplish with this junk in your belly. That being said, you don't seem to be up to a lot these days. How is your job search going?" Mr. Sharma prodded.

Her son choosing indifference as a shield against paternal sarcasm, Mrs. Sharma filled the awkward silence, "What your dad means, Moonna, is that you should take into account that your *prakriti*<sup>33</sup> is dominated by *vata*<sup>34</sup>. To balance it, your diet should include certain food types. A warm *dosa* wrap filled with heavy and oily potato curry would be good for you. Your dad has a *pita*<sup>35</sup> dominance, yet he manages it well through the right food mix."

R nodded, slurping down his noodles. What could he say? That he did not share many of their views and beliefs? That he hoped to emigrate to America? No, he did not want to hurt their feelings.

He had witnessed some of the hardships they had surmounted, slaving for years in low-level public service jobs to pay the bills and raise two sons. Then, Ashok's departure had hit them hard. Mrs. Sharma's hair, perfectly black until six years ago, started turning gray soon after her eldest son left. R knew that they also worried about his own future in an overpopulated India—in which young graduates were lucky to find work as office help or, in a few cities only, as IT service workers. "Except those whose parents are well-off or have the right connections," he reflected bitterly.

"More and more people are opting for fast-food these days," he ventured lamely.

"Because they know little or nothing about nutrition!" Mr. Sharma snapped back.

"Moonna, they are probably people who don't have time to cook or who can't afford a good cook," Mrs. Sharma smiled soothingly, noticing her husband's dilated nostrils, a tell-tale sign that he was about to erupt in a bout of anger.

But this time R was the first to lose his cool. His father's authoritarian attitude was getting unbearable. That, along with his own lack of success on the job market made him mad.

"Okay, I am eating this to get used to fast-food. Americans eat this way, and I want to settle there, just like Ashok!"

His parents eyed each other in shocked silence. Mrs. Sharma's smile vanished instantly, hurt feelings exuding from her watering eyes and trembling lips. As she struggled to suppress her emotions, her husband questioned sarcastically, "So that's why people are so desperate to go to America? To eat junk food?"

A rebellious R replied, "Look Mom, Dad. Do you really want me to stay here and be stifled by the thousand and one constraints of this poor country? Wouldn't you prefer that I build myself a better life in America ... like Ashok?"

"We have lived all our lives in India and we enjoyed a decent life. Didn't you grow up in relative comfort compared to so many millions of Indian youths?" R's father exclaimed, waving his arms to show the living and dining room, eclectically decorated—over many years—with Indian-style furniture, tapestry and craft.

"You just *survived*," an increasingly defiant R retorted. "I want to live my life fully. I want to exploit my full potential. India has a great past, but America is the land of opportunities."

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<sup>32</sup> Pancake made with rice flour, ground urad dal and yogurt.

<sup>33</sup> Specific nature of a person under *ayurved*.

<sup>34</sup> Type of person with characteristics such as: enthusiasm, imagination, dynamism, predilection for change, etc.

<sup>35</sup> Type of person with characteristics such as: irritability, tendency to criticize, meticulousness, discipline, etc.

The conversation was getting out of hand. Mrs. Sharma did not want her husband to leave for work with his blood pressure going through the roof. At fifty-eight, he should take it easy. After all, retirement was just around the corner. Shivkumar Sharma had toiled demurely in shadowy, unexciting positions during a long, lackluster career as a public servant. Because of his unbending principles, he had never nurtured the kind of relationships needed for 'accelerated' promotions. For the man she was proud to call her life partner, a day's work meant a full day of work well done, not a day spent polishing the boss's shoes.

She intervened, shunting the conversation onto a less confrontational path, "I always said that we should never have given the children the north-west room," she exclaimed tearfully, looking at her husband. "If only you listened to me more often, this would not have happened. Even my dear Ashok could still be here."

Mr. Sharma knew how much she loved her first-born. When Ashok had won that scholarship and left hurriedly for Los Angeles, it had taken her several months to recover from the shock. They had never even suspected that their eldest son wanted to leave for America. After all, he had won a gold medal in his final year of Computer Science.

Like a vulture—according to Mr. Sharma—Aunt Deoki had swooped to the scene as soon as she heard that Ashok had left. "You see Yashoda," she explained emphatically to her younger sister, "your sons' room is in the north-west quadrant of this apartment. According to *vastu*<sup>36</sup>, that direction is ruled by *vayu*<sup>37</sup>."

"I guess that must be bad, *Didi*<sup>38</sup>?" Mrs. Sharma had asked, her voice quivering with grief.

"Not exactly *bad*, Yashoda. You see, *vayu* influences movement, and therefore instability ... or progress, depending on how you choose to look at it," Deoki explained. "I strongly advise you to move R to another room unless you want him to follow his elder brother's footsteps ... and leave when you and your husband are nearing the dusk of your lives."

But Mr. Sharma had rejected that recommendation when he guessed its origin. Since the beginning of his married life, he had bitterly resented Deoki's interference. However, he had never been able to wean his wife from her elder sister's influence.

Undeterred, R's mother had then discreetly re-decorated her younger son's room with appropriate colors and shapes to compensate for the *vayu* element.

Apparently, however, that had not been enough.

Mr. Sharma did not respond to his wife's clumsy attempt to divert his attention. In his books, R's reply had crossed all permissible limits. His neatly trimmed gray mustache twitching with rage, he burst out, "How dare you? Out there, millions of people actually survive on just a few rupees<sup>39</sup> a day. We have had a comfortable, sheltered life thanks to our government jobs. We were able to shield you and your brother from the kind of poverty in which your mother and I grew up in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh<sup>40</sup>. In so many parts of this country, people still live from hand to mouth. So yes, we are proud of 'surviving' as we do! And that brother of yours who never writes, you think he is happy in Los Angeles? I am sure he was disappointed with his American dream. It's only a dream, you see, nothing else. Once they get there, immigrants' dreams are shattered by the tough reality. They may earn more money, but they pay a hefty price in return. Take your brother for example; he may be making money like a *seth*<sup>41</sup> in California, but he has forgotten about his mother, his father and his younger brother. You call that 'living your life fully'. I call it living it selfishly!"

Wheezing after this passionate outburst, Shivkumar Sharma turned away to look at the wall clock, concealing a sharp pain in his chest. R's father was short, with a bureaucrat's potbelly, and cardio-vascular disease had taken full advantage of his short-tempered nature and sedentary lifestyle.

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<sup>36</sup> Ancient Indian science of architecture for wellness and prosperity, based on aligning living areas with the natural order, shapes, colors, and personal characteristics to create the best conditions for living and working.

<sup>37</sup> The gaseous state / element of air. Vayu and the other four elements under vastu [akash (space), jal (liquid), prithvi (solid) and agni (energy)] represent natural influences and forces to be taken into account when planning living areas for optimal benefit.

<sup>38</sup> Elder sister.

<sup>39</sup> Indian currency. 1 rupee = 100 paisa.

<sup>40</sup> Northern and central Indian states, among the most heavily populated.

<sup>41</sup> Rich merchant.

"I have to leave for work, Yashoda," he panted as he got up, one hand pressed against his tie to keep it from dipping into the bowl of *chutni*.

From the apartment's balcony, Mrs. Sharma watched her husband as he hung on to the bus window. This was normal during rush hour, but he was getting too old for that. If he was lucky, he would find a standing place inside the bus later during the trip.

She went back inside. R was laboriously swallowing his now cold *masala*-flavored noodles. She knew that her son was finding it hard to eat after such an emotionally charged skirmish with his father. Unfortunately, their clashes were getting more and more frequent. So, a few days ago, she had consulted a local *gyotishi*, a holy man warmly recommended by Deoki.

"You know Moonna, your father is right. You will find your way here, in India. The *gyotishi* said it," she told her son.

"Mom, please stop calling me Moonna. Didn't I tell you about my latest nightmare?" R protested.

"A nightmare!"

"Yes. It was like this: I was at the university, surrounded by my friends, when you came and called me 'Moonna' in front of them. They all burst out laughing. Fortunately, the earth gave way under my feet and I fell into a deep crevice."

Mrs. Sharma smiled with relief, guessing that her son's 'nightmare' was an imaginary one.

"Really, Mom. I am not a child anymore. One of these days you will forget and call me 'Moonna' in front of Mohini."

Mrs. Sharma's smile vanished instantly. "Is this what it would take to stop her from seeing you?" she asked coldly.

"Mom!" R protested, leaving the table to retire in his room.

The young man peeked out at eleven when the doorbell rang. Old Sunil, their cook and housekeeper, opened the apartment door and handed five stacked *dibbas* to the young man standing in the hallway. The head of the Sharma household would get his warm lunch on time. Like every other weekday, Sunil had prepared a well-balanced *ayurvedic*<sup>42</sup> meal for his employer. The largest *dibba*, at the bottom of the stack, contained rice or *roti*<sup>43</sup>. The other smaller containers held *dal*, cooked vegetables, *chutni* or *anchar*<sup>44</sup>. A metal strap held the *dibbas* tightly shut, preventing any spillage.

From the balcony, R observed the *dibbawala*, clad in khaki shorts and shirt, as he ran across the street carrying several sets of similar looking food containers. Although mostly illiterate, the *dibbawalas* used a foolproof, color-coded system to ensure that their customers received food prepared in their homes ... not another person's. During British rule, Indian public service employees received their noon meals in this highly efficient way, much to the delight of their productivity-minded masters. To this day, this tradition was still reverently upheld by Mr. Sharma and many others who, like him, preferred home-made food in a country where food-related infections were rife.

In the early afternoon, R took leave of his mother. Feeling sick, she was staying home that day. "I'm going out for a walk, Mom. I won't be long."

However, he was—returning to the family abode in the evening. The whole afternoon, the young man wandered around aimlessly, too upset to search for a job.

"The previous night at Mohini's place was great," he pondered, "but this morning was quite the opposite." The volley of hot words exchanged with his father had brought back his gloomy mood. It was therefore a somber young man who paced along the streets of his neighborhood all afternoon. He did not know or seem to care where his footsteps took him.

Before leaving, he had checked his email. Ashok had not replied. "Is Father right about him? Has he turned selfish?" he had wondered.

Turning pensively into a narrow street, R was forced to stop as he found himself among a group of men who were listening to a speaker perched on a wooden box. There could

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<sup>42</sup> *Ayurved* is the holistic and preventative Indian wellness system.

<sup>43</sup> Flat, unleavened bread (like *pharatha* or *chapati*).

<sup>44</sup> Fruit (unripe) pickle (mango, lime, etc.) preserved in oil and spices.

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not have been more than twenty men in the audience, yet the orator screeched as if the attendance at his event was huge.

"Neither the best time of the day, nor the best location for a public meeting," R observed. "And there is no political campaign going on these days."

Curious to know what the gathering was about, the young man mingled with the crowd, breathing—through pinched nostrils—the overpowering stench of rancid cooking oil that clung to the men. He knew that most people could not afford hair gel or the more traditional sandalwood-perfumed coconut oil. "Cooking oil, though! Revolting," he thought.

The speaker was young and wore a white *kurta-pajama*<sup>45</sup>, the favorite attire of local politicians. "Rise, Bharat<sup>46</sup>! Bharatwasion<sup>47</sup>, be proud of the glorious past of your country. Work hard to make it prosperous and strong once again!"

"Proud of what? Most of us can barely make ends meet," a young man sneered.

A white haired man with a Nehru-style *topi*<sup>48</sup> and a splendidly curved mustache glared at him and the man left hurriedly, followed by R.

"It's not surprising that the young are so cynical, so disenfranchised. It's so hard to make a decent living ... that is when you can find work," he reflected.

As he walked, R pondered on the reasons behind his desire to emigrate to America. As Ashok had pointed out, he did not know much about life over there. At this stage therefore, his American dream was essentially a reaction to the challenges he was facing in his own country. As the frustrating obstacles of everyday life kept adding up, everything in India had started to look and feel unpleasant, providing him with a long list of reasons to leave.

"Take politicians, for example. That one back there probably just wants to leverage popular discontent to win a plum elected office. Then, he and his cronies will profit from his power and influence. Like many others, he will promptly forget those who voted for him. Then, on the eve of the next elections, he will reappear, plumper in belly and cheek, a false smile on his lips, hands joined in traditional greeting, begging electors for one more term to complete the reforms he has 'started'. And their attire! If they want to look traditional, why not wear a *dhoti*<sup>49</sup> and a shawl like Gandhi? Those long *kurtas* look like Roman togas. Is this a sign of our own decadence?"

Walking slowly towards the family apartment in Sarojini Nagar, the young man continued his pessimistic analysis.

"In fact, we have gone beyond decadence. After seven hundred years of Moslem cruelty and oppression, Indians became the servants of the British without any redeeming transition. I am not surprised that we are so polarized; on one side those who are proud of some distant, glorious past; and on the other, people like me who feel that the Indian civilization has already crumbled down."

R recalled that Ashok also had concerns about the ability of Indians to crawl out of the poverty trap. "You see, Chotay, our middle classes prefer to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the plight of the poverty-stricken majority ... because they do not believe that they can make a difference."

R agreed that the survival instinct was quickly becoming a defining characteristic of his fellow citizens. His parents, for example, were always prompt to defend their relatively privileged position in the middle class. At work, they would submit to the worse injustices just to maintain their lifestyle. R understood that, but like his brother, he was not sure that he could accept it. He had seen how the suppressed suffering caused by this submissive attitude had turned his mother, a radiantly smiling young bride in the photograph that hung on their living room wall, into a diabetic, overweight, middle-aged woman, the corners of whose mouth now hung permanently downwards.

That morning too, he had told his parents that it *was* wrong to be content with the minimum, and that it was *not* wrong to move to greener pastures if that was the only solution. But they stubbornly rejected that idea. As old age crept in, so—it seemed—did conservatism. "Have they forgotten that they too left their villages in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in search for a better life in New Delhi?" he wondered.

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<sup>45</sup> Long-sleeved, buttonless tunic over loose-fitting pants.

<sup>46</sup> Traditional name of India.

<sup>47</sup> Citizens of Bharat.

<sup>48</sup> Indian style hat, cylindrical and short, with no rim.

<sup>49</sup> Traditional North-Indian pants made up of a single piece of cloth wrapped around both legs.

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"Ashok often said that he could not understand how so many middle-class people can enjoy their relative comfort while walking past the grime and indigence that plague the majority. That's why I can't believe that he has forgotten about us, or turned selfish. The last thing he wanted was to turn into one of those *bourgeois* who stoop low in front of the rich and powerful, scold those on the lower rungs of society, and reserve their friendship and smiles only for their equals. Ashok was not a fatalist; he felt strongly that injustices can and should be righted. I looked up to him for that and I still do."

Only a few hundred feet from the family apartment, the young man stepped back to avoid a vigorous pushing and shoving match as people vied to climb aboard a bus during the evening rush hour. "The law of the jungle is taking over," the bitter young man observed. "Indians think less and less about helping each other. So many people compete for jobs; so many hands, so many mouths compete for food. We were already divided into a multitude of ethnic, linguistic and regional groups, but overpopulation and poverty are making it even worse," he concluded gloomily.

That night, he checked his email again. Still no reply from Ashok.

## CHAPTER 4

Daylight crept timidly into his room through the sheer fabric of the 'vastu' curtains. R had resisted his mother's efforts to move him to another room because here, in the north-west corner of the apartment, the glaring morning sun never woke him up. The curtain, however, was an unavoidable gift from his aunt Deoki. He did not like its mango-yellow color and square patterns.

"Moonna," his mother had justified with a honeyed smile, "this color and the squares are symbols of *prithvi*. The solid element will compensate for *vayu* and bring you stability."

The young man got up reluctantly, and after a shower, started his daily *hath yog* and *pranayam* routine. He stretched his entire body with a Suryanamaskar *asan*<sup>50</sup>. Then, after a few minutes of breathing exercises that helped clear most of the negative thoughts and emotions of the previous day, he completed his session with a series of twelve other *asans*.

Getting up from his rug, R had a grateful thought for Pundit Yogish Doobay. His guru had taught him a number of useful things during his past visits in Varanasi. Over the years, as the teenager had matured into a young man, he had begun to understand the value of *hath yog* and *pranayam*.

As he opened the bedroom door, he sneezed twice in quick succession. "The first sneeze is for the sandalwood *agarbati* that Mom and Dad use for their morning prayer, and the second one for the pungent aroma of chili and spices that Sunil is frying to make Dad's breakfast," he guessed, shaking his head. "There go some of the benefits of my *pranayam*."

He grabbed a banana for breakfast, then slipped back into his bedroom, narrowly avoiding his father.

After several attempts, which he blamed on a whimsical telecommunications network, R was finally able to download his latest emails. His persistence was amply rewarded when he found a reply from Ashok in his inbox. His heart leapt with excitement ... but he quickly yanked it back. "What if it's another 'no'?" he wondered, picturing himself having to break the news to Mohini.

R breathed out a sigh of relief as he read the first two lines of his brother's reply. "I knew that Ashok would never turn his back upon me if I told him that I am desperate."

*"Dear R, I am sorry that I could not reply earlier. Over here, work takes precedence over everything else. My team was busy with a major system upgrade all week. I know what you must be going through, Chotay. I too was a young graduate six years ago. I was lucky to escape the rat race for entry-level jobs in India, so I will help you."*

R felt his heart freeze with glee. Scrolling down the screen, he read the words that followed, eerily feeling that he was floating ... or flying on a magic carpet.

*"I will sponsor you and help to pay for your university tuition so that you can come to America and study for a master's degree. When you complete it, you may look for a job here and settle down if that is what you really want. I tried several times to tell you that life is not all that rosy here, but it seems that you really need to taste it to understand that there is a lot of good in our country too."*

R paused for thought. "What does he mean by 'our country'? Doesn't he feel at home there, in Los Angeles?"

*"You are welcome to live with us until you find a part-time job and a place of your own. However, while your paperwork is being processed, I'd like you to do me a favor."*

"What 'favor' and what does he mean by 'us'? Is that a typo or ... no, he would not have got married without at least informing us. I know Mom and Dad were extremely upset with him because of the abrupt way in which he left, but he would not exclude them from such an important event."

*"I would like you to meet my five best university friends and deliver to each of them—in person—a memento to remind them of our good old days. You met them at the university once, about seven years ago. We were inseparable then. I would like to rekindle the flame of that great friendship."*

R paused, lifting his eyes towards the photos and postcards that Ashok had sent over the last six years. The Statue of Liberty, the Grand Canyon, and many other American landmarks were arrayed quasi-religiously on the wall, just as pictures of Hindu deities

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<sup>50</sup> A hath yog posture.  
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adorned his parents' small prayer room. As he gazed at those pictures everyday, his imagination had increasingly conjured up images of himself and Mohini walking hand in hand at those famous sites. And now, finally, the dream would turn into reality!

*"As I do not want to entrust precious gifts to the Indian postal system, I will send them to you by courier. I also deeply regret that I could not meet with our guru, Pundit Yogish Doobay, before leaving. I would therefore like you to offer him a small token of my respect. I will also send you a digital camera. As you travel through the country to meet with my friends, please take a few pictures and email these to me whenever you can along with a few comments. Below are their names, addresses and phone numbers. However, I strongly recommend that you confirm those before setting off just in case they moved. I will soon transfer money into your account to cover all your travel expenses."*

R remembered the day on which he had met with Ashok's five friends at the university. As a sixteen year old, he had been proud to shake hands with Gautam Toolsi, Jeremy Souza, Vijay Singh, Ashraf Ali, and Nandan Muttu.

"Meet my younger brother R. He is still in high school, but he wants to follow my footsteps and study computer science too," Ashok had said.

Since then, however, R had changed his mind about his field of study, opting instead for commerce.

The young men had greeted him warmly.

"Hi R. I am Gautam, studying civil engineering to build the future high-rises of New Delhi."

"I am Vijay. Political Science. I'll be joining the army, like my father."

"Ashraf. I prefer money to war, so I am studying Marketing."

"Jeremy, specializing in Finance to become a stockbroker."

"And I am Nandan, completing a medical internship. When I qualify next year, I'll leave to seek fame and fortune in England."

In his email, Ashok gave indications on the whereabouts of his friends. Vijay lived in Jaipur, the majestic capital of the western Indian state of Rajasthan. Ashraf was in Porbandar, a major port city in Gujarat. Jeremy had settled in Goa, previously a Portuguese outpost in southwestern India, while Nandan lived in Madurai, the famous temple city in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Gautam was working on a project in Bodhgaya, a small town where the Buddha once lived and preached, in the central state of Bihar.

While the email was printing, R's initial elation subsided as he struggled to come to terms with Ashok's mind-boggling request.

"This means a three week trip across the entire country, west to Rajasthan and Gujarat, then south to Goa and Madurai, north into Bihar, then back to New Delhi. Why, Ashok, why?" he griped mentally. "I could have used those three weeks to learn a lot more about the United-States, and to prepare for my master's degree. And the truth is, I can't stand this country anymore ... so traveling all over it is going to make me sick, for sure!"

Ten minutes later, however, after reading the printed email for the third time, the young man concluded that he was very lucky indeed. The helping hand extended by his brother was going to make a world of difference for himself and Mohini.

"With a master's degree in International Business, or an M.B.A, the sky will be the limit in America! All right, I will do whatever it takes. The favor that Ashok is asking is nothing compared to what he is doing for me in return."

R fired off a grateful reply email to his elder brother, thanking him wholeheartedly and assuring him that he eagerly looked forward to conveying Ashok's regards and gifts to his friends and to their guru.

"After all," he reflected, "I'll be traveling at his expense, and all the repulsive things that I will see, feel, smell, and experience during this trip through India will only make me more eager to leave the country."

It was past nine o'clock when R left his bedroom. His father had already left for work. The young man could hear the clanking sound of *kuraiy*<sup>51</sup>, *thali* and *katori*<sup>52</sup> as Sunil washed

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<sup>51</sup> Indian style wok.

<sup>52</sup> Stainless steel bowl/gobelet.

the dishes in the kitchen. His mother was home on an extended leave of absence, but the bathroom door was shut and he could hear the shower running.

"I must think of a way to break the news to her ... without breaking her heart. ... Mo? ... Are you still there?" he whispered to his girlfriend over the phone.

But the young woman barely heard his question. Suddenly, it felt like a pitch-dark sky had turned ablaze with fireworks. Their American dream was finally coming true!

R hung up hastily as the bathroom door squeaked open.

"Good morning, Mom," he said with an angelic smile.

"Moonna, why did you skip breakfast? I told you a hundred times that is how your father developed his chronic acid reflux condition," she scolded.

"I had a banana, Mom. I am not hungry."

R then noticed that she seemed more cheerful than usual, although the lines of sadness engraved on her face were still there.

"Good news, Mom?" he inquired, conscious that *he* did not have any good news for her, quite the contrary.

She paused and smiled, then said, "Well, your father's boss is retiring, and it seems that no one will be parachuted in the vacant position. That means your dad finally has a fair chance to win a well-deserved promotion," she confided.

"That's great."

"Last night I dreamt that goddess Lakshmi<sup>53</sup> was visiting our house on Divali<sup>54</sup> night," she added. "The festival is in two days' time. This year I took a whole week's leave to celebrate Divali. I would like you to buy all the ingredients we need to honor the goddess in a splendid way. I will prepare the *mithai*<sup>55</sup> myself. Sunil is an excellent cook, but on this day, the offerings should only be prepared by the housewife."

"Many people probably cheat, Mom, otherwise the *mithai* makers and sellers would not make one quarter of their annual sales just during Divali week."

"That may be, Moonna, but this year, I feel that good fortune will smile upon us; maybe we will get back some of the joy of living that deserted us years ago," she sighed, her gaze lost in distant memories.

"How paradoxical," R thought, biting his lower lip. On one hand, he was overjoyed to leave for America soon, and on the other, he was sad that his mother would probably be hurt by the news ... especially as she was dreaming of a happier life.

Feeling guilty and torn, he blurted out, "Dad may get his promotion, but Ashok won't return to India, Mom." However, he regretted those words as soon as the lines of sorrow rippled across his mother's face.

"I left some cash and a list on the table," she murmured as she left the room.

R had never traveled to the west or to the south of India. Therefore, he decided to surf the Web in search of information about the regions and cities he would soon be visiting. He therefore read about Jaipur, the city of Rajput kings, then about Porbandar, the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi.

"The Web will become the world's biggest repository of knowledge in a few decades," Sachin Kumar, one of his university professors, had once prophesized. "When I was a kid, I had to walk miles to reach the nearest library. Your generation has access to so much more information at your fingertips, so make good use of it. We are entering into a new era of human development—an era of exponential growth in knowledge—as information and ideas are exchanged from all the corners of the globe instantly via the Internet."

R was a Web enthusiast and his reputation of technical expertise had spread to such an extent that their next-door neighbor, Mr. Soondardas, the author of a book on Indian classical music, had enlisted the young man's help. The retired music teacher could not share the magic of sound through his book, so he had asked R to help him build a website for that purpose.

Much later, R glanced at his watch. "Time always seems to fly when you are doing something captivating." He shut down his computer reluctantly and got dressed to go

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<sup>53</sup> Goddess of prosperity and well being.

<sup>54</sup> Annual festival celebrating prosperity, goodwill between neighbors, and the supremacy of good over evil (symbolized by light against darkness).

<sup>55</sup> Sweets and cakes.



shopping. His mother needed the ingredients by early afternoon to start preparing the different types of *mithai* that they would distribute to their neighbors during Divali night. He glanced at the list to ensure that she had not forgotten anything important. It seemed right to him: terracotta oil lamps, cotton wicks, lighting oil, and the edible ingredients she needed for the *mithai*. Every year since he had been strong enough to carry the heavy bags back from the shop, his mother had entrusted him with the same mission; and he had proudly brought home the little lamps that the family lit to symbolize the light of wisdom and knowledge combating the dark veil of ignorance.

Pundit Doobay, his guru, also liked to remind him of the festival's historical significance, "After defeating the tyrannical king of Lanka, King Ram returned with his wife Sita to his kingdom, Ayodhya. As they reached the city at night, the people greeted them by lighting up all the lamps they could find. Divali is also a day of celebration during which we offer our devotion to goddess Lakshmi, the divine representation of goodwill and prosperity. We pray that she guides us so that we prosper, live happily and, above all, share our well-being with others."

Mrs. Sharma and Sunil had shopped loyally at Lalaji's *dookan*<sup>56</sup> for more years than they cared to remember. They had known the old Lalaji, who died ten years earlier. His eldest son had then taken over, but nothing had changed since then.

"This must be the best week of the year for you, Lalaji," R once quipped, a few days before Divali. The short, plump and perpetually smiling merchant had only shaken his head sideways a few times in agreement, his slitty eyes closing with glee.

"Divali is a merchant's dream come true, R. Tradition dictates that everyone who can afford to do so should buy new clothes and wear them on that day, after a ritual bath in homage to the goddess of prosperity," Vikram Varma had mocked.

Of course, true to his principles, the Marxist professor never celebrated that festival—or any other except Republic day. However, Mohini once confided that her parents used to do so—at least until her mother's death.

During Divali week, pyramids of terracotta oil lamps, bales of cotton wick and barrels of lamp oil lined the entrance of Lalaji's cramped retail outlet, reassuring his customers that these essential Divali items were indeed in stock at their favorite store.

That day, as R squeezed into the shop, over a dozen women were already jostling for service.

"Half a pound of cardamom seeds for me!"

"I need one pound of almonds."

"Why don't you finish serving me? I have been waiting half an hour for those five pounds of *baysan*<sup>57</sup>."

Two stressed-looking store clerks juggled with the groceries, filling orders as fast as they could to avoid being scolded by their boss. Lalaji watched their every move impatiently, appeasing the most irate customers with a fake smile. Every few minutes, the plump merchant wiped his shiny, sweaty face with the yellow scarf that hung across his shoulders.

"Please be patient, ladies. There is enough for everyone," he squealed.

Turning around to avoid responding to their cries of protest, the shopkeeper lit an incense stick and placed it in a lotus shaped bronze holder. In salutation to his favorite deity, he then waved it a few times around a small statue of Lakshmi strategically placed close to the cash register.

When one of the clerks finally glanced at him, R wasted no time reading out his list to the man ... and he was soon out of the crowded shop. Suspending his bags on both sides of the old bicycle that his father had bought thirty years ago, the young man pedaled his way back to his parents' Sarojini Nagar apartment.

Two days later, it was Divali, the festival of enlightenment and prosperity. Mrs. Sharma had given Sunil a day off so that he could spend some time with his family. Now certain that he would hurt his mother's feelings by announcing his plan to leave for America, R offered to help her prepare the last few *mithai*. Indeed, in an email sent on the previous night, Ashok had confirmed that he had transferred enough money to cover the journey's

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<sup>56</sup> Shop. Usually a grocery.

<sup>57</sup> Chick pea flour.

expenses into R's account. "Why procrastinate? My American dream will come true soon. I might as well tell them everything today," R decided.

But Mrs. Sharma wisely—and tactfully—declined her son's offer. The last time she had allowed him to help with the *mithai*, it had been a disaster. She knew that she would be better off on her own.

That afternoon, the whole family put on their new clothes early, Mr. Sharma being a stickler for tradition. "Quite the opposite of Vikram Varma," R reflected. "Those two would never agree on anything. I cannot imagine them even talking to each other."

Mrs. Sharma was beaming in her bright yellow and red sari. Her hair was neatly tucked into a bun and a silver chain ran straight along the parting in her hair down to her forehead, contrasting with the scarlet *sindoor*<sup>58</sup> underneath. R and his father also looked handsome in their matching, cream-colored *kurta-pajamas*. As Mrs. Sharma got the basket of *mithai* ready, the two men finished setting up the oil lamps on their balcony. They would light them up at dusk, when darkness would cast its shroud on the city.

At five o'clock, the family set out to visit neighbors, friends and relatives to wish them well and offer them some *mithai*. As usual, R carried the heavy basket. Earlier that day, he had tasted the sweet treats prepared by his mother. *Luddoos* were his favorite since childhood. He could not resist those yellow balls of fried *baysan* soaked in cardamom-flavored syrup and mixed with raisins and shredded almond. His mother also sprinkled some dried shredded coconut on top of each *luddoo*, adding a South Indian touch—a welcome suggestion from Aunt Deeki.

As night fell, the Sharmas lit several rows of little oil lamps. Many of their less traditional neighbors had simply flicked on a light switch connected to arrays of tiny electric lamps hanging from their balconies, and then sat down to watch the fireworks and Divali lights. However, Mr. Sharma believed neither in cutting corners, nor in sacrificing tradition to modernity.

As Divali is always celebrated on the last night preceding the new moon, the man-made lights contrasted sharply with the pitch-dark sky. That night, as the first fireworks exploded far above their heads, mother, father and son stood still, soaking in the magic of the moment. They then gazed down from their apartment balcony at the dazzling scene below. As far as their eyes could see, thousands of small lights shone, holding their own bravely against the night's darkness.

R glanced at his parents. They were smiling serenely—a rare occurrence. He had been dreading this moment for the last few days, but it had to be done, and now was probably the best moment. The young man steeled his heart and forced himself to smile, then the words tumbled out of his mouth, "Mom and Dad, it's Divali today and I have some good news."

"What is it? You finally found a job?" Mr. Sharma's tone was caustic as he continued to stare at the scene off the balcony.

"What a coincidence! It's Mother Lakshmi's blessing, for sure. I am so happy for you," R's mother exclaimed, clapping her hands with joy. Her prayers had finally been answered. Their life would now take a turn for the better, she was certain of that.

"... Actually, no. It's not a job ... I ..." R hesitated.

Shaking his head, a disillusioned Mr. Sharma turned away to pour oil in the lamps that needed a refill. His wife, however, continued to smile encouragingly at their son, waiting for the words that would describe his 'good news'.

"I will be leaving soon. ... Leaving for America. ... With Ashok's help," R stammered. The words seemed to slash his throat and burn his tongue as they came out. His eyes lowered, R was unable to look up at his parents. "For them, this is the worst possible news. Mother always dreaded losing me as she lost Ashok."

A deafening crescendo of fireworks punctuated his last words. When he raised his eyes, his mother and father were filling up their precious oil lamps on the other side of the balcony. For a few seconds, he wondered if they had heard him. "Maybe not, with all this din."

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<sup>58</sup> Red colored line drawn along the parting of a Hindu married woman's hair down to her forehead.  
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He had spoken loudly enough, though. In fact, their next-door neighbor overheard his announcement. The diminutive Mr. Soondardas popped his wrinkled face over the half wall that separated the two balconies, a broad smile uncovering his remaining teeth, "Mrs. Sharma, congratulations. Your *mithai* are as delicious as ever, and the goddess of fortune must be pleased with your devotion. See, she is smiling upon your family. Now both your sons will live as rajas in America."

R thanked Mr. Soondardas wholeheartedly. The elderly neighbor was his first well-wisher. His parents, however, ignored the verbal exchange. He reflected on their surprising reaction. "It seems that they were prepared for this. Therefore, I was wrong to worry about leaving them. In India, children are still the best form of social security for ageing parents. In our extended families, the young and productive care for elderly, sick and infirm family members. I am so relieved to see that they are ready to face their old age alone ... in the American way. That's great, as both Ashok and I will be living so far away."

On the other side of the balcony, Mr. Sharma turned to his wife, seething. "Goddess of fortune, my foot!" he hissed. "This is the second and last son we are losing. Has that old crow Soondardas become senile? We struggled to raise two sons, and after years of sacrifice, this is to be our reward?"

Mrs. Sharma gestured to her husband to calm down and keep his voice low. She dreaded an eruption of his wrath on an auspicious day like Divali. Much to her relief, instead of exploding like the surrounding fireworks, he just ranted on, "I always suspected that those who find favor with the goddess of fortune during *kaliyoog*<sup>59</sup> are the crooked, the corrupt, the selfish, the evil-doers and the evil-thinkers. I told you, Yashoda, that people like us, who struggle to live a simple and clean life, can only expect pain and sorrow in return. Sometimes I feel that we should just stop celebrating Divali altogether!"

A dark cloud seemed to hover over the rest of the evening ... in spite of all the Divali lights. R was relieved that his father did not express his anger, and his mother her sorrow. "Maybe because it's Divali and all the neighbors are out on their balconies. I'll find out what they really feel about this tomorrow morning."

An hour later, after putting out the last of the oil lamps, the Sharmas went to bed in silence.

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<sup>59</sup> The fourth era according to the Hindu concept of time and evolution of life.  
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## CHAPTER 5

A week later, R received the gifts to be delivered to Ashok's friends and the camera. His brother had finally opted to send them through a friend of his who was traveling to India on his annual vacation.

Prashant Saksena was the director of IT in a company located close to Ashok's. The two Indian immigrants had met at a technology conference and quickly became friends. Saksena had gladly accepted to deliver the backpack that Ashok handed to him prior to his departure.

"I told him not to worry at all; the contents of this bag would be secure with us. My daughter Lalita carried it, and the customs officers did not even ask to search it," he smiled, winking knowingly as he handed the backpack to R.

"It contains gifts that Ashok wants me to deliver to his friends. I believe they may be brittle, which is why he did not want to mail them ... I guess," an uneasy R felt compelled to explain.

Saksena laughed. "Just joking; I know that Ashok would not send anything illegal."

While the Saksenas waited for their relatives to pick them up, R shared his plans to emigrate to America with them, hoping for some advice. They were encouraging, particularly Mrs. Saksena, whose thickly kohl-lined eyes darted from Lalita to R. Shooting a meaningful glance to her husband, she said, "R, I hope you will visit us once you are settled in Los Angeles. Just remind Ashok of it, and the three of you could join us for dinner sometime." Smiling invitingly at the young man, she nudged her husband.

"Oh yes! Of course, please do visit us," Saksena echoed hastily, finally getting the message. His wife was right, this handsome young man, who also happened to be Ashok's brother, could make a fine son-in-law a few years down the road.

R felt Lalita's gaze as he talked to her parents about his plans. She was a pretty girl in her late teens, with straight hair falling like a black waterfall down to her curvy hips. However, Saksena's daughter just stood there, unsmiling, her eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses. "As if she resents this trip to her parents' country of birth," R sensed.

After thanking the couple, R boarded a bus going to the city center, thoughts racing through his mind. "Mrs. Saksena said 'the three of you'. I have no doubt now that Ashok is no longer single. Why keep it a secret, though? He could at least have told me, even if he feels embarrassed to announce a love marriage to our parents—or whatever his relationship may be. I would not have betrayed his secret; I would just be happy for him. I wonder what she looks like. Is she Indian or American?" he wondered as he sat down next to a woman clad from head to toe in a black burka in defiance of the stifling Delhi heat.

He opened the backpack carefully, almost reverently. The woman stared suspiciously as he sniffed inside, his eyes shut. "The fragrance of America," thought the young would-be migrant. An instant daydream swept him to the beaches of Los Angeles. There, a bevy of curvy, tanned girls played beach volley, while a lifeguard, ogling them through his binoculars, failed to notice a large triangular fin slicing its way towards a swimmer. The swimmer suddenly emerged from the water. It was Mohini, her beautiful face dripping with salt water!

That disturbing thought yanked R back to reality. In fact, he had never seen his girlfriend in a bathing suit, and he could not imagine her in that attire without recalling the words of Vikram Varma and his unusually serious tone when they had discussed his relationship with the professor's only daughter.

"R, I am a widower doing his best to raise a beautiful daughter. My own views are liberal, but we live in a fairly conservative society. I am allowing you to spend time together without supervision, and I hope that you will not make me regret my trust. I expect this relationship to lead to an honorable outcome for Mohini. Do I make myself clear?"

"By all means," R had stammered, the heat of embarrassment darkening his cheeks.

He looked again at the backpack. It was of excellent quality; sturdy and big enough for what may well be a long and rough trip through India. "But its best features are the American flag, the bald eagle logo and the words 'Los Angeles' printed on it," he thought blissfully. In one of the pockets, he found a tiny digital camera and a few spare batteries. "Ashok thinks of everything," he mused, smiling. "Why so small, though? This camera fits in the palm of my hand. Does he want me to take secret photos?"

There was also a note scribbled in his elder brother's tiny and precise handwriting.

*"R, I heard that there are now Internet cafés in most major Indian cities. Please email me a few photos and comments after you meet with each of my five friends. I am also eager to see what India now looks like, six years after I left. Finally, Chotay, one last recommendation: do not take any unnecessary risks. I want you to be healthy and strong when you eventually land in Los Angeles."*

R smirked. "Ashok must be getting soft-hearted with age. What risks? In fact, although I would prefer to stay in Delhi, this trip can only provide me with even more reasons to leave this poor, hopeless, old country."

Looking out through the dusty window, he thought, "Actually, I will take the most depressing pictures possible during this trip and write some notes as I travel. Then, I will post these on a website as soon as I get to Los Angeles. That will encourage other young Indians like me to consider emigrating."

An hour later, back in his room at Sarojini Nagar, R undid the large brown paper package that he found in the main compartment of the backpack. Inside were six smaller brown paper parcels which he laid side by side on his bed. Five of these were identical: small, oval and heavy. The sixth was flatter and rectangular. "A book," R guessed. Its label read 'Pundit Yogish Doobay, Varanasi'.

R turned a curious gaze to the oval parcels. He felt them over, trying to guess what they contained. They weighed about a pound each and felt hard. The recipients' names were clearly marked on the thick wrapping paper.

There was another note from Ashok. "Chotay, please hand these wrapped gifts in person to my friends and to our guru."

He wondered why Ashok had underlined the word 'wrapped'. "Doesn't he trust me? Does he think I might open them?" R wondered, peeved. "Anyway, these gifts cannot be that brittle; otherwise their wrapping would be padded. What can they be? I guess I'll find out when I meet the first of his friends, as they all seem identical."

That afternoon, a radiant R made his way to the Varmas' apartment. Mohini and her dad were glad to see him so changed, his happy smile and lively voice contrasting so much with the glum R they were used to seeing until a few days ago.

"I am confident that I will succeed in America—just like my brother. Once I complete my master's degree, I'll find a job, obtain a green card, and return as soon as possible to ask you for Mohini's hand," he declared confidently to his potential father-in-law.

Mohini hid happy eyes under her shadowy eyelashes, smiling demurely. "That's how Sonia Singh reacted when Ahmed Khan asked for her hand in marriage in last year's award-winning movie," she thought ecstatically.

Vikram Varma just smiled blissfully as his squinty eyes darted back and forth between the two young lovers. Then, taking off his misty glasses, he mopped tears of happiness off his wet cheeks with a red and yellow, checkered handkerchief. He now knew that his cherished daughter would be happy, even if it had to be in America ... of all places! Clearing his throat, he responded, "I am so happy for you. In any case, Mohini still has to complete her university studies. That will keep her busy until you are ready, R."

"Sure, and I'll learn to sew and embroider as well, while Mr. R. Sharma enjoys himself in Los Angeles!" the young woman protested, feigning outrage.

As they all burst out laughing, R could not help wondering whether father and daughter were ready for the coming separation. As a father and a surrogate mother to his only daughter, Vikram Varma was deeply attached to the only living reminder of his now deceased wife. R also knew how much his girlfriend loved and cared for her dad. Both would be torn when she would become Mrs. Mohini Sharma and leave for the other side of the world.

As if he had read R's mind, Varma, now serious, declared, "You know, children, no one spends their entire life with the same person. Our individual path is unique. We learn to walk alongside our parents, and then continue our journey through life with our spouse, after whose death we can still walk a few last stumbling steps with our children. Ultimately, we realize that the only permanent companion we have is ... ourselves."

His philosophical words seemed to burst Mohini's bubble of happiness, but she clearly understood and shared her father's feelings.

"Yes Dad, you told me several times that no relationship lasts for a whole lifetime; we should always be ready to pursue our unique paths, surmounting the inevitable separations that life brings, separations such as the death of a partner ... or a daughter's wedding," she said, ending in a whisper.

R could nearly reach out and touch their emotions, so tangible were they. He knew that both Mohini and her father wished that Mrs. Varma could have been with them at that moment to share the good news. He could empathize well with their feelings; his own grandfather had died a few years earlier. Mr. Mishra, a retired schoolteacher, used to delight his youngest grandson with vivid narrations of tales from the *Panchtantr*<sup>60</sup>.

R felt that he should say something—quickly; something that could change the mood, which was turning somber. "And to think that I came here to bring them happy news!" he wondered.

"Mo, I may need to buy a few things for my trip. Would you like to accompany me to Chandni Chowk tomorrow?" A few days ago, he would not have dared ask that in front of Professor Varma. "But today is special," he felt. All three were elated by the young couple's now shining prospects, and a new phase of their relationship was clearly starting; one that would lead to a wedding, eventually. And he was right; Varma merely looked on, a benign smile brightening his round face.

Mohini's beautiful eyes sparkled with joy. He knew how she loved shopping ... even window-shopping. Clapping her dainty hands, she exclaimed, "Yes! We are going to Chandni Chowk tomorrow."

During dinner that night, R spoke to his parents about his plans. Not all his plans, though. He cautiously left out the part about his shared future with Mohini. "That can come later," he thought.

Since Divali, he had been expecting his father to fly into a rage and his mother to flood out her emotions. Neither had happened, and much to his amazement, when he talked to them that night, they showed a polite interest, even providing a few travel tips.

"Moonna, Ashok could have sent those gifts by mail. Our postal system has improved a lot since he left," Mrs. Sharma sighed. "Anyway, drink only bottled water while traveling and don't eat anything that has not been thoroughly cooked. That means no salads or fruits."

"Be on your guard in railway and bus stations. They are full of pickpockets," his father echoed.

R felt relieved. He dreaded having to leave them as Ashok had: in a state of shock and denial. Still, he suspected that his parents were holding back their true feelings about his eventual departure for America.

He told them all about the journey, about the people that he would be meeting, and where they lived. He then took a few photos of them with his new camera, and that seemed to make them genuinely happy. However, he did not feel that it was necessary—or wise—to tell them about the pictures of Mohini and her father that he had taken earlier.

Later that night, R emailed his elder brother a photo of their parents. As an afterthought, he also uploaded a photo of Mohini. "This might prompt him to be more open about his own girlfriend," he thought. In his email, he wrote, "Dear Ashok, please hold on to the photos and the emails that I will send you along the way. Later on, I will need that material to build a website."

The next morning R woke up thinking, "How different life feels now. Barely two weeks ago, I was still desperately hunting for a job. I can hardly believe that our dream is finally coming true. Once this delivery trip is behind me, I'll start counting the days until I leave for Los Angeles."

He glanced at the belongings that he had already begun to pack for his trip to Varanasi the next day. There was plenty of room for his clothes in the large backpack that Ashok had sent. He stuffed spare shirts and underwear into the main compartment and the side pockets. Everything fitted snugly. He was ready to go!

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<sup>60</sup> An ancient collection of short interwoven tales, meant to impart basic wisdom to children. Originally narrated to three young princes by their guru, as part of their education.

Later that morning, midway through their bus ride to the Chandni Chowk market, R noticed a *dhobi*<sup>61</sup> *ghat*<sup>62</sup> through the bus window.

"I'll have my clothes washed by *dhobis* whenever I stop over for a day or more. They are so efficient. I have all these parcels to carry, and I do not want to haul any extra luggage across India," he confided to Mohini.

Thousands of *dhobis* from all over the capital flocked daily to the banks of the Yamuna to ply their age-old trade. They brought with them soiled clothes picked up at their clients' doorsteps. The garments were identified by a code known only to the *dhobis*. Although mostly illiterate, these hard working folk rarely got mixed up, faithfully delivering washed and dried clothes to their customers at the end of the day.

Through the bus window, R observed the *dhobis* thrash wet laundry onto the riverbank rocks, splattering soapy water in all directions. A few dozen feet from the *ghats*, hundreds of garments of all shapes, sizes and colors hung on clotheslines, drying under the hot Delhi sun. R took a few pictures with his camera, then turned away grinning. "That is one scene I'll never see in America," he thought smugly.

"I will not miss the *dhobis* either, R," Mohini said to her boyfriend, guessing his thoughts. "My best jeans and t-shirts get worn out so quickly when they are scrubbed and whipped on the rocks like that."

R looked at her, and she returned his smile. Although he did not look forward to this trip in one of the most crowded shopping areas of Delhi, he was happy to spend this last day in her company. He was relieved to see her smile; she seemed to have made peace with Ashok's request. Just the day before, she had protested, "Why didn't he mail those gifts directly to his friends? We could have enjoyed some time together after so many months of tension. Now I have to wait here alone until you return from this silly delivery trip."

R had shrugged. "I don't like it either, Mo, but there is nothing I can do. Ashok will help us turn our American dream into a reality, and he is just asking a small favor in return."

The crowd never seemed to shrink in Chandni Chowk. It was still a very popular shopping area, although its heydays were really during the reign of the Mogul despot Shah Jehan. Chandni Chowk had been named after the silversmiths who plied their trade there, initially making and selling silver jewelry for the Moslem ruler's large harem of wives and concubines. Gradually, the shopping area had diversified, offering a wider range of goods and services to people from all walks of life.

As Mohini accompanied him, R did not expect this outing to end quickly. So, before starting, he decided to fill up with some comfort food. "That will make me drowsy and I will be able to endure the 'shopping' better," he strategized.

"Mo, I am so hungry. Could we have a quick snack before we start?"

The young woman just nodded sideways<sup>63</sup> a few times, too absorbed by the market's multiple attractions to answer. R yanked her back just in time. Pedaling hard to haul two Japanese tourists whose eyes seemed glued to their camcorders, the skinny, white-bearded *rickshawalla*<sup>64</sup> was too feeble and shaky to avoid anyone in his vehicle's path.

"It's unfair that people this age still have to work," R remarked.

"This is India, Hero. Don't worry. If we make it to America, someday we'll retire earlier, richer and healthier than this old man."

Before R could express his astonishment at her insensitive remark, his girlfriend had whirled around and was peering into the nearest jeweler's window.

"That silver wedding set is magnificent; don't you think so, R?"

"Superb," was her boyfriend's grumpy reply. Marriage was a long way away. It would probably be at least two, maybe three years before he would be able to come back and sweep her off to America as a bride. "So what's the point of looking at these now?" he wondered.

"Come on, let's go in for a minute, R. I just want to fill my mind with images of these superb jewelry sets so that I can dream about them while I wait for you," his pretty girlfriend pleaded irresistibly.

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<sup>61</sup> Laundryman.

<sup>62</sup> Stone steps on the bank of a waterway.

<sup>63</sup> Indian head sign for 'Yes'.

<sup>64</sup> Driver of a two-passenger tricycle taxi.

R could not say no when she talked like that, looking at him with those large, almond-shaped eyes. He followed her in the little shop, nodding in salutation to the owner, a chubby fellow with a bushy grey mustache and a black *topi*.

"*Namastay*. May I help you? Are you looking for something in particular?" the jeweler asked, uncovering a gold tooth in a professional smile.

"Your wedding sets," Mohini exhaled, staring rapturously at the intricately crafted necklaces, earrings, forehead pendants, hair brooches, nose rings and chains, bracelets, rings, hand chains, waist bands, toe rings and *payals*<sup>65</sup> spread out on the display shelves, well out of reach behind thick glass.

Half an hour later, they left the shop without having bought anything, much to the owner's chagrin. However, R had to acknowledge that the refinement of the silver jewelry sets was admirable.

Snaking their way through the colorful—and odorous—crowd, the young couple soon found a decent-looking eatery. Standing around a small, chest-high round table, they shared some *chaat*<sup>66</sup>, *pakora*<sup>67</sup> and a mango *lassi*<sup>68</sup>.

As they left, R took a *mitha*<sup>69</sup> *paan* to cleanse his mouth. Mohini frowned. "R! It's so old fashioned. You will regret it; your lips and gums will turn bright red."

"I don't do this everyday, Mo. Only when I eat out. Don't worry," he said, chewing the spicy mouth freshener, "over there in America, they don't sell these."

That thought seemed to cheer her up. She smiled and turned towards a sari shop. "Will you help me choose my wedding sari?" she asked.

"You know that it's against tradition for a man to accompany his future wife for that. They say it brings bad luck."

Mohini sighed sadly, resting her long eyelashes on her cheeks, her head bowed. "You are right. Traditionally, it's the role of the bride's mother."

"I ... I am sorry, Mo. Listen, I don't believe in those silly superstitions anyway. Let's go in."

The walls of the large store were layered with dozens of brightly colored saris; silks on one side, cottons on the other. Inexpensive prints for home and for work hung in the furthest corner of the store, far away from the gold and silver embroidered saris meant for weddings, festivals and ceremonial prayers. Mohini's eyes shone, reflecting the glitter of hundreds of tiny mirrors sewn into the spectacular garments.

A store clerk approached and invited them to be seated. Leaving their shoes behind, they sat on a thick rug, between luxurious, silky cushions embroidered with peacock and elephant designs. "There is clearly no sign of poverty or unemployment here," R mused.

"You know, R, maybe Dad could buy me a wedding sari right now instead of waiting for the wedding. Sometimes people do that when they find a rare and magnificent piece like this one," she whispered, her eyes sparkling as she stroked the fine Varanasi silk sari that the vendor had ceremoniously spread out in front of them.

The soft-spoken middle-aged clerk, sniffing a potential sale, clapped his hands to call a tea boy, who hurried to the young couple's side.

"Hot chai or cool drink?" the teenager asked.

Soon, R and Mohini were enjoying their drinks while admiring several other wedding saris. In stores like these, it is customary to serve refreshments to patrons as they chose from among dozens of saris that vendors very obligingly propose. Such exceptional customer service is amply justified by high profit margins, as wedding saris cost thousands of rupees.

"These merchants probably buy them for one quarter of their selling price," R speculated as he slurped a delicious, *sonph*<sup>70</sup> flavored chai.

He turned sideways, looking for the owner. The stone-faced *seth* was enthroned in a mezzanine, from where he stooped to collect a bundle of banknotes from a group of female customers. Licking his thumb from time to time, he counted the notes meticulously, and

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<sup>65</sup> Anklets made up of a single layer of tiny silver bells.

<sup>66</sup> Spicy snacks.

<sup>67</sup> Vegetables fried in chick-pea flour batter.

<sup>68</sup> Buttermilk based cold drink, sweetened with fruit juices, or drunk plain in the salted version.

<sup>69</sup> Sweet version of the paan mouth freshener.

<sup>70</sup> Fennel or aniseed.



then nodded dismissively to the women. Turning around, he picked up a lotus-shaped incense stick holder and waved its smoking *agarbatis* several times in front of a large picture of Lakshmi.

R suddenly felt hot with shame. Neither he, nor his girlfriend planned to spend any money there. "Mo, let's go now. Please!"

Gliding between a dozen women who were choosing a wedding sari for a daughter, a niece or a granddaughter, they made their way towards the exit as swiftly as they could, holding their heads high, trying not to be embarrassed by the stares and grins of the store clerks and their employer.

Later on, R did buy something for his trip. At an IndoComm outlet, he purchased a cell phone.

"With this, I'll be able to call you anytime during the journey, Mo. The salesman confirmed that his company provides coverage throughout the country."

Mohini sighed with relief. She had been dreading their separation.

"When you are in America, I won't be anxious at all, R. My cousins say that traveling there is perfectly safe. I am just so worried about your journey through India. I had a bad dream last night. I saw you losing your way and then ... we never met again. Promise me that you will be extra careful."

In the early evening, after a day spent mostly window-shopping, they stopped in front of the Varmas' apartment door. There, R politely muted a gasp of relief. He had enjoyed spending the day with his girlfriend, and he knew that he would not see her for another two or three weeks, ... but he just could not stand crowds and shopping.

"It will be over quickly, Mo, and I'll keep in touch, I promise. I'll call you every evening," R said with a smile.

"And I look forward to your return. We'll talk about our plans, about America, about our life together," a starry-eyed Mohini replied as they parted company, stifling their sorrow at the prospect of being separated for so long.

## CHAPTER 6

The next morning, as R lay awake in bed, he found it difficult to overcome the distaste that this journey evoked in him. He tried to dispel that negative feeling with a longer session of *hath yog* and *pranayam*.

A peaceful state of mind and an eerie eagerness to meet his guru, Yogish Doobay, gradually replaced his earlier reluctance to get ready to leave. What was it that Doobay had once said about *sattva* being much superior to *tamas*<sup>71</sup>? Something about a 'state of purity or enlightenment being more conducive to a balanced and happy life than wallowing in negativity and ignorance'. R was keen to see the old sage again, and he mentally thanked Ashok for having asked him to deliver a gift to their common guru.

Varanasi, Doobay's hometown, is one of the holiest cities for Hindus. It is a unique pilgrimage site bordering the majestic Gunga<sup>72</sup> River, a waterway that sustains millions of Indians living along its banks. R recalled his first visit there, when his entire family spent a couple of weeks at his uncle's place for the wedding of R's cousin. That was when they had first met Pundit Yogish Doobay; he was the officiating priest at the wedding ceremony. Impressed by his stellar reputation and noble demeanor, R's parents beseeched the Hindu priest to take their two young sons as his *shishyus*<sup>73</sup>.

The first time that Doobay invited Ashok and his younger brother to his modest home close to the *ghats* along the Gunga, he taught them how to play Chaturang. Avinash, the pundit's son, who was about Ashok's age, joined them. Chaturang being a four-player ancestor of chess, they teamed up in pairs. R could still remember Doobay's patient smile as he coached him on how to use the elephants in this exciting strategy game.

"Imagine that you are one of the heroes of the Mahabharat<sup>74</sup>, R, and that you have all these war elephants and chariots at your command. Do you know that they played this game in those ancient times too? It helped the young princes to learn the art of war." Those words captured the boy's imagination, and R quickly became addicted to the game.

After a lighter than usual breakfast, R said goodbye to his parents. A teary-eyed Mrs. Sharma expressed the wish to accompany her son to the station, her husband quietly supportive for once. But R did not want an emotional farewell on the crowded platforms of New Delhi's railway station. He categorically refused. "Mom, I am a big boy now and I have traveled once or twice outside Delhi on my own, so please stay home. I would prefer you to take care of your health instead." Indeed, Mrs. Sharma's blood pressure had been rising steadily over the last few days, and she complained of headaches and dizziness. "It's because of me," R blamed himself.

Eventually she relented, forcing him nonetheless to accept a large plastic bag full of food that Sunil had been cooking since daybreak.

R glanced at his parents a last time before leaving. On the landing, they did their best to look reserved, having learned to suppress their emotions in public after nearly three decades in Delhi, gelling under the well-adapted masks needed to ensure their survival in the capital's competitive jungle. "The result?" wondered the young man as he walked out of the building. "A successful adaptation, but at the expense of that refreshing openness, that joy of living that our rural relatives and friends bring when they visit us from time to time." R pursued his reflections as he boarded an *autoriksha*. "With both Ashok and me in America, will they wonder whether their uprooting and sacrifices were worthwhile?"

While the rudimentary motor vehicle snaked its way between cars and buses, R checked the contents of his backpack for the n<sup>th</sup> time. The gift parcels were all there, their brown paper wrapping secured with some string, a last 'precaution' suggested by the meticulous Mr. Sharma. A few neatly pressed clothes were stacked under the parcels, cushioning these against the inevitable shocks and bumps of a rail and bus trip across India. His camera was right on top, close at hand in case he came across good photo opportunities.

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<sup>71</sup> One of the three goonns (states of being). The *tamsik* state is linked to decay, ill health, ignorance, procrastination, etc. The *rajsik* state is characterized by passion, energy, heat, bravery, etc. and the *satvik* state regroups qualities such as purity, wellness, spiritual awareness, knowledge, etc.

<sup>72</sup> Ganges.

<sup>73</sup> Disciples.

<sup>74</sup> Ancient Indian epic.

Its spare batteries were in a side pocket; they would be easy to replace even if a nifty pickpocket stole them. The other side pocket contained six notepads and the same number of pens.

He opened the first notepad and put it in his shirt pocket, having checked that it was the right one. In there, he had transcribed the names, addresses and telephone numbers of Ashok's friends. "All right, I haven't forgotten anything. I'll call Mohini from the train."

New Delhi's railway station had not changed since he last boarded a train there. R weaved himself through the colorful crowd, holding his breath to protect his nostrils from the *pot-pourri* of fragrances and odors. The deafening cacophony in the station was enough to drive a bull-elephant raving mad. Conversations—in all the major languages of the country—were taking place between passengers and their accompanying friends and relatives, many of whom wore traditional garments. There were turbaned and bearded Sikhs, along with their wives dressed in vividly colored *salwar kamiz* to which clung the children. Others, less identifiable by their appearance, chatted or yelled in Tamil, Marathi, Bengali and other regional languages of the Indian subcontinent, accepting or rejecting the services of porters, shoe shiners, and chai or *paan* peddlers. R reluctantly inhaled the smells of sandalwood, spicy chai, cheap perfume, mixed with the odors of sweat and rancid hair oil, and those of snacks consumed by children and adults as they waited for their train.

After a long wait in line at the ticket booth, he heaved a sigh of relief when his turn finally came. The bored face of an Indian Railways employee welcomed him. Thanking his elder brother mentally for his generosity, R bought a one-way ticket in an air-conditioned, first-class carriage on the Kasi Vishwanath Express. "Comfort will certainly make this seventeen-hour trip more bearable," he thought.

He turned around to gaze at the impressive number of uniformed police officers in the station. "Only a few years ago, you only had to worry about the pickpockets," he mused. "Now, there are terrorist attacks and bombs as well."

He was relieved that he did not have to travel second-class as he had during previous trips with his family. He remembered what an ordeal those train journeys had been. The first time he traveled to Varanasi with his parents and Ashok, he vomited twice. The toilet odors, the crying children, the passengers who spat their *paan*-stained saliva directly on the floor conspired with the undulating motion of the train to overcome the pluckiness of a little boy brought up in the relative comfort of his parents' snug apartment.

From that thought, he moved on to nicer memories of his trip to Varanasi. During their two-week stay at R's uncle's house, they met Pundit Yogish Doobay, who accepted the Sharma boys as his disciples. The learned old Hindu priest had a great sense of humor, which helped the boys stay attentive as he attempted to instill essential elements of their culture into them. The brothers returned three more times to their guru's home to add to their knowledge. On each of those visits, they lived for a couple of weeks at their uncle's place, grateful for the latter's decision to settle in Varanasi after the two senior Sharma brothers—R's father and his uncle—left their village on the banks of the Sarju river nearly four decades earlier in search of a better life.

R glanced at the station clock, then started walking towards the platform where the Kasi Vishwanath Express stood. The train would leave in half an hour, and he preferred to avoid the last minute hustle and bustle. Stepping energetically towards the first-class carriage, he could not repress a smug grin as he passed the already crowded second-class compartments. Avoiding a coolie<sup>75</sup> bent under a load of luggage that the skinny man balanced deftly upon his neck and shoulders as he ran through the crowd, R climbed onto the train with one last contemptuous look at the carriage. "This dates back to the days of the British Empire. However, it's true that in the last century, things were built to last."

The interior of the wagon was clean and smelled of insecticide. He smirked as he dropped his backpack on the luxurious seat. "What a thoughtful precaution. They probably do not want the roaches that infest the lesser parts of this train to bug those of us who paid a small fortune for some comfort and hygiene."

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<sup>75</sup> Porter.

Once seated, R heartily enjoyed a few of the *samosas*<sup>76</sup> that Sunil had fried that morning. The Sharmas' cook made an exceptionally delicious filling of curried potatoes, peas and onions.

"Better enjoy these now. During the rest of this journey, I'll have to worry about getting colic each time I eat the local food," he thought sardonically.

The air inside R's compartment started to cool down as the train got ready to depart. The young traveler took his first photo of the journey: a snapshot of the bustling crowd on the platform. As the train staggered out of the station and gradually picked up speed, R settled comfortably on the first-class couch. Closing his eyes, he allowed his imagination to whisk him off to Varanasi and to the other locations on his itinerary. He daydreamed briefly about the majestic forts and palaces of Rajasthan; the lovely beaches of Goa, lined with coconut trees; and the spectacular temples of Madurai. As for Bodhgaya, he knew the modest town quite well, as it was home to his maternal grandmother and aunt.

Waking up from his inadvertent nap two hours later, R sat up with a jolt. "I forgot to call Mohini!" After a few deep breaths, he phoned his girlfriend, ready to apologize, "Hello Mohini, I am calling from the train. There was so much noise in the station; we would not have heard each other."

"You ... rascal. I do not want to speak to you. I was so worried. I thought ... I imagined ... all kinds of horrible things. They just announced another terrorist train bombing on the radio."

"I am sorry that I did not call you earlier. Actually, I dozed off. First class is so comfortable, Mo ... I wish you were here ... there's no one else ... and it's a sleeper compartment," he risked, stumbling on these daring words.

All of a sudden, he felt hot, although the air-conditioning was on full blast. He had never been so open with her before. It was sheer torture to imagine that it would be several years before they could get married and then only ....

"What was that? R, I think I am losing you. Is the train going through a tunnel? Anyway, I forgive you this time, but don't *ever* forget to call me, or else .... Do you get that, Hero?"

"Yes Ma'am, I'll call you around nine every evening," R sighed. He knew that she was only pretending not to have heard him. That way, she avoided having to respond to his unsophisticated amorous avowal. "Maybe I should watch a few more Bollywood movies to find out how she expects me to make these moves."

"That's fine. Dad is the 'early to bed, early to rise' type. Hey, I bet you haven't heard the latest news."

"What is it?" R interrupted, alarmed. "Another bomb?"

"If it was just that! Ahmed Khan is divorcing his wife! All his fans are so shocked. Actually, to tell you the truth, I could see that coming. It's all because of Uma Kapur, the actress who played his wife in Manish Chawal's latest box office hit. She ..."

"Mohini, the train is going through a tunnel now. If we are cut off, I'll call you tomorrow without fail," R interrupted.

He turned off the cell phone. The last thing he wanted was to waste his airtime and batteries on film-world gossip. From the window, he gazed at the brownish column of dust and smoke that rose high above the city he was leaving behind. "Like some evil genie hovering over Delhi, clouding people's hearts and minds, sending them scurrying every day into their never ending rat race for survival," he mused.

Turning away, he reflected upon his city of birth. He knew its present too well. "I am enduring it." Its future, however, was unclear; he did not see himself in it, as he planned to leave soon for America. His thoughts therefore turned to its past.

Delhi had a glorious birth, as Indraprasth, the capital of the Pandav kingdom, ruled by king Yudhistir and his four brothers—the five Pandav princes—central figures of the great Mahabharat epic, written several thousand years ago. According to the text, the city was so splendid that it stirred the envy and jealousy of the Pandav princes' rivals, their Kaurav cousins. The great Mahabharat war resulted from the Kauravs' desire to possess Indraprasth.

Since those early days, Delhi had lived through more than its share of wars. About a thousand years ago, Afghan invaders ransacked the city, returning later to rule it. In the

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<sup>76</sup> Triangular fried or baked pastry with a spicy vegetable filling.  
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centuries that followed, they were followed by waves of plunder-seeking Persians, Turks, Arabs and finally by Moguls, descendants of bloodthirsty Mongols freshly converted to Islam. "It's as if a dark cloud loomed menacingly over Delhi since its inception, as aunt Deoki suggests."

Then, after the capital saw the last of the British, it became the stage for the daily squabbles of a host of political parties, all vying for a slice of the power pie, but rarely agreeing on anything. "She could be right. Maybe our capital should be a different city; this one has seen too many rivalries, too much bloodshed."

That reminded him of one of his history lessons. Several centuries ago, Hindustan<sup>77</sup>'s longest lasting Mogul ruler Akbar built a new capital named Fatehpur Sikri. The arrogant Moslem tyrant, famous for erecting a 'tower' made of the severed heads of thousands of defeated Hindu warriors at the battle of Panipaat, built the new capital to house his five thousand concubines in luxurious palaces. Disdaining the services of local architects and engineers, that megalomaniac's dream promptly turned into a nightmare as the water supply to his new city proved to be highly inadequate, forcing a shameful return to Delhi.

"He probably had to be re-introduced to his concubines each time he visited them. Who could remember all those names?" a puzzled R marveled. "No wonder Akbar felt the need to create Din-i-Illahi, his own variant of Islam. Like Henry the Eighth, he must have felt constrained by the limitations imposed by religion on his private life."

His thoughts wandered to two other large monuments that were landmarks of his region of birth: Humayun's tomb and Shah Jahan's Taj Mahal. Was he proud of those? Would he take their pictures given the chance? "Probably not," he thought. Why not? "Because of what they remind us of: seven hundred bloody and harsh years under Moslem rule."

Humayun's tomb, made of red brick, stood as a vivid reminder of the blood of the millions of Hindus slaughtered since Mahmud, the Afghan warlord, left his home town of Ghazni a thousand years ago to loot, butcher and burn his way to the throne of Delhi. Humayun, a descendant of Genghis Khan, retraced Mahmud's footsteps, just like many others would do later, hankering after the riches that India was renowned for since antiquity. By the time the pharaoh-like Shah Jahan forced thousands of workers to build the Taj Mahal, a mausoleum in honor of a deceased concubine, the once prosperous India was down on its knees, bleeding profusely like an ancient war elephant pierced by dozens of spears and arrows.

R remembered visiting that world-famous tourist attraction with his parents once. As an eight-year old, he had pinched his nostrils as they walked through the filthy and derelict streets of Agra, the town in which the Taj Mahal was erected. The huge contrast between the magnificence of the tomb and the dirt and dust coating the small houses of Agra left a lasting impression in his mind. In addition, as he leaned over the perimeter walls of the monument, the young R was sickened by the putrid stench that rose from the banks of the Yamuna River.

These unpleasant thoughts combined with the *samosas* he been snacking on all afternoon to drive away any further desire for food. R sighed as he put away his notepad and got ready to sleep, skipping dinner.

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<sup>77</sup> Name given to India by the Moslem invaders.  
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## Part 2

### Mist and Light in Varanasi

## CHAPTER 7

In his dream, somebody was tickling his toes. Was it Mohini? No! That unbelievable thought startled him into waking up. The tickling had not stopped, though. Something was crawling on his foot underneath the sheet. With a swift kick, R tossed the cockroach away. Rebounding on the opposite wall, the insect scurried out of reach into a crevice. "What a way to wake up! Curse this journey," he thought bitterly.

He switched on his cell phone. "Five thirty a.m. ... What was that? The rumbling of thunder? Strange, the sky seems clear outside. Oh, it's my stomach!"

As he precariously shaved and washed in the oscillating compartment's narrow washroom, a white-clad waiter brought a platter with the toasts, cheese, banana and tea that he had ordered. "The benefits of traveling first class," the young traveler thought, grinning as he wiped his face and sat down.

Looking out the window, R guessed that the train was well past the historic sites of Mathura, Vridavan, Govardhan and Gokul, where, according to the Bhagwat pooran<sup>78</sup>, important events in the life of Krishna took place. Those towns are must-go pilgrimage sites for Hindus who choose the path of *bhakti*<sup>79</sup>.

During his first visit to Bodhgaya, his maternal grandfather had narrated, in his inimitable way, the story of that incarnation of Vishnu.

"At the end of *dwaparyoog*<sup>80</sup>, Shri<sup>81</sup> Krishna took birth in Mathura, the capital of the Magadh Empire. As a teenager, and after many adventures in his adopted village of Gokul, in the neighboring forest of Vrindavan and on Govardhan Mountain, he freed the Magadhans from the oppression of Kans the tyrant. Later, he played a key role during the Mahabharat war, helping the Pandavs win back their kingdom, which had been usurped by their evil cousins, the Kauravs. It was on the battlefield of Kurukshetr, near modern day Delhi, that he imparted all the wisdom contained in the Bhagwat Geet<sup>82</sup> to Arjun, one of the Pandav princes."

R learned more about the birthplace of Krishna when his grandfather once exclaimed while reading his newspaper, "It's amazing what the army has to do these days. Some soldiers have been ordered to guard a mosque."

When R pressed for details, he explained, "It's because of Aurangzeb, *Baytay*. Over two hundred years ago, the last Mogul emperor, whose pastime was to raze historical Hindu sites—at least those that his ancestors had not already destroyed—flattened the temple that marked the birthplace of Shri Krishna in Mathura. In its place, he erected a mosque as an attempt to brand the supremacy of Islam into the minds of the local Hindus. Although Aurangzeb's actions never conquered any hearts, long after his death and after the demise of the Moguls, our government still cannot muster the courage to pull the mosque down and rebuild the original temple. Instead, in a country that is 82% Hindu, they send troops to protect it against those who feel that this historic pilgrimage site should be restored. As a matter of fact, that mosque has very few worshippers, and could easily have been relocated elsewhere."

R had read about the Moguls. Aurangzeb, the last of those cruel foreign rulers was the worst of the lot. Driven by an urge to prove that he was a worthy descendant of his barbaric predecessors, the fanatic despot amassed an impressive record of accomplishments over his lifetime. He crisscrossed the country from west to east and from north to south, razing Hindu and Buddhist temples. His army is also credited for looting tons of temple decorations and statues of deities made of solid gold and precious stones. In Vrindavan and Mathura, now home to thousands of temples dedicated to Krishna, Aurangzeb flattened the largest Hindu religious monuments.

Those thoughts brought other, more recent images to R's mind: TV coverage of Taliban warriors merrily displaying incomplete rows of yellow teeth as they blasted giant

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<sup>78</sup> Ancient Hindu sacred text describing the life of Krishna as an incarnation of Vishnu.

<sup>79</sup> Spiritual path preferred by the emotionally inclined, characterized by devotion to a divine manifestation (e.g. Krishna, Ram, etc.), the repetition of mantras and prayers, and the chanting of devotional songs.

<sup>80</sup> Third of the four yuogs (eras) that make up a day of Bramha (One day and one night of Bramha make up one complete cycle of creation and dissolution. At the end of the night, another day starts, and the cycle perpetuates.) Dwaparyoog, which ended around the time when Krishna died, lasted several millennia and preceded the actual Kaliyoog.

<sup>81</sup> Title of respect.

<sup>82</sup> Major Hindu religious text.

statues of the Buddha, the last reminders of a brief peaceful period in perpetually war-torn Afghanistan.

R gazed through the window, catching the first few glimpses of what promised to be a beautiful sunrise as the train moved eastwards through the state of Uttar Pradesh. "This is a historically, spiritually and culturally rich state; yet it is one of the worst faring ones in the Indian federation, poor and populous with deep social and political scars," he regretted.

He knew that they had left Lucknow, the State's capital, far behind. After the Mogul rule crumbled down, and during the rise of the British in India, Lucknow witnessed the decadent lifestyle of Moslem nawabs, as those despots led extravagant lifestyles while others endured poverty and famines in a crippled Uttar Pradesh.

The train had also passed Ayodhya, located further north. This ancient capital of the Raghu dynasty, the birthplace of Ram during *tretayog*<sup>83</sup>, is sacred to Hindus. The model reign of this other incarnation of Vishnu, chronicled by *rishi*<sup>84</sup> Valmiki, became an example for subsequent righteous monarchs. During *ramraj*<sup>85</sup>, honor and justice reigned supreme, and evil was kept at bay. The reign of Ram was that of an ideal ruler who stuck to his principles, even when it was against his interests to do so. Here also, R knew that the army had been called in to protect a site where once stood a mosque built on the foundations of a historic temple. The Ramjanmbhoomi temple had been there from time immemorial for pilgrims to worship at the site of Ram's birth. Then, it too was razed and replaced by a mosque during Mogul reign.

"In Ayodhya, Hindus grew weary of their hypocritical and procrastinating politicians. So they demolished the mosque in 1992 with the intention of rebuilding the original temple," R's father once explained.

"Wasn't anybody hurt when they did that?" R had asked.

"That old mosque had few regular worshippers. It was erected primarily to symbolize Moslem domination. But once it was pulled down it became a political powder keg. Gutless local politicians were scared of losing Moslem votes, so the situation turned into a stalemate. Now, neither Moslems nor Hindus can worship there because the Supreme Court issued a ruling to that effect; and that's why the army now guards it."

"So, in the country of Ram, the model Indian king, his devotees cannot even salute his birthplace; but monuments built to glorify barbaric invaders are here to stay?" an indignant R had wondered.

Nonsense like that only reinforced the young man's contempt for his country of birth and nourished his growing desire to leave. "Are there such things as an Indian spine, as Indian guts?" he often wondered, as he came across more and more examples of wrongs that no political leader seemed bold enough to fix.

R could now see the outskirts of Varanasi. He checked his cell phone. The Kasi Vishwanath Express was indeed on time, even after a seventeen-hour journey.

The young man drew air through each nostril in turn, slowly at first, and then more and more energetically, stimulating the flow of *pran*<sup>86</sup> through his stiffened body. He wanted to be at his best when he met with Yogish Doobay. Many years had passed since his last visit.

Doobay did not have a telephone, so R had asked his uncle Suresh to inform the pundit that he would be arriving that morning. He half expected the old sage to meet him at the station. He always used to in the past. The learned man took his responsibility very seriously, and was fond of his young disciple's sharp intellect and keen sense of justice.

R toyed with his camera, thinking about his first stop on this countrywide journey. Here in Varanasi, after he handed the gift to Doobay, he would be expected to spend the day with the pundit's family. Then, there was his uncle Suresh and his wife; they would want him to spend at least one night under their roof. The following day, however, it should be possible to set off for the second leg of his journey, after taking a few pictures of 'scenic' Varanasi.

R smiled at that last thought. Varanasi, or Kasi as it was also called, was all but a picturesque city. "Unless one is into poverty, grime, pollution, and extreme displays of

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<sup>83</sup> The second *yog* (era) which preceded *dwaparyog*.

<sup>84</sup> Sage. Learned religious person in ancient times.

<sup>85</sup> The reign of Ram.

<sup>86</sup> Life force.



religious fervor," he mused. "But that works out well for me. After all, I am on the lookout for images that will justify my decision to leave."

He peeked into his 'Los Angeles' backpack. "I wonder why Ashok asked me to send him photos and comments during my trip. Surely, he must trust that I will deliver these precious little parcels to his friends. And why on earth does he want to look at images from a country that he so readily left behind?"

He puzzled on that for a while, then came up with only one plausible explanation. "Mr. Ashok must be hiding an American girlfriend from us. That must be it. The photos and the travel notes that I will be sending will give her a glimpse of his country of birth."

R explored the idea further. "I hope that she does not decide to visit India ... at least not before Ashok sponsors my applications. Who knows what could happen if she comes here? Some foreigners have such strange ideas. They come here looking for spiritual enlightenment—or for some other weird reason—then they settle down forever. If she were to do that, I would have to kiss goodbye to my American dream, as Ashok would surely accompany her here."

He paused, alarmed, and then pursued his wild speculations. "In any case, I had planned to capture the worst pictures for my website, so those will be the ones I will send her ... or rather *him*, because officially, she does not exist. However, the Saksenas let the cat out of the bag at the airport, and Ashok did too, in his email. How silly all this secrecy is. After all, I do not mind sharing my feelings for Mohini with him. He *has* changed after all ... a little."

R had some nice memories of Varanasi from his childhood visits to his uncle's and the Doobays'; however, he knew that it would be easy to capture a few off-putting scenes with his new camera. Such images abounded in this overcrowded city in which *sadhus*<sup>87</sup> walk naked in the streets; where half-cremated corpses float on the Gunga River, impromptu fodder for the crocodiles; and where thousands of pilgrims immerse themselves daily in the heavily polluted waters of the still-sacred river.

As the train finally stopped, a grateful R lifted his sore bottom off the Indian Railways first-class couch and picked up his belongings. He waited a few minutes for the crowd to clear before setting foot on the platform, and then made his way slowly towards the exit.

Doobay was there, easily recognizable with his white beard and his *pagri*<sup>88</sup>, the same smile and merry twinkle in his ageing eyes. As always, he wore a spotlessly clean white *dhoti*, with a saffron shawl draped over his thinning shoulders.

R had developed a special bond with the elderly man. Family ties did not bind them, but sometimes he felt that the pundit filled the gap left by his deceased grandfathers. His own paternal grandfather had also been a Hindu priest, although R's memories of him were scant at best.

As R joined his hands in traditional salutation, bowing to his guru, he noticed without any surprise that the priest's feet rested on wooden sandals, as Doobay refused to wear anything made of leather.

"*Namaskar*<sup>89</sup>, *Punditdji*."

"*Ashirvad*<sup>90</sup>. I am happy to see you, R. Come, let us leave this noisy place promptly. We'll talk along the way."

Doobay turned around and stepped forward with an energy that even R found hard to match, especially after such a long trip.

"How are your parents? And Ashok?"

"They are fine thank you. And you?"

"In excellent shape, as you can see. So what brings you to Varanasi this time? I thought your uncle had married off all his children," the pundit jested.

Breathing hard to keep pace with his guru, R blurted out everything about his plans to emigrate, and about Ashok's request to deliver parcels to his former university friends.

"I am fortunate that Ashok asked me to bring you a little token of his respect, *Gurudji*. This gives me a chance to meet with you and *Chach*<sup>91</sup> before I leave for America."

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<sup>87</sup> Elderly men who have renounced the world and spend all their time in their spiritual quest, surviving on alms.

<sup>88</sup> Turban.

<sup>89</sup> Formal salutation.

<sup>90</sup> Blessings.

<sup>91</sup> Paternal aunt – wife of an uncle (referring to the pundit's wife).

The old sage smiled mischievously. "What makes you think that you will be leaving Bharat soon, R?"

"What do you mean?" a startled R asked. "The formalities should take a few weeks at the most." Doobay was a highly regarded *gyotishi*, and although the young man did not believe in astrology, he suddenly felt a pang of anxiety. Had his guru foreseen any obstacles to his departure for America?

"Actually, these formalities can be very lengthy, R. You remember my son Avinash, don't you?" Doobay said with a hint of sadness. "It took him months to get his visa although he had won a scholarship from an American university."

As they crossed a noisy market area, neither of them bothered to speak for a few minutes. Bicycle hawkers, street vendors and their customers yelled at each other over the din caused by the horns of scooters and *autorikshas*.

The pundit's house was in the older part of the sacred city, where the streets are too narrow even for the popular sub-compact Premiers<sup>92</sup> and Marutis, India's most popular cars. As a *bramhan*<sup>93</sup>, Doobay lived frugally, and only used motorized forms of transport when he could not do otherwise. "Why pollute *Prithvi Ma*<sup>94</sup>, if we can avoid it with just a little extra effort," he preached to those willing to listen to him. However, most people just nodded benignly at his words of wisdom, barely paying lip service to environmental issues in a country struggling to crawl out of the poverty trap.

After leaving the market area, and as they marched along Chaiganj Road towards the pundit's home, R could not help noticing the old sage's unusual silence. Yogish Doobay, like many who preached and taught all their lives, had always been an outgoing, talkative person. In addition, he had always been fond of talking to R. What could be the matter? The young traveler felt relieved when they finally reached the priest's modest house, merely a stone's throw away from the nearest *ghat* on the banks of the Gunga River.

The famous *ghats* of Varanasi; R knew that at least a hundred of these large, stone platforms hugged the riverbank, so that Hindu pilgrims could pay homage to Gunga, the life-giving river along which millions of people lived. It made sense for Doobay and many of his colleagues to live close by; they could walk to the riverbank in just a few minutes to assist devotees with their services. The priests would help people with their prayers, and officiate in formal religious ceremonies for births, weddings, and cremations.

Mrs. Doobay, who treated him as her son, welcomed him warmly. "Moonna, you have grown even taller. Yashoda must be so proud."

"*Namastay, Chachi*," saluted R, stiffening a little at the use of his childhood name. "How are you? How is the family?"

Much to his surprise, Mrs. Doobay chose not to answer his polite question, turning away to pick up a copper *lota*<sup>95</sup> full of water. Like his guru, R left his footwear at the doorstep and washed his hands and feet with the water that the pundit's wife poured. Then, with a paternal hand on the young man's shoulder, Doobay invited him to step in.

Nothing seemed to have changed in the pundit's home. The interior was exactly as in his last visit. "Unpretentious, but spotlessly clean," he always felt. On each of his visits, he could not help comparing this modest dwelling with his parents' apartment. Indeed, Mr. and Mrs. Sharma kept on adding furniture and appliances over the years, in an eclectic style imposed by their limited spending power, eventually turning their apartment into something that looked more like a bazaar than a home. On the other hand, space dominated this house, as did earth-related colors. Furniture was sparse and Indian in style. Here, the mood seemed always cheerful and inspiring. Conversely, the Sharma household often felt tense, anxious or sad.

The two men sat on a large straw mat in the main room where the pundit met with all those who came to request his services. Careful to follow basic etiquette, R made sure that his soles did not point towards his guru as he folded his legs underneath him.

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<sup>92</sup> One of the most popular of the few brands of automobiles produced in India, based on a European model of the 1960s.

<sup>93</sup> Hindu priest and/or teacher. Accumulating wealth is forbidden to members of this social class.

<sup>94</sup> Mother Earth.

<sup>95</sup> Round, vase-like utensil.

While savoring a cinnamon flavored chai and some *mawa*<sup>96</sup>, Mrs. Doobay's forte, the young traveler glanced a few times at the couple facing him. Both seemed to have aged considerably since his last visit.

"Tell us more about your project to emigrate to America, R," Doobay asked with a polite smile.

Shock registered on his wife's face. Glancing first at her husband to find out if he was joking, she turned to R. "Is that true, R? Are you *also* thinking of emigrating?"

Hesitant at first but growing bolder as he spoke, the young man then justified his reasons for wanting to leave his country of birth. Here, drought; there, green grass ... and so on.

When he finished, he looked up at them. They seemed a little sad, but he felt that he could read some understanding in his guru's eyes. Yet, he was surprised by their reaction. As if guided by intuition, his next question was right on target.

"And how is Avinash? And ...," he hesitated, unable to remember their daughter's name.

A pained expression rippled across Mrs. Doobay's face.

"It must be something to do with one of their children," R guessed.

"As I told you, Avinash left to build a life for himself in America," Doobay replied stoically.

"So that is why she is so sad. She has lived what Mom went through when Ashok left," R thought.

"He felt that things move too slowly over here, although he did find a job fairly easily after completing his Electronics Engineering degree. Then, one day, he came in and told us that he had won a scholarship to study for an MBA in a prestigious American university ... and he could not let such an opportunity pass by. He left a few months later. Over a year has gone by, yet ... his mother cannot quite get over it," the old sage explained.

"We only wished the best for him," Mrs. Doobay said in a trembling voice. Suddenly, she got up and, without a word, hurried to the kitchen as fast as her portliness would allow her.

"To hide her tears," R guessed. He was at a loss for words. Was it a coincidence that Avinash had followed Ashok's footsteps? Did those two stay in touch after Ashok left for Los Angeles? Did his elder brother help Avinash to leave for America? "After all, this sounds so similar to the path that Ashok suggested I take," he wondered. It was not surprising therefore that his own story seemed to have hit a sensitive chord with the Doobays.

His guru's somber voice cut through the silence. "Avinash left to chase the shadows of the material world. I sometimes wonder if he paid enough attention to my teachings. ... He might have understood the value of leading a simple but principled life."

"Being your son, I am sure that he will uphold the values that you hold dear," R said encouragingly.

"Let's hope so."

R tactfully felt that it was the right moment to change topics. Reaching into his backpack, he pulled out the rectangular parcel sent by Ashok.

"*Gurudji*, Ashok sent this for you, along with his respects," he said, holding the parcel with both hands and placing it reverently on the straw mat in front of Doobay.

The pundit picked up the gift and unwrapped a book, which he placed on the mat after a brief glance at its cover. Opening the envelope that had slipped out of the parcel, he then read the letter it contained, keeping it at arms' length. R remembered that his guru refused to wear glasses, even though his old eyes were gradually letting him down. Yogish Doobay eventually looked up, folding the letter carefully. "As if he does not want me to see what is in it," R felt strangely.

Doobay's smile had a baffling twist as he spoke, "R, you will be leaving soon and we might never see each other again. In this letter, Ashok regrets that he could not spend more time learning what I could have taught him. He would not like you to leave your motherland as he did—unprepared. In other words, he would like me to spend a day or two teaching you a few essential things."

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<sup>96</sup> Candy made by reducing sweetened milk to pudding consistency and flavoring with cardamom.  
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R was both surprised and annoyed, but did his best not to show it. "Ashok could at least have discussed this with me," he thought. "I planned to leave Varanasi tomorrow morning!"

"I will not refuse his request, R, but I do hope you share—or at least understand—his wish," the pundit added, peering deep into R's eyes.

"I am indebted to you for all that you have taught me during my previous visits, *Gurudji*. If you think that there are important things that I still need to know, then I would be grateful for your teachings," R replied with a polite smile, fuming internally at Ashok.

"Then plan to spend the next four days here. I need that much time to complete my task as your guru." Doobay's smile had vanished, replaced by a serious look. His tone also indicated that it was now a guru speaking to his disciple.

A shocked R stared at the priest in silence. Four days was a long time ... but he had no choice. He did not wish to offend Yogish Doobay. Not after all that the old sage had taught him freely, without ever asking for anything in return. Besides, he knew from experience that his guru's teachings had often proved useful.

He had lunch with the Doobays. Their daughter Gaetri, they explained, was out, attending BHU<sup>97</sup>. In the afternoon, he strolled through Varanasi, taking a few pictures, and then made his way towards his uncle's house.

The couple was not at home, but Prakash, their housekeeper, who knew R well, let him in.

"How are my uncle and aunt, Prakash? And how are you?"

"Come in, R *Babu*<sup>98</sup>, they were expecting you this morning, but they had to leave for work. It's the end of term and all university professors are very busy correcting papers."

"I met someone I know at the station this morning and he invited me to his house," R explained.

Prakash showed him to his room, which brought back pleasant memories from his childhood.

"I'll ask uncle Suresh whether I can sleep on the roof as we used to long ago. I would prefer the sky as my bedsheet in this heat, and at night the air is breathable."

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<sup>97</sup> Benares Hindu University.

<sup>98</sup> Young Sir.

## CHAPTER 8

The night had been restful. R had slept under the stars, as he had wished. The old straw mattresses were still on the roof, and although they felt much smaller and less comfortable than in his childhood memories, he had been too tired to notice. He fell asleep like a log, in spite of a tantalizing conversation with Mohini after dinner.

"Dad told me to be nice to you. Apparently, your trip across the country will be tiring and full of challenges, so you don't need me pestering you. Instead, I should encourage you. So, here you go," she said in a mock little-girl voice, blowing him a kiss through the phone.

R's travel fatigue vanished immediately.

"Did he tell you to encourage me like that?" he teased.

As his aunt and uncle were well out of hearing range in the house below, R enjoyed the rest of the conversation's flirty tone. Clearly, Mohini's father was already asleep, or she would not have dared speak like that.

The previous evening, Suresh and Urmila Sharma returned late, just in time for the excellent dinner that Prakash had laid on the table. They were both glad to see him. R was like a son to them, having spent many weeks at their home during his childhood, playing daily with their own children.

Urmila was delighted to receive the small jar of *ancha* that R's mother had sent. "Yashoda's mango *ancha* is the best in the family. She inherited that recipe from her mother," she said, thanking him.

The young man was getting used to unenthusiastic reactions to his emigration plans, so theirs' pleasantly surprised him.

"This is great news! I hope your application is received by the university in time, though," Suresh said.

"I hope so too. I mailed the forms to Ashok before I set out on this journey."

"We are really happy for you. Our children are also considering emigrating, but to Canada," Urmila added.

"Canada? What a strange idea. Do they like snow and ice that much?" R quipped.

"They are married and already have kids, you know; and they have that strange notion that Canada might be a better place to raise a young family."

"Well, I prefer the sun and the beach. But above all, I believe, like so many others, that America is *the* land where dreams come true."

"What a speech. If you change your mind about emigrating, consider a career in politics," Suresh teased.

They made light conversation throughout dinner, concluding with R's plans.

"I am glad to finally meet people in your age group who react so well to this. I am not sure that my parents really like the idea that I will be leaving."

"Ashok's sudden departure hurt their feelings. He should have talked about his plans to them beforehand. Having said that, we both believe in moving to where your skills are valued most. We left our villages decades ago in search of a better life in the city and look at us now. It was well worth it, and that's why we encourage our children to do the same if they feel that they have to."

"Don't worry, R. Your parents will come to terms with your decision ... eventually. When you are settled in America and doing well, they will be proud of you," Urmila said with an encouraging smile.

When R reached Doobay's house that morning, his guru was already waiting for him. The young man was still smarting from Ashok's cavalier request to their guru. "He did not even bother to inform me, let alone ask me what I thought about it. He still treats me like a kid," he thought bitterly.

"*Gurudji*, you already taught me so much. Is there still a lot that I don't know yet?" R questioned, stopping short of asking the pundit whether he really needed four days. The reluctant young traveler was keen to complete his journey and return to Delhi as soon as possible. There, he dreamed, he would spend some 'quality time' with his girlfriend before leaving for Los Angeles.

"Don't be so impatient R," the old sage replied, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "You will find your path soon enough. But don't you agree that the better prepared you are, the easier it will be to face any obstacles ahead?"

These cryptic words baffled R. He recalled the prediction made by his mother's *jyotishi* in Delhi. "That I will find my path 'within a year'. Now what is this about 'obstacles ahead', though?" he wondered.

Doobay carried on, "R, there is so much wisdom and knowledge that I could share with you. Two days will barely be enough for that. However, I need you to stay in Varanasi four days because I had prior engagements for the next couple of days. So we will spend today together, then meet again after another two days."

He paused, then suggested with a hint of excitement, "Actually, why don't you accompany me tomorrow? I will celebrate a wedding. You will be surprised to know who is getting married. Varanasi can be such a small place."

R did not react to Doobay's intriguing words. He was glad to notice that his guru was clearly himself again; the upbeat teacher and spiritual guide that he had always known, cheerful and in control. "Doobay never looked despondent before. Yesterday's somber mood was probably linked to my migration plans. It must have brought back painful memories of Avinash's departure. Doobay must have wondered whether he failed to give his own son the wisdom that he freely hands out to so many strangers," R concluded perceptively.

The invigorated pundit added, "Tomorrow morning, I will be busy with some rituals prior to the wedding. Meet me here in the afternoon—at one o'clock. And, be on time; the wedding is due to start at two o'clock sharp. It will take place on the *ghats* nearby. The day after tomorrow, I will be taken up all day and part of the evening as well, but my daughter Gaetri will play the role of Sita<sup>99</sup> in a scene of the Ramayan at a nearby temple. After that, she will lead a *bhajan*<sup>100</sup> session. That means she will be returning in the early evening. R, I would feel more ..."

"Don't worry, *Gurudji*, you can count on me to accompany her," R interrupted, saving Doobay the embarrassment of having to ask for a favor. However, R knew that this responsibility would tax his patience; he felt uncomfortable in crowded places. His parents performed most of their prayers in their apartment, only visiting temples on rare occasions like Maha Shivratri<sup>101</sup>.

That whole day, R listened to his guru. Yogish Doobay had the rare ability to explain complex concepts to his disciples in plain language, and he was neither pedantic nor prescriptive. R, as a dutiful disciple, politely asked the right questions at the most appropriate moments.

"Do you know why the area where we are sitting is located in this part of the house?" Doobay asked.

A puzzled R looked around for clues, but found nothing special. The sparsely furnished sitting area where the pundit received his guests was located in the northeastern side of the small house.

"Well, let me explain. The science of *vastu* provides us with knowledge and rules that, if applied, lead us to obtain the best benefits from our vital space, whether at work or at home. Our offices, bedrooms, living rooms and kitchens can be in harmony with the forces of nature rather than in conflict with them. Planning living areas with *vastu* can contribute to a healthy, happy and prosperous life. This area, which I use to meet with my disciples and with those who require my services, is located in the northeast quadrant, that of *varun*, the liquid element. This direction is most conducive to peaceful, productive thought, and to meditation. This is why I chose this area for my meetings decades ago. And I can assure you that my work here has always been fruitful."

"But isn't your success attributable to your own competence and abilities, *Gurudji*?" R asked, masking his skepticism.

"You are right about that, but it is in our best interests to have as many positive factors as possible on our side. There is no harm in using age-old wisdom if it works, and if it can help us. You see, the science of *vastu* was not the brainchild of a single person

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<sup>99</sup> The wife of King Ram.

<sup>100</sup> Devotional song.

<sup>101</sup> Religious festival in honor of Shiv.

accidentally hit on the head during his nap by a falling coconut. It is the result of hundreds of years of observation of nature and of its influence on our daily lives. Our current knowledge of *vastu* was perfected and put to test repeatedly over several centuries by many sages before it was eventually compiled in the *vastu shastras*<sup>102</sup>."

R listened to the old sage as he explained how all Hindu temples, monuments, palaces and even ordinary dwellings were built, in ancient times, using the principles of this ancient architectural science. "These days, my colleagues in prosperous cities like Mumbai and Bangalore are submerged by requests from businesspeople who want their guidance to design *vastu*-compliant offices, in which their employees will give the best of themselves and thus bring long term prosperity to their enterprises."

He paused reflectively, and then confided, "Avinash, who is so interested in business, particularly exports, should have known about this; if only he had given me more time to teach him, that is. You see R, *vastu* is one of our civilization's many exports. Like Buddhism, it was disseminated in other parts of the ancient world, where other similar practices—like feng shui—emerged later. Our concepts of *nadis*<sup>103</sup> and *chakras*<sup>104</sup> may well have inspired acupuncture, and *hath yog* is now popular throughout the world.

"But *Gurudji*, aren't we all unique or at least different? So how can *vastu* be equally beneficial to all?"

"You are right again. When planning to build a house, for example, the owner should ideally know the *tridosh*<sup>105</sup> profile of all members of his household. Otherwise, he should ask a *gyotishi* to determine those. Using *vastu*, he would then be able to plan the optimal room allocation, choice of colors and geometric shapes for each family member."

"*Gurudji*, I know that you are a *gyotishi* practitioner. Some people I know think that *gyotishi* is just a bundle of superstitions," said R, thinking of his Marxist mentor, Professor Vikram Varma. "They are shocked that in this scientific age, so many Indians still blindly rely on *gyotishi* predictions to decide whether a potential marriage would work or not, when a house should be built or a business launched, when they can leave for a *tirthyatra*<sup>106</sup>, and so on."

Doobay burst out laughing. He knew that R was too polite to state his own doubts about the effectiveness of *gyotishi*. Wiping a tear off his bearded cheek, he answered, "R, the observations that have led to the *science* of *gyotishi* were compiled over thousands of years. During this time, our ancestors observed the stars and the solar system, identifying patterns and trends. They painstakingly mapped relationships between the forces at play in the universe and our everyday lives. No one can deny the effects of the moon on tides, or that of the seasons on agriculture. The early *gyotishis* understood how our uniqueness is, in part, a function of our date and place of birth, and they learned how we carry that uniqueness throughout our current life, reacting differently to universal forces. You talk of a 'scientific age', but *our* science did not emerge just in the last few centuries; it was always an integral part of our civilization. However, the terminology we use is different from that of the science you learnt in high school. Our ancestors determined the rules and formulas of *gyotishi* after centuries of observation and verification, fine-tuning them, perfecting them. I, and so many other *gyotishis*, have made countless predictions using complex calculations based on people's *rashis*<sup>107</sup> and *nakshatras*<sup>108</sup>. R, *gyotishi* means *the science of light*. Not the external, material light, but that light which enlightens the inner self; which minimizes uncertainty; which allows us to plan our future, to put all the chances on our side and to reduce the risk of failure. These are the main benefits of *gyotishi*. R, I know from experience that *gyotishi* is based on science, not superstition."

Doobay paused to moisten his throat with some water from a copper *lota*, then added, "If *gyotishi* was superstitious, if its predictions were inaccurate, then it would have disappeared a long time ago because people would have stopped believing in it. However,

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<sup>102</sup> Treatises.

<sup>103</sup> Channels allowing the flow of *pran* (life force) through the astral body.

<sup>104</sup> Energy centers located within the astral body.

<sup>105</sup> The exact proportion of the three dosh (types)—*vata*, *pita*, *kapha*—used to characterize a person under *ayurved*, the holistic and preventative Indian wellness system.

<sup>106</sup> Pilgrimage to Hindu sacred sites.

<sup>107</sup> Sign of the Indian zodiac (based on the sidereal zodiac) which uses the position of the planets in relation to the stars (instead of the sun).

<sup>108</sup> Sign of the lunar Indian zodiac.

even in this 'scientific age' as you say, so many still trust this ancient gem—because it works."

As R appeared doubtful, mulling the sage's arguments, Doobay paused, and then asked, "R, has the science you talk about solved fundamental questions, such as the nature of life, of energy, or the origins of the universe?"

R did not reply. That was not necessary. The pundit obviously knew this subject for having talked about it before.

Doobay continued, "That *science*, which many people believe has an answer for everything, has not even provided a clear explanation for those fundamental questions yet. Scientists who research those areas would probably admit that they are still fumbling in the dark. Yet, so many people blindly swear by that *science*, blissfully unaware of its limitations. They wave that magic word as a banner to justify deriding the knowledge that we inherited from so many brilliant *rishis*, who were themselves scientists, albeit of a different type. R, the sciences of *jyotish*, *ayurved* and *vastu* are among those ancient Indian scientific disciplines that have been researched, challenged, tested, and perfected over thousands of years, not mere decades."

Doobay drank some more water, wiping a few drops off his beard with the back of his hand. Looking into R's eyes, he continued, "Elsewhere, and to a much lesser extent in our own country, astrology has lost its credibility because of crooks who pretend to be astrologers although they do not have the required knowledge and training. In fact, learning to practice *jyotish* can take years; for example, you need to be good at mathematics to perform the many necessary calculations. In so many countries, people cannot tell the difference between a trained astrologer and an impostor. Anybody can just set up shop as a soothsayer in circuses or fun fairs. When the dreamed-up prophecies of such charlatans do not materialize, people feel justified to relegate astrology to the level of superstitions."

R patiently listened to his guru for another two hours until Mrs. Doobay finally appeared, inviting them to freshen up before lunch. As they got up, Doobay looked into his disciple's eyes, "R, I hope that you will come to appreciate the value of these ancient gems of our civilization. Do not underestimate them just because they are old. Remember, the science you talk about is still so young, and real wisdom comes with age. Our culture promotes harmony, encourages us to seek resonance with our surroundings, and teaches us that synergy between the individual and the forces of the universe is desirable. Through tools such as *vastu*, *ayurved* and *jyotish*, we strive to align our vibrations with those of the universe so as to seek a happy, productive and ideal life; to seek perfection."

The meal took place in silence, as usual. R remembered one of his guru's first lessons. It was years ago, in those days when he still wore shorts. Ashok and he were having lunch at the pundit's house for the first time. Doobay's children were there too. While everyone else ate in silence, the young R chatted about the morning's events. Doobay had then lectured him—and he had never forgotten that lesson.

"R, do you know what we call the physical body in Sanskrit? *Annamay kosha*. This means *the layer built from food*. Without food, our bodies would not exist for long. Do you know that most of the atoms in our body are replaced within a year through the food we eat?"

R had paused his chatter to listen to the pundit, who carried on, "Because of that, once food is placed in front of us, ready to be consumed, we should give it due respect. That means we should *eat* it, and not waste time talking or doing anything else. In addition, we should not consume cold or decaying food because that is conducive to *tamas*."

At that point, the young R had started looking around for a spoon, a utensil he always used at his parents apartment. Doobay noticed and told him, "R, we are all eating with our washed right hand. By touching the food with our fingers, we establish an intimate link with it right away, helping us to *feel* that this food is soon going to become part of our body. That positive feeling helps us to digest and assimilate the food."

Once their meal was over, Mrs. Doobay brought them a *lota* of water to rinse their hands, and then both men went to the backyard for a digestive stroll. The air was moist, and it was not just because of the house's proximity to the river; the family's washing was drying on ropes stretched from the house to the fence, and a light breeze made the garments swing back and forth under the noonday sun.



Later, when they returned inside, Doobay said, "Let us now talk about a few fundamental principles of our spirituality." He paused, raising his hand to silence his young disciple who seemed about to speak, and then continued. "I know that you are not very religious. I said spirituality, not rituals and religion. You told me that you had found most of my teachings about *yog* and *pranayam* useful, so hear me out on these topics as well. You won't regret it, I promise."

R smiled, settling down on his folded legs. The pundit then asked him, "Before I start, tell me what you know about our spirituality, R."

"Well, I admit that I know little. We celebrate a few festivals like Divali. My parents practice *puja* twice daily. They have an *ishtdev*<sup>109</sup>, which is Shiv; but they also worship other deities. ... Talking about that, *Gurudji*, we Hindus seem to have so many gods. I read in a foreign magazine that we are thought to have 33,000 or 36 million of them. Is that right? If so, how do we remember who's who ... or who does what?"

The pundit laughed. "First, you are talking about religious rituals and religion, not spirituality. As for our supposedly very large number of gods, that is partly right ... and partly misleading. Let me explain."

He sipped some water then added, "As you mentioned earlier, we are all unique. Therefore, it is normal to expect that our spiritual quest is also unique. In order to succeed, people's spiritual journeys should therefore be free, unconstrained by dogmas and rigid religious ideologies. We have always understood the need for freedom within every individual's spiritual quest. We know that all the rivers lead to one vast ocean. Raindrops are tiny, but whichever stream they chose to follow, they end up becoming one again with the huge ocean, in an endless cycle."

Doobay paused briefly to smile at R's baffled expression.

"Our spiritual path is called Sanatan Dharm, *the eternal path*. Many in our own country prefer to use its foreign name, Hinduism—as it seems so difficult for them to conceive that the days of British rule are over. Sanatan Dharm recognizes our uniqueness by allowing everyone to select spiritual practices from its major streams. We are not compelled to adhere to any rituals; but we can do so if we wish. The greatness and resilience of our *eternal path* lies in its openness. Sanatan Dharm allows an infinite number of streams to flow side by side to the same ocean—as long as they do not impede each other. So when others laugh at our myriads of 'gods', we are in fact enjoying great spiritual freedom; the freedom to create our unique spiritual path. Now, do you understand why the '33,000 or 36 million gods' is both right and misleading?"

"I am beginning to. We don't really believe that there are that many gods; it's just that we are each free to shape our unique spiritual path. Is that right?"

"Exactly. Just as a diamond has many facets, we can choose to worship our preferred aspect of God—or *ishtdev*—in our own way, and achieve spiritual progress."

"Is that also why we do not practice proselytism?"

"You understand fast," Doobay smiled. "Sanatan Dharm being about openness to various forms of spiritual practice, it leaves its practitioners free to follow the path that suits them best at any particular stage of their spiritual quest. Under Sanatan Dharm, some can chose to pray and chant *bhajans*, while others practice selfless service, or meditation, or any combination of these. It's also this openness of our eternal path that allowed Bharat to be both an incubator and a safe haven for some of the world's leading religions."

"Is that right? I know about Jainism, but it is an offshoot of Hinduism ... sorry, I mean Sanatan Dharm. Are there many others?"

"Actually, Buddhism was born here and blossomed before being disseminated throughout Asia. It even quenched the spiritual thirst of many parched souls in arid Afghanistan, when Emperor Ashok, who conquered that region, later adopted the path of the Buddha."

"So that's where my elder brother's name comes from? I digress, but was the original Ashok a great emperor?"

"He was one of our early emperors along with Bharat, after whom our country is named. Later, Chandragupt and others came, and their empires extended across most of the subcontinent. Anyway, let's focus on spirituality for now, shall we?"

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<sup>109</sup> Preferred deity.

"Sorry *Gurudji*. Please carry on. You said something about our country being a safe haven for other religions."

"And an exemplary one too, as from antiquity. When Jewish refugees settled on parts of the west coast fleeing persecution, we did not harass them, torture them, burn them alive, or even tax them punitively. Instead, we offered them a sanctuary in which they felt safe and free to practice their faith—at least until Mogul rule started. Until today, some of their descendants still live there. The same can be said for the Zoroastrians who fled Persia in those early days when Islam was spreading its wings aggressively from Arabia. Many Parsis, as their descendants came to be known, still live in Mumbai today."

R mulled about this for a short while, and then asked, "*Gurudji*, how do we react when other, less open faiths engage in aggressive or covert proselytism in our country?"

"Good question, but from what I just taught you about Sanatan Dharm, you should be able to answer that one yourself. Now, I want to talk about something else."

The pundit paused, waiting for R's full attention.

"We recognize four major stages of life, R. As you will be completing your studies soon, and then starting a new chapter of your life, this concept may be useful to you, so listen. The first stage of life, called *bramhachari*, is that of childhood and education. Once our preparation for adulthood is completed, we step into *grihast*, during which we work to earn a living. We marry and raise a family ... if we wish to. As our children grow up and get married in turn, we step back gradually and move into the pre-retirement stage of *vanprast*. Finally, during *sanyas*, the last stage, we should be free to spend much more time on spiritual progress ... and prepare ourselves for the next life."

As his guru spoke, R reflected on how he fitted into this framework. "Now I am still a *bramhachari*, but someday, I will move into *grihast* with Mohini, and it will be in America!"

Doobay snapped his wiry fingers, drawing R out of his brief daydream.

"You may also find useful to think in terms of life's four main goals to help you plan your life well, R."

"What are those goals, *Gurudji*?" R asked politely.

"The four goals of life are *arth*, *kam*, *dharm* and *moksh*. *Arth* is about acquiring and producing the means to earn a living. You are thinking in terms of *arth* when you plan to leave Bharat for America."

"Because I will earn a better living there," R responded.

"*Kam* is about enjoying the pleasures that life can offer. After you find a job here or in America, you can then get married, for example," Doobay said with a smile. "However, if we want to live in peace and harmony within society, we need to obey rules in the workplace, in the streets, and at home. *Dharm* is about living our lives in a disciplined, ethical way, respecting others and being useful to society."

"I understand that. We reap what we sow; bad behavior leads to suffering; the law of *karm*."

"We will talk about that later; I want to make sure that you understand the concept of *karm* well. Let us conclude the goals of life with *moksh*. When we come to realize that material things and pleasures, power and even knowledge are fleeting and relative, we then seek out the absolute and the eternal; we then look for *moksh*."

Their conversation continued until the early evening. As the young man left Doobay's house, his guru reminded him that they were due to meet in the afternoon on the following day.

After dinner, when he retired to his rooftop bedroom, R tried to share what he had learnt with Mohini during their daily phone call. Later that night, after much tossing and turning, the young man eventually fell asleep with an uneasy feeling, his girlfriend's flippant comment still ringing in his ears.

"Don't lose any sleep over those old fashioned Indian ideas, Hero; they will not be of much use to us in modern and rich America," she had said, yawning.

## CHAPTER 9

At the crack of dawn, R opened his eyes lazily as his lungs filled with Vanarasi's cool early morning air. It smelled faintly of camphor, incense and other ingredients used by devotees in their sunrise prayers on the *ghats*. He rose and stretched into a full Suryanamaskar, facing the mild, early light rays that seeped between the buildings opposite his uncle's house.

"Is the breeze coming from the east this morning?" he wondered. Indeed, in that direction, barely ten minutes from Suresh Sharma's home, flowed Gunga, India's best-known river. There, on dozens of *ghats*, devotees flocked daily to pray. Many came from far away to bathe in Gunga as part of a *tirthyatra*. Others, mostly from Varanasi, enjoyed a daily ritual dip in the polluted—but still sacred—river. Weddings and cremations drew thousands everyday, as did special religious ceremonies during which pundits recited *Vedic mantras*<sup>110</sup> in front of the sacred fire of *hawans*<sup>111</sup>.

That afternoon, R would accompany his guru to a wedding ceremony. The pundit was officiating at the marriage of Urmila's niece. Both R's uncle and aunt would be at the wedding, but they were so harried by the wedding preparations that they did not even raise an eyebrow when R announced that he would be going with Doobay instead.

With a whole morning at his disposal, the young man went picture hunting in the streets of Varanasi, his little digital camera on standby to capture the kind of images that—he hoped—would dispel any desire to visit India from the mind of Ashok's American girlfriend. "Yes, she must be American," he firmly decided. "Otherwise, why would he keep it a secret?"

Walking along one of the dark and narrow alleys of the old city, he wondered why Ashok had initially tried to discourage him from emigrating. "He must be enjoying a great life over there, so what did he mean by 'Forget about immigrating to America ... You are chasing a shadow'? Has he turned selfish? ... No, because if he had, he would not have changed his mind afterwards as he did—and very generously too! This is another mystery that I would like to solve ... in due time."

He took a few photographs along the *ghats* lining the river. Among people of all shapes, sizes and ages, he noticed a large group of shaky elders, their faces strained by a lifetime of hardships. Somehow, they had managed to survive the long and tedious journey from remote villages to this highly symbolical site. Here they would start, continue ... or perhaps complete preparations for their next life.

Turning around, R gazed at other people on the *ghats*. These were there not to pray or meditate, but to offer their services to pilgrims and devotees. His attention was drawn to a *puja samagri*<sup>112</sup> seller. The young man crouched in front of his merchandise, which was laid out on a piece of brownish cloth to protect it from the surrounding dirt. A portly, middle-aged woman, wrapped in a green and blue sari, and accompanied by her daughter, had just bought one of his small, neatly wrapped packages. As he got closer to the merchant, R peeked at the contents of these packages through their clear plastic wrapping. They were 'express' prayer kits: some camphor and a small matchbox for offering fire and light to the deity; incense sticks, a few mango leaves and some flowers. There were also some other ingredients that he could not identify.

His eyes trailed the two chatting women as they ambled towards a small temple. At the foot of the steps leading to the temple's entrance, a man wearing a tan shirt and brown pants was removing his sandals. Leaving his leather briefcase next to his footwear, he climbed the steps briskly. After a quick bow to the deity, the man rang the small bell hanging just outside the temple's door, then spun around. A stressed look on his face, he glanced at his watch while descending. R noticed that several other men and women, similarly dressed for work, performed the same ritual in much the same way. "An 'express', morning prayer to their *ishtdev* to help them face another challenging day, no doubt," the young traveler concluded absentmindedly.

Suddenly, R's bored face lit up with a bright smile. There, at the street corner, was a photo opportunity that he could not afford to miss. Suppressing his mirth, he moved closer

<sup>110</sup> Sanskrit religious hymns from the Veds (sacred Hindu texts).

<sup>111</sup> Pyre used for religious purposes during major Hindu prayers.

<sup>112</sup> Ingredients needed for Hindu prayers.

for a better view. As the camera's flash shone briefly, the mobile barber and masseur raised vacant, hopeless eyes, then continued smearing his client's bald head with coconut oil—from the smell that reached R's sensitive nostrils, it could not have been anything else.

Seated on a wooden stool provided by the masseur, the flabby man whined, "I have a splitting headache. It must be the heat ... or my stomach. What do you think?"

As the masseur mumbled a response, R moved on cheerfully, having captured one more scene that he would never have to contemplate in America. Turning back after a few steps, he saw that the man had finished with his client, and was getting ready to turn into a barber. Indeed, two men stood in line, waiting to have their mustaches trimmed, or their hair cut before setting off for work or to attend a religious ceremony. The masseur was clearly good at his job, because his first customer, initially sour-faced, looked clearly relieved as he got up and dropped a few coins in the outstretched palm of the itinerant entrepreneur.

An hour later, R met with his guru. Pundit Yogish Doobay was clad in his ceremonial outfit. In other words, he was dressed a little less simply than usual, with a saffron shawl ceremonially wrapped around his shoulders. The two men set off without any further delay.

"Let's walk fast, R. As this wedding's *pujari*<sup>113</sup>, I personally calculated the ideal period of the day during which the ceremony should take place, based on the couple's *jyotish* readings. Therefore, I cannot afford to be late."

"But *Gurudji*, life is so unpredictable," a smiling R replied, feeling relaxed and carefree.

Doobay sighed and turned towards his young disciple, frowning. "I am pleased that you came to meet me before leaving for America. I will endeavor to enlighten you as much as possible about our beliefs, if time—or rather, if your *karm*—permits.

He walked a few steps then added. "I thought that I had already explained to you why the science of *jyotish* is so important. In this particular case, by using the dates and times of birth of the future husband and wife, we can determine, through a series of calculations, what their degree of compatibility will be. Because *jyotish* is a proven and tested science, the risk of matrimonial failure is low. Besides, the purpose of consulting *jyotishis* is not to ensure their livelihood, but to contribute to a more stable and happy society in which children can grow up in the company of parents who get along well. If you need proof, well, it's the low rate of failed marriages in our country."

A short while later, the pundit added, "The wedding ceremony should ideally start and end within the ideal timeframe calculated by the *jyotishi*. As you are aware, *jyotish* is about aligning our lives with the forces at play in the universe, so that we can reap optimal benefits. Don't we wait for the right day and time to launch rockets into space? Don't farmers wait for the right season to sow their crop, and don't sailors use their knowledge of marine currents and tides to navigate safely? Well, if the science of *jyotish* can help us determine the right day and time for a wedding to take place so that the new couple can get the best start in their married life, then why not use this knowledge? ... R, if you ever meet anyone who knows beyond any doubt that properly applied *jyotish* does not work, then ask that person to come forward and prove it. In the meantime, we should continue to use this age-old scientific gem to improve our lives."

"That sounds fair enough, *Gurudji*," a contrite R admitted.

Turning into an alleyway that led to the Dashwamedh Ghat, their final destination, Doobay said, "Making use of *jyotish* to avoid matrimonial disasters is particularly important these days with the growing trend in divorces. You see, most of these failures are the result of 'love marriages', or because 'progressists' chose to disregard *jyotish*."

R turned his face away, feigning to avoid a crowd of pilgrims returning from the *ghats*. How could he look his guru in the eyes and refrain from revealing that Mohini and he had never dreamed of consulting a *jyotishi* before they fell in love?

As he joined Doobay again and they continued their swift walk to the *ghats*, the pundit said, "R, I am now going to describe for you how the wedding ceremony will unfold."

"Thank you, *Gurudji*. I have been to several traditional Hindu ... sorry, I mean Sanatan Dharm weddings, but I never understood what was going on."

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<sup>113</sup> Officiating priest.  
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Then, thinking of the day when he would be united to Mohini, he added, "I am genuinely interested."

"Well, this wedding will take place in a hall close to the Dashwamedh Ghat, between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. First, the wedding guests will be welcomed outside the hall in a ceremony called *milni*. After that, they will proceed to their seats in the hall. In the center of the hall is a *mandap*, the dais where I will be conducting the rituals and blessing the couple. In the middle of this dais is a *hawan koond*<sup>114</sup> that will be used to offer prayers, and to witness the couple's vows around *Agni*, the sacred fire. The couple, their parents and a few close relatives usually sit close to the *mandap*."

Doobay then described how he would begin the ceremony with a Ganesh *puja*<sup>115</sup>, following which the bride's mother would ceremonially greet the groom and accompany him to the dais, where it would be her husband's turn to greet his future son-in-law.

"The bride is then accompanied to the dais by her maternal uncle and her unmarried sisters or female friends. I then request her father to proceed with the *kanyadan* ritual. That is when the bride's parents offer her hand in marriage to the groom."

"Then it's a done deal at that point, *Gurudji*? So why do these ceremonies take so long?"

Doobay fired an irritated glance at his disciple, but was unable to answer, as they slowed down to plough through another crowd of pilgrims returning from the *ghats*. As soon as he was once again within earshot of the young man, he replied, "At that point, we are just confirming their intentions. After I have made sure of that, I ask the couple to state the traditional marriage vows ... in Sanskrit, of course. They promise to love and protect each other throughout life. They also undertake to help each other attain the four aims of life ... you recall that from yesterday's discussion, don't you?"

"... I remember that you mentioned them," R stammered.

Doobay's eyebrows went skywards as he sighed.

"Just as a reminder, the four aims of life are *arth*, *kam*, *dharm* and *moksh*."

"*Arth* is about securing the means to earn a decent living and *kam* is the pursuit of the joys of life. *Dharm* is about adhering to principles and living in an ethical way, while *moksh* is the quest of the absolute. Is that right, *Gurudji*?" R interrupted, eager to prove that he had been attentive to his guru's teachings on the previous day.

"Excellent. Now let me finish explaining about the wedding ceremony. After the vows, I carry out the *ganthbandhan* ritual, in which I tie a knot between the bride's and the groom's garments to symbolize their union. I then proceed with the *hawan*. After the prayers around *Agni*, the sacred fire, I ask the couple to rise for the *saptapadi* ritual, during which they circle the sacred fire seven times, each time taking a different vow."

"So now they are married, right?"

"Not yet! There are still a few essential steps to complete. The groom symbolically smears some *kumkum*<sup>116</sup> in the middle parting on the bride's head. They both touch each other's hearts, promising eternal love, and I give them my blessing, requesting that all guests do so as well. The newlyweds are then free ... to leave for other ceremonies and rituals of a more folkloric than religious nature."

The two men reached the hall where the wedding would take place. There, taking on his ceremonial role, Doobay dismissed his young disciple with a quick glance, and then turned to meet the bride's parents.

After the welcoming ritual, R slipped into the hall, a little embarrassed about not being an 'official' guest. Inside, he noticed Urmila, in her best wedding sari, busy coaching the bride for her highly anticipated walk. Suresh was there too, seated close to the dais. "It's just too bad that the seats next to him are taken," R thought. He then sat on a chair a few rows away from the dais, where he found that he could still enjoy a good view of the ceremony.

Once seated, the young man was able to glance around at leisure. "How ostentatious," he felt, noticing the showy garments worn by the mainly middle-class crowd. "As if all this

<sup>114</sup> Clay pyre, built according to specific propitiating rituals, which contains the sacred fire (*Agni*) that acts as a messenger to the gods, conveying prayers through offerings of rice, ghee, and jaggeri (unrefined sugar).

<sup>115</sup> A prayer to Ganesh marks the start of all Hindu religious ceremonies.

<sup>116</sup> Red dye, also called sindoor, symbolizing Hindu women's married status.

extravagance can visually and esthetically balance out the poverty and grime in the neighboring areas," he wondered cynically. Indeed, those flashy gold jewelry pieces and exquisite silk saris were probably worth hundreds of times what the average person outside that hall made in a week.

R's hardly noticeable smile had a bitter twist. "I can understand such a large investment by the parents of unmarried girls," he thought. "This may be necessary to attract the best possible suitors. However, all the girls here are equally overdressed!"

Feeling increasingly uncomfortable under the inquisitive female stares, and embarrassed by his discordant 'denim and T-shirt' attire, R took out his digital camera and took several pictures of Doobay performing the ceremony. "They will conclude that I am just a poor photographer, not a potential son-in-law or husband. And Ashok will be happy to see a few photos of our guru, after so many years."

When the ceremony ended, he took a few steps on the *Dashwamedh Ghat*, restoring blood flow to his legs, numbed by the hours spent on a rudimentary and uncomfortable metal chair. His eyes followed the newlyweds as they walked slowly towards the river. Taking a few steps closer to the new couple, R noticed the peculiar stance of the groom's female relatives. Their eyes seemed riveted to the newlywed's face, scrutinizing his features for signs of satisfaction. "Of course he should look happy," R thought. "Marriage brings him a young wife, *and* a dowry, which his father has probably already received and counted."

Indeed, the groom's father, holding a large, ornately molded, brass *lota* tightly to his chest, scampered to his son's side and whispered a few words into his ear. The newlywed nodded distractedly, his gaze never leaving the lovely young woman at his side. The young couple resumed their walk to the nuptial boat, berthed at the edge of the *ghat* and invitingly decorated with yellow and orange marigold garlands.

Urmila's niece wore a splendid red and yellow Varanasi silk sari, richly embroidered with gold thread. A golden *anchal*<sup>117</sup> shielded her pretty, heavily made up and bejeweled face from curious stares. To ensure that she did not trip on the stone steps of the *ghat*, her new sister-in-law guided her footsteps with a protective arm around her shoulders.

R noticed that all the women in the bridegroom's family covered their heads with their *anchals*. "What a reversal compared to the clothing style of a thousand years ago," he thought, recalling pictures of ancient sculptures. "In those days, when our civilization was at its peak in terms of individual freedom, women did not feel obliged to cover themselves from head to toe like this."

He recalled the words of Subbu, one of his university friends and a history student. Talking about the most popular women's garment, the sari, Subbu had said, "The sari is a recent invention, R. It evolved when Moslem invasions and settlement forced Indian women to adopt the kind of attire prevailing in the invaders' countries ... as a precaution against the newcomers' lewd stares and unwelcome intentions."

R took a last photo of the couple as the women helped the bride climb on board the boat. Standing straight as a drumstick a few steps away from his fussing female relatives, the groom was proudly enjoying this unique moment. His mustache quivering with suppressed elation, he knew that he was one of those who would tell their grandchildren that they got married on the banks of the Gunga River in the holy city of Varanasi. Soon, after the welcoming rituals at his home, he would retire to his bedroom, and there, under a curtain of fragrant flowers, he would remove that golden turban with its proudly jutting peacock feather and then ...

R interrupted his daydream for a last look as the nuptial boat carried the new couple and a few of their close relatives northeast towards the Trilochan Ghat, where they would disembark and walk a short distance to the groom's family residence.

"Hopefully, there will not be any unpleasant encounters along the way," R thought. Indeed, the Jalsain Ghat, located halfway to the Trilochan Ghat, was a major cremation site. "They might come across a floating funeral pyre over there ... and that would not be particularly stimulating, especially today."

Some smoke was actually rising above the Jalsain Ghat. The night before, Suresh had deplored the custom. "In this poor and overpopulated country, it's amazing that people still depend so much on wood for cooking and cremating. Everybody knows that deforestation is

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<sup>117</sup> Veil covering the top and sides of a woman's head, protecting its wearer from the sun, dust and wind, as well as unwelcome stares.  
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contributing to the expansion of arid and desert lands. As wood gets rarer and less affordable here in Varanasi, more and more funeral pyres are being released in the river without enough material for complete combustion. The result? Half-burned corpses that float on the sacred Gunga, adding to pollution ... and fattening the crocodiles."

Turning in the opposite direction, R saw a group of pilgrims standing waist deep in the river. Gathering some life-giving water in the cusp of their joined palms, they poured it back into Gunga at the same pace at which their pundit recited *Vedic mantras*. At the end of the prayer, the devotees released several large leaves in the river, each bearing a small *diya*<sup>118</sup> and a few flower petals as an offering to the deity. The women stood waist-deep in the river in their saris, their heads covered, while the bare-chested men were clad in *dhotis* only. They were too far away to notice him. Zooming in, R discreetly took a picture.

"I wonder when the authorities will ban ritual bathing in this river. Everyone knows that Gunga's pollution level is excessively high. Does anyone care about the health risks?" R wondered. The night before, Suresh had warned him to stay away from the water, "It's so paradoxical, R. Thousands of years ago, ancient Indian cities like Mohendjo Daro were built with covered public sewers that drained away used water from every house's bathroom and kitchen. The people who lived in those cities also had access to public baths and pools. Today, their poverty-stricken descendants wallow in polluted rivers and sewerless slums."

Next to him, one of the guests observed, "They are nearly there. They just passed the Alamgir mosque."

"A mosque!" a startled R exclaimed. "What on earth is a mosque doing on the *ghats*?"

"You are not from here, are you? The Alamgir mosque was built by Aurangzeb on the foundations of a Vishnu temple that he had previously razed," the man explained patiently.

"Aurangzeb! Him again! He must have had a burning desire to secure a choice place in paradise ... with an ample supply of virgins. But I thought that the Alamgir mosque was further south, close to the Vishwanath Hindu temple."

"No, that one is the *Great* Alamgir mosque. It was also built by Aurangzeb, mind you ... and on the foundations of another destroyed Hindu temple, of course," the man said with a bitter smile. "On top of that, our taxes are being used to protect it."

"How is that?"

"It is guarded day and night by the authorities. In the absence of decisive action by the state government to return ancient places of worship to their faith of origin, a few Hindu groups have threatened to take matters in their own hands." Shaking his head, the man added, "Mogul rule collapsed two hundred years ago, and these monuments, erected long ago to mark military victories and foreign domination, are barely used for worship these days. They just stand there, stark reminders of a painful past."

R felt the bitterness in those words. He was about to reply when he noticed Doobay standing just outside the hall, talking to a group of wedding guests. Nodding to the man beside him, R made his way towards the old sage.

"There you are ... at last. We can leave now," Doobay said, smiling at the others as he left their company, both hands joined in salutation.

As they walked away from the *ghat* towards the city, R questioned his guru about Aurangzeb's monuments. The old pundit's reply was cryptic, "R, in nature, bees work hard and build a nice hive in which they ensure that all members are fed and protected. Their society is ruled by their *dharm*, in which efficiency and hard work are paramount. Soldiers defend the hive, and workers work to feed all."

"Forgive me if I fail to see the relationship with the Moguls and their destructive nature, *Gurudji*," R interrupted.

"The impatience of youth! I am getting there," said the pundit with an impish smile, as he stopped to give way to a religious procession heading towards the river. He then continued, "The industrious bees sweat and toil to build a prosperous society. They certainly do not build it by attacking or robbing their neighbors. Bears, on the other hand, only leave their caves when they feel hungry. You see, bears know that it's easier to steal the bees' honey than to work hard to produce and store it. In nature, bears opted for a different strategy; that of destructive parasites."

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<sup>118</sup> Small flame made by lighting an oil soaked wick.  
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"I am beginning to understand, *Gurudji*."

"You see, R, we, the people of Bharat, built our civilization just like bees: by working hard; not by invading other nations and stealing their riches. A long time ago, we specialized into professional groups, or castes, to be more efficient. Our specialization and the resulting higher efficiency accelerated our economic growth very early on, at a time when many parts of the world were still in the Stone Age. Thus, during the past millennia, we steadily built wealth and prosperity ... and Bharat became a rich country."

He paused, noticing R's sardonic smile.

"That's right. I said *rich*."

"But I don't see a rich country here and now, *Gurudji*," the grinning young man replied, pointing to the grime covered, poorly maintained buildings and the trash littering the streets.

Doobay's smile had a sad twist. "Son, Bharat *was* wealthy, but that was before the invasions of the last millennium: those of the Moslems over the first seven hundred years, followed by the shorter British rule. During the last thousand years, Bharat, this 'beehive' country that grew rich over thousands of years thanks to the efforts of its people, was plundered and laid to waste by Mogul and British 'bears'. Now that this 'hive' has been emptied of most of its 'honey', the descendants of the 'bees' of ancient times face the formidable task of trying to rebuild the 'beehive' and replenish the 'honey'. However, the country's population has grown tremendously over time, so there are now hundreds of millions of feeble, poverty-stricken 'bees' in this devastated 'beehive'."

As they walked, R digested Doobay's words in silence, attempting to reconcile these historical facts with the strongly held beliefs and feelings that he nurtured as a potential migrant.

A little later, Doobay added, "The Chinese are also among those hard working and peaceful people who toiled to build their civilization, without resorting to plundering their neighbors. Although they did not have to endure prolonged foreign occupation as we did, they fell prey to Genghis Khan and his hordes. The aggressive and opportunistic Mongols thus leapfrogged their way to the wealth painstakingly accumulated by the hard working Chinese."

They walked in silence as R mulled further over this perspective on Indian history. A short while later, he remembered what his original question to Doobay had been, "*Gurudji*, about the Alamgir mosque ...."

Doobay interrupted, "I would prefer to talk about the Vishwanath temple, which is also located close to the Benares Hindu University. It's such a magnificent place of worship, and thankfully, it did not get destroyed like so many others. It is the largest temple dedicated to Shiv in Varanasi and its main dome is coated with a fine layer of gold," he blabbered enthusiastically. "I conducted several major religious ceremonies there, you know. I remember once ...," he broke off and laughed.

"What, *Gurudji*?"

"Once, after I had said prayers all night long on the occasion of *Maha Shivaratri*, I left the building. It was still early in the morning, but there were already a group of tourists taking pictures. As they spoke English, I understood they were amazed that there was 'over 1,500 pounds'," Doobay said, smiling.

"1,500 pounds of what?"

"Of gold, of course. They were looking at the dome and were stunned by the amount of gold that went into its coating. They did not care about the temple as a historical place of worship"

"Maybe they were marveling at the fact that the Moguls and the British had overlooked such a treasure," R mocked.

Doobay raised his palm in appeasement, then stopped walking as they had reached a street corner. The old sage pointed to a decrepit two-storey building and said, "A friend of mine, Pundit Shyam Trivedi, gives classical Indian dance lessons here. He is a renowned *kathak*<sup>119</sup> guru. Every night, he hosts a classical music and dance recital with his best students. It's free—but only a select few, such as myself are allowed in. Would you care to attend one of these sessions?"

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<sup>119</sup> Classical northern Indian dance style, miming scenes from sacred Hindu scriptures.  
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It was getting late and R felt more like returning to his uncle's place for a nice hot shower, followed by a succulent dinner prepared by Prakash.

Reading the lack of enthusiasm on his disciple's features, Doobay insisted, "It has been a long time; I would like to say 'hello' to my old friend."

"By all means," R agreed. "Is it safe, though?"

"What do you mean?" Doobay burst out laughing.

"This ... building seems about to fall apart."

Doobay smiled reassuringly, "I have not heard of anyone getting injured here. Besides, Shyam Trivedi does not work here by choice. His profession is not a lucrative one. Fewer and fewer young people are interested in classical dancing these days. As you know, they prefer Bollywood-style disco dancing."

It was R's turn to laugh; a laugh that turned sour as soon as he remembered that Mohini and himself had enjoyed 'disco dancing' at several university parties.

He followed Doobay inside. Climbing up a dark, creaky, wooden staircase, they reached the landing. An ajar door allowed some light and the sounds of *tabla*<sup>120</sup> and ringing *ghunghrus*<sup>121</sup> to filter out. Doobay pushed open the door to reveal a hall whose windows were obscured by heavy, dark-red curtains. Two anemic light bulbs hanging from the ceiling dimly lit the room. "These walls have not seen a painter for at least twenty years," an increasingly hesitant R guessed. However, it was too late for him to change his mind. A skinny, elderly man with a flowing mane of white hair, garbed in a *kurta-pajama*, came forward to greet Doobay with a warm, welcoming smile. After the traditional greeting, the two embraced each other, visibly happy to meet again.

It turned out to be a memorable evening for R. The young Delhi resident and would-be migrant never expected to be dazzled by the talent of Pundit Trivedi and his students in such a shabby locale—but he was! Seated on a few worn out cushions scattered on an old rug, the old dance master elatedly orchestrated a *kathak* demonstration by one of his star pupils, on the frenzied rhythm of a pair of *tablas*, played masterfully by a young man. Later on, Doobay told him that the scene that had been mimed that evening was from the Shiv pooran<sup>122</sup>.

R was enraptured by the performance, and he was allowed to take a few photos. The young woman who performed the dance to near perfection wore a spectacular costume. Her *anchal* was held in place over her head by a glittering array of silver chains. Her dark red silk sari, intricately embroidered with silver patterns, was wrapped loosely around her legs, leaving her free to move graciously. The front of the sari formed a multilayered skirt that glittered with every dance step that she took. Her henna-dyed hands and feet, also covered with jewelry, drew attention to each of her perfectly choreographed gestures.

That night, laying under the starry Varanasi sky after his phone call to Mohini, the young man recalled the sheer magic of that artistic evening. Then, he wondered why he had taken those photos. "After all, I want to record the worst images of this journey, so that when I reach glitzy Los Angeles, I will look at the photos I took and feel relieved that I escaped the squalor of India. Should I therefore erase this evening's photos from the camera's memory?"

Wearied by his eventful day, the young man fell asleep before he could make up his mind.

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<sup>120</sup> Small Indian drum.

<sup>121</sup> Classical dance accessory made up of several rows of small bells attached above dancers' ankles. The sound produced emphasizes each leg movement.

<sup>122</sup> Sacred Hindu scripture about Shiv.

## CHAPTER 10

The following day, R wandered about before going to Doobay's house later in the afternoon. It was vegetable market day. So, in the morning, he accompanied Prakash, his uncle's plump, mustachioed—and cranky—cook, hoping to capture a few more repulsive images.

The young would-be migrant was not disappointed. In fact, he even smiled as they jostled through the crowd, skipping over muddy puddles caused by the recent rain. The market, located in a series of dark alleys littered with vegetable and fruit peels, was narrow, smelly ... and very populous. In spite of these obvious drawbacks, hundreds of people flocked to the place, then left, sweating and exhausted, carrying away fruits, vegetables, herbs and condiments. R could see mangoes, bananas, *kuhrayla*<sup>123</sup>, eggplant, okra, cauliflowers, tomatoes, hot green chilli peppers, coriander, ginger, onion and garlic in their heavily laden baskets.

"Do you use the same combination of spices for all your curries, Prakash? More and more people in Delhi think it's much more convenient," R ventured, attempting to open up a conversation with the tight-lipped cook.

"Certainly not! Your aunt insists that I vary the spices and the cooking style according to her mother's recipes. That old lady taught me all I know. She stayed with us three weeks just after your uncle hired me twenty years ago. Such an admirable woman; she left us for a new life last year."

"So you make curries often?"

"For me 'curry' is a meaningless term," Prakash said disdainfully. "Actually, after I buy the vegetables, I need to get some spices to prepare my *masalas*, so why don't you follow me."

"Sure. I have the whole morning," R responded, taking a photo of a few merchants engaged in a yelling match for the attention of passers-by.

"Too bad that this technological marvel cannot record odors too, Prakash," R sneered, his delicate nostrils twitching at the market smells.

Out of R's sight, the manservant discretely shook his head with a disenchanting smile. "Another one who thinks that he is too good to live in his own country," he thought, having overheard the young man's reasons to emigrate to America.

The market area was filled mainly with Varanasians, few tourists venturing in such an unaesthetic location. Here and there, however, a few foreign-looking individuals strolled by, apparently on a quest for the genuine sights and sounds of the old city.

"Why don't the authorities place a few garbage bins around the market? It could have helped to turn the place into a tourist attraction instead of the dump that it is," R lamented aloud. "Look, Prakash. One of them is even filming the litter. At the very least these merchants could avoid throwing away the peels on the pathway."

Prakash smiled again. This time it was a superior, arrogant smile. Pursing his lips, he said in a falsely mellowed tone, "R *Babu*, they do that on purpose."

"What? I thought that they just don't care. Are you saying that they are dirtying the market area intentionally?"

"No, they are not dirtying it; and they do care. But they care more about retired cows than about the aesthetic opinions of a few tourists."

"... Retired cows?" R gaped.

Prakash explained with the same patronizing, sarcastic tone, "When cows grow too old to give milk, they are not slaughtered. Instead, their owners set them free. They wander the streets and it is the duty of all of us—who may have drunk their milk at some point or the other of our lives—to feed those cows. That's why you see so many of these animals wandering the streets. You may also have seen people stopping to feed them. After the market closes tonight, several of those 'retired cows' will feed off the vegetable and fruit peels, R *Babu*. That would not have been possible if the peels had been collected and sent to a garbage dump."

R digested that amazing ecological fact in stunned silence as he followed the cook through the crowd to the entrance of a dusty-looking grocery. Like most of the other shops in

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<sup>123</sup> Also known as bittermelon (or bittergourd), this bitter-tasting vegetable is considered to have anti-diabetic properties.  
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that street, its sign was written in *devanagari*<sup>124</sup>, but the letters were partly hidden under years of grime. R was able to decipher 'Sookhi Spice Shop: all types of spices and *dals*'.

To reach the counter, the two men squeezed in between bales of yellow *dals*, dried red chili, orange turmeric root, and fragrant coriander seeds. R knew that his clothes would reek of spices for several hours after the visit. "That's all right," he thought with a smile. "It will distract my sense of smell from the odors of sweat and rancid hair oil out there."

Prakash purchased some *haldi*<sup>125</sup>, *jeera*<sup>126</sup>, and *imlj*<sup>127</sup>.

"Prakash *ji*<sup>128</sup>," the owner called enticingly, "I have just received some fresh *methi*<sup>129</sup> and *moong*<sup>130</sup> *dal*."

"I still have some at home, Sookhi *ji*."

With the permission of the flattered shopowner, R then took a few photos of the narrow and fragrant shop. Mr. Sookhi thought that his young visitor was one of those quirky expatriate Indians back in his country of birth for a nostalgic vacation. "More and more of these NRIs<sup>131</sup> keep coming. Aren't they happy over there in America? What's there to see here, anyway?" he wondered.

Showing a few teeth under a thick black mustache, he attempted to confirm where the young 'tourist' hailed from, "America is a great and beautiful country, isn't it?"

"... Sure is," mumbled a bewildered R, snapping a photo of the shopowner. As Sookhi turned to show his best profile, a solitary ray of light, filtering somehow through the dust-covered windows of the grocery, bounced off his shiny forehead, spoiling the shot.

Once outside, R pointed to the small plastic bag that Prakash had come out of the shop with, "So is it with these few spices that you concoct such delicious dishes, Prakash?" he teased.

"I still have lots of spices in the kitchen, R *Babu*. I have enough *dalchini*, *laung*, *dhania*, *saunf*, *kari patta*, *rai*, and *kali mirch*<sup>132</sup>, and there are also several varieties of *dal*," the short-fused cook replied irritably, impatient to get rid of his uninvited companion.

The young traveler understood that it was high time for him to let Prakash tend to his remaining business alone.

"Well, I got a few good photos here, Prakash. Thanks. See you later."

The young man walked away in the general direction of Gunga. Soon, he found himself on Rana Ghat, one of the busiest places in the sacred city. There, in the shade of a temple, he sat down and wrote a few lines for his next email to Ashok, raising his eyes from time to time to glance at passers-by. Then, peering through the camera's tiny LCD screen, R scrolled through the photos he had recently taken and chose three of the worst ones to send to his brother. However, when he tried to upload these in an Internet café half an hour later, it proved impossible at first.

"Try reducing the resolution of those photos; they could be too large to send," advised a pimply teenager sitting next to R.

Disappointed, the young man followed the advice, then tried again. Eventually his email got through, albeit with poorer quality pictures. Pestering against the local telecommunications network, he resumed his walk after a quick lunch at an eatery that seemed capable of passing a public health inspection.

It was then time to head for the Doobays' house. Indeed, the pundit and his wife counted on him to escort their daughter Gaetri to the temple that afternoon.

A few minutes later, he reached the pundit's modest abode.

"I am leaving to perform a religious ceremony, R. Thank you for escorting Gaetri." Doobay said.

"*Gurudji*, you embarrass me. I am eternally in your debt."

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<sup>124</sup> North Indian alphabet.

<sup>125</sup> Turmeric

<sup>126</sup> Cumin

<sup>127</sup> Tamarind fruit preserve. Added to sauces and chutnis.

<sup>128</sup> Mr.

<sup>129</sup> Fenugreek.

<sup>130</sup> Type of dal, giving a thick, yellow soup when cooked.

<sup>131</sup> Non-resident Indian.

<sup>132</sup> Types of spices.

Gaetri was ready, so they set off immediately. She was keen to arrive at the *mandir*<sup>133</sup> early to rehearse her part. To save time, she had already put on her costume for the play. Her plain, beige, cotton sari with just a few embroidered patterns reflected Sita's simplicity when the princess decided to follow her husband on his fourteen-year exile in the forests of ancient India, abandoning the luxurious lifestyle that she was accustomed to.

R noticed that this simplicity also matched Gaetri's nature very well. Very reserved, she seemed to radiate purity. Was it because of the supremely serene gaze with which she had skimmed over R's face when they had saluted each other? Or the perpetual smile that barely lifted the corners of her curvy, pink lips? "As if it had been painted on her perfect face," R observed, careful not to stare at her. "It's a confident, serene smile, not an amused one."

R felt a little intimidated by her at first, although he was not of the shy type. "I shouldn't be," he thought. "After all, she is my junior by a few years." He tried to shrug off that baffling feeling by recalling the games they had shared during his visits to the Doobays years ago. It was a futile attempt, though, as the chubby little girl who could not stop giggling had changed so much since those days. As a dull chrysalis eventually turns into a splendid butterfly, the child had metamorphosed into a charming, albeit reserved, twenty-year-old woman.

R found out that Gaetri planned to walk all the way to the Toolsi Manas temple. "Are you also against the use of transportation methods that pollute the environment, like your father?" R asked to break the ice.

"At this time of the day, buses are crammed with schoolchildren. It would not be a comfortable ride. We left early enough to get there on foot ... and it will give me more time to rehearse my lines," she replied without looking at him.

R guessed that the temple was at least a mile away along Durgakund Road and was grateful that it was not as hot as on the previous day. In addition, Gaetri's *payals* sang pleasantly at each step she took. After a few silent minutes, thinking that she was nervous about the play, he tried starting a conversation to help her relax.

"So ... you are studying at BHU?" he asked. "That's what your mother told me," he added hastily.

"Yes, I am studying Sanskrit," was her polite reply.

"Sanskrit! Why? It's a dead language."

"Actually, all religious ceremonies—like the one you attended yesterday—are conducted in Sanskrit."

"All right, but no one understands anything, except the pundits."

The young woman turned amused eyes towards R, clearly suppressing laughter. "Thousands of people in Bharat and throughout the world read, write and converse in Sanskrit. It is one of the most ancient languages of humanity, and, above all, it provides access to a wealth of wisdom and knowledge."

"As a pundit, your father masters the language, so I guess that must have helped, but didn't you find it hard to learn?"

"That's what many people believe, but in fact, Pundit Panini wrote a complete, quasi-mathematical grammar for Sanskrit about two thousand four hundred years ago. To this date, this valuable tool makes learning Sanskrit very easy indeed."

R smiled, glad to have discovered a subject that Gaetri seemed passionate about. She appeared livelier now; so different from the tight-lipped young woman he had set off with.

"Still, many in New Delhi believe that this language belongs to our past," he said, thinking of Professor Varma.

"Then, they are wrong. Sanskrit is the vehicle used by our ancient *rishis* to convey the wisdom of the Veds<sup>134</sup> and the other *shrutis*<sup>135</sup> that constitute the basis of Sanatan Dharm. However, many would like to see us sever our ties with our rich and ancient culture so as to win the covert struggle for the cultural and religious domination of our country."

A startled R turned towards the young woman. The serene smile was still there on her juvenile face. He was shocked that Gaetri had so bluntly articulated what so many in Delhi dared not even think. Indeed, in the capital, among the self-effacing public servants, the

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<sup>133</sup> Hindu temple.

<sup>134</sup> Sanatan Dharm's most ancient scriptures, the four Veds are: the Rig Ved, the Sam Ved, the Yajur Ved and the Atharv Ved.

<sup>135</sup> Ancient Hindu religious texts.

tactful diplomats and the negotiator-politicians, he knew that it was unthinkable to voice such politically sensitive issues publicly.

"Sanskrit is the language of our *itihas*<sup>136</sup>, like the Ramayan and the Mahabharat; our *poorans*<sup>137</sup> like the Bhagwat pooran and the Shiv pooran. It is the language of the *dharm shastrs*<sup>138</sup>, the *darshans*<sup>139</sup>, the *agamas*<sup>140</sup>, the *kavis*<sup>141</sup> and the *nataks*<sup>142</sup>, and so many other types of literature," an animated Gaetri added, sincere passion wrapped in every word she pronounced.

A cozier feeling had gradually replaced R's initial unease. He was now curious to know more about the strongly opinioned daughter of his guru, so he taunted her once again, "Honestly, I am not sure I know what all these refer to, but I guess that your interest for Sanskrit is driven by a desire to uncover the treasures found in our ancient scriptures. However, why are you so keen about those relics of our past when so many thousands of new books are published every year—although not in Sanskrit?"

"One priceless jewel is worth thousands of grains of rice, a sage once said. The *rishis* of long ago never wrote a single superfluous line. All those 'relics', as you say, are filled with deep wisdom and knowledge. Even if I could spend this entire life researching, I would only explore a fraction of them. That is why I also want to teach Sanskrit to others, so that *they* can dig further and deeper, and learn more than I can ... and then share what they learn with others who don't know the language, here in Bharat and throughout the world," she explained enthusiastically. "I also want to write in Sanskrit and share my writing with others through the Internet, so that we can keep this wonderful language alive."

It took a stunned R several seconds to grasp the full extent of Gaetri's dream. It was an impressive one, especially for one so young.

"... How ... where would you teach Sanskrit? At the university?"

Gaetri smiled, "Oh no! University is for academics, for researchers. I want to help people—children—learn the language, and do something useful with it. That's why I would like to teach in a *gurukul*."

"A *gurukul*? Do they still exist? I thought that our modern educational system had made them obsolete."

"You are wrong again," Gaetri replied; and as she shook her pretty head, her silver, bell-shaped earrings swung back and forth. "It is still the best education system, based on a long tradition that has produced Bharat's brightest sages."

R was irked and tried not to show it. His reply nonetheless conveyed his annoyance, "I doubt that a *gurukul* could ever produce computer programmers. Besides, many argue that we should invest more in teaching science and technology to help this country make some material progress."

"My father would be disappointed to hear you say that. But why should we have to choose between one and the other when we could contribute to developing the country without having to reject our vast and deep heritage?" Gaetri replied. "The difference between our traditional education system, as taught in *gurukuls*, and the one imposed by the British, is that ours emphasizes *vidya* and theirs, *shiksha*."

"And what is the difference?"

"According to our *rishis*, the acquisition of *vidya* requires a holistic approach to education, which leads to an integral development of the individual. The British, on the other hand, were here just to exploit our resources. The education system they introduced—and which our political leaders still did not see fit to change—is based on *shiksha*, or teaching only. It is an approach that favors rote learning to produce workers trained to earn a living, but at the expense of a truncated emotional and spiritual life. On one hand therefore, holistic development, and on the other, the training of a skilled labor force."

R made a conscious effort to shut his gaping mouth; Gaetri was proving to be astonishing indeed.

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<sup>136</sup> Ancient historical text.

<sup>137</sup> Encyclopedias of Indian culture and religion in narrative format.

<sup>138</sup> Ancient law texts (e.g. Manu smriti (Laws of Manu))

<sup>139</sup> Philosophical texts.

<sup>140</sup> Theological texts.

<sup>141</sup> Poetry.

<sup>142</sup> Drama.

As they walked around a group of tourists standing on the sidewalk, R glanced at them distractedly. As a slim and muscular young man, he could not help smiling. The men as well as the women in that group of middle-aged foreigners all seemed ready to burst out of their shorts and T-shirts. "What do they eat?" he wondered.

The women were looking at some souvenirs laid out on a wooden table in front of a brass and stone statues shop. These were miniature replicas of the type of artifacts found on some ancient Hindu temples. A few of these sculptures, depicting the process of creation through the union of *purush*<sup>143</sup> and *prakriti*<sup>144</sup>, seemed to be the cause of the men's mirth. R had just passed the group when he heard one of them, a reddish, tattooed fellow wearing sunglasses exclaim, "These Indians! No wonder their country is overpopulated. This is all they think of."

Another one sniggered, "It must be one of the poses of the Kama Sutra."

As the men burst out laughing, R noticed that the women turned away from the 'obscene' objects, feigning revulsion.

R felt a surge of adrenalin. Blood gushed to his head. He felt like stopping and telling them that Hindus had never been hypocrites nor bigots; that God had created a world in which procreation was a natural act; and that India had enjoyed the benefits of civilization long before their own countries had emerged from the Stone Age.

Then he wavered, remembering that he was supposed to escort his guru's daughter to the temple, safely and on time. In addition, he did not want her to witness a verbal outburst that might mar her opinion of him. The angry young man therefore reluctantly decided to move on.

A few steps later, however, he pondered about his hesitation to react because of Gaetri's presence. "Why should I care about her opinion?" He also analyzed his anger at the tourists' insulting remarks. "And why should I care what these ignorant strangers think? Soon, very soon indeed, I will leave this tarnished country for the glittering America."

Then, the young woman surprised him again. "These people don't understand anything. They should not visit Varanasi. Here, everything is so different from the world that they have known all their lives. The culture gap is just too wide to bridge." She looked at R, smiled and added, "When you will be in America, you will understand very quickly that life there revolves around the satisfaction of material desires. When people like those tourists visit places like Varanasi, they come here unprepared, and then feel that they have landed in a very poor and backward country. Deluded by the veil of ignorance, they are unable to conceive that we are infinitely richer than they imagine."

R wondered how she had found out about his emigration plans. "Her mother must have told her," he supposed. "You are really very wise ... for someone your age," he admitted with a hint of envy. "But then, I am not surprised ... being the daughter of my guru. I wish that I had more time to learn all that he can teach me ... that 'holistic education' that you mentioned earlier. At this stage, I must admit that I am a product of the education system we inherited from the British."

A little later, the pair reached the Toolsi Manas temple. The show was to take place in the main hall, whose walls were covered with paintings portraying famous scenes from the Ramayan. R and Gaetri parted company as the young woman sped backstage to get ready. When the young traveler turned towards the audience to search for a convenient seat, he stopped in his tracks. Another surprise awaited him. The *natak* that was about to start was for an audience of schoolchildren! And neither Gaetri nor her parents had bothered to tell him that.

A self-conscious R tiptoed towards the last rows, hoping to be as inconspicuous as possible. However, it was a vain attempt. At least half of the giggling kids turned around to stare at the tall young man who, clearly, was not one of their accompanying female teachers.

The children were all seated on the cool, polished floor, their folded legs neatly tucked underneath them. R, who had removed his shoes at the temple entrance like everyone else, nearly slipped as he sat down at the very back, in a dark corner. "An ideal place for taking photos," he justified to the closest kids, showing his little digital camera.

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<sup>143</sup> The spiritual aspect of the Ultimate.

<sup>144</sup> The material aspect of the Ultimate.

The drama, which was played in a variant of *kathak*, had the audience spellbound. The performers danced passionately to the rhythm of a pair of *tablas* and a *veena*<sup>145</sup>, while one of the teachers commented the scenes in Hindi. Impressed by Gaetri's heartfelt interpretation of Sita, R took a few pictures of her.

Normally lukewarm—at best—about anything religious, he then surprised himself by watching the play with great interest, noticing something that seemed to have eluded the children. All the performers were female—without exception. A few of them wore male costumes to play men's roles. "That's not really surprising," he reflected. "Unmarried girls from 'good families' are expected to avoid unnecessary social contacts with the opposite gender."

Shortly after the play ended, Gaetri and the other girls came back on stage to give the young audience an hour-long recital of *bhajans*. The schoolchildren joined in, encouraged by their teachers. All the devotional songs were in praise of Ram or Krishna, the two most popular incarnations of Vishnu. "What am I doing?" an embarrassed R wondered, finding himself humming in tune with the other singers, carried away by the eerily blissful chants.

It was nearly dusk when the pair left the temple. On the way out, Gaetri had put on her serene and reserved face again, much to R's disappointment. They ambled in silence to the nearest bus stop, Gaetri feeling too tired to walk back. He congratulated her on her brilliant performance, but she just smiled demurely in return. Seeking to draw her out again, R questioned, "Gaetri, why are Indians still so fond of the Ramayan? I know you said something about the 'gem that is worth many grains of rice' ... or something like that, but surely our modern literature must be worthwhile too."

"The Ramayan is one of the most popular *itihās* in Bharat and in several Asian countries as well—like Cambodia and Sri Lanka. It brims over with valuable teachings about the most common situations in life, and has helped to shape the ethics and values of our civilization. In fact, in the form of a story, it is a 'how-to' manual on ethical living."

"But several millennia afterwards, life has changed so much in India ..., sorry I mean Bharat."

"It certainly has, but the basic principles and human values that are conveyed through the Ramayan transcend time itself. Even today, the ideal relations between friends; parents and children; rulers and the population, as depicted by the characters of that epic, are still applicable at work, at home, and in society in general. In fact, if everybody still upheld those values, Bharat would be a much better place to live in."

A cool breeze blew, and as Gaetri wrapped her *anchal* tighter around her shoulders, R wished fleetingly that he could wrap his arms protectively around her slender frame to keep her warm. Shaking that unexpected thought from his mind, he said, "I ... I must admit that I joined in, when you were singing the *bhajans*, Gaetri. I cannot explain to myself how it happened ... because I am not very religious; I do not consider myself a *bhakt*<sup>146</sup>."

"That's not surprising at all. It's contagious. That's why people get together to sing *bhajans*."

"But why, though? Does God hear better when people sing songs of praise in large groups?" R's smile had a taunting twist, just like the smile he had when they talked about Sanskrit and the traditional *gurukul* education system earlier that afternoon.

Gaetri serenity was unperturbed, but he could feel latent passion when she replied, "Even if God does not listen, we certainly feel much better when singing a *bhajan*, and afterwards. That's a concrete result; a real benefit! So even if you choose to look at this activity from a purely materialistic or even an atheistic perspective, it provides a useful boost to participants' morale. *Bhajan* sessions are a very effective therapy for those who are hurt and need healing; internal healing, I mean. It's also a way to share joy, to spread love of humanity and God." She looked at him and added, "You know, what really matters is that it works! It does a lot of good emotionally, even if you choose not to believe in the spiritual benefits."

R's smile had vanished. This young woman, he realized, was passionate about her beliefs and her way of life. The squeak of a stopping bus' brakes, the loud rumble of its engine, and the suffocating cloud of smoke it emitted saved the young traveler from an awkward moment. During the brief but uncomfortable ride to the pundit's house, R paid

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<sup>145</sup> Musical chorded instrument similar to the sitar, with fewer chords.

<sup>146</sup> Devotee.

close attention to Gaetri. He knew that his gaze would not make her uncomfortable because he was seated a few rows behind her, on the opposite side of the aisle. He stared at leisure at the nape of her slender neck, at her slim shoulders, and at her long, thick, silky, black tress highlighted by an orange marigold. He could even catch a glimpse of her finely chiseled face. It suddenly dawned upon him how beautiful she was, although he had not dared venture along that path because she was his guru's daughter. "Yes, she is beautiful, but so different from Mohini," he pondered. "In fact, they are poles apart. Mohini is bubbly, very feminine ... and materialistic. Gaetri, on the other hand is serene, very bright ... and hides her passion well."

Suddenly, as if she felt his gaze, the pundit's daughter turned her head slightly, without actually looking at him ... just enough for him to notice that she was smiling. This time, however, it was a smile of amusement.

They walked back to her father's house in silence, R not finding anything to say until they reached it. There, after a quick 'thank you' on the doorstep, Gaetri vanished inside without a second glance at him.

R politely declined her parents' offer to join them for dinner, "My uncle invited a friend who lived in the United-States for over twenty years. He is in Varanasi to sell some inherited property. For me, this is a great opportunity to learn more about my future country."

"Oh yes, I had nearly forgotten that you are planning to leave for America," Doobay smiled. "All right, don't forget that I will be waiting for you early tomorrow morning. It will be your last day with me, so I will try to teach you as many useful things as possible."

"I am grateful for all the knowledge and wisdom that you have showered upon me already, *Gurudji*. I am sad to have to leave tomorrow evening, but I still have to fulfill the mission Ashok entrusted me with."

He called Mohini while walking back to Suresh and Urmila's house. It would be a long, albeit interesting evening and he knew that he would not be able to call her at the agreed time. He told her all about his day ... without mentioning Gaetri. But his girlfriend was unimpressed; she had failed an exam and she anticipated an unpleasant conversation with her father. Her dismal mood only improved slightly when she sang him the best song from Ahmed Khan's latest hit movie.



## CHAPTER 11

Early in the morning, well before the sun's burning rays had dispelled Varanasi's dawn mist, R took leave of his uncle Suresh and his aunt Urmila, their words of encouragement ringing through his ears.

"Don't forget to write as soon as you are settled in Los Angeles," Urmila requested. "As I said, our children are also thinking of emigrating. Who knows, they might decide to go to America instead of Canada."

"With you there to help them, we will be less worried, *Baytay*," Suresh added.

R smiled back at them. He had enjoyed their hospitality so many times over the years, and now he had a chance to be of service to them—at least potentially.

"Sure. I'll be glad to help."

Half an hour later, he sat in front of his guru, Pundit Yogish Doobay. The young man felt relieved; this was going to be his last day in Varanasi. He looked forward to boarding a train at end of the day, hoping to complete Ashok's deliveries in record time and return to Delhi to enjoy Mohini's company while his applications were being processed.

Listening to Doobay was not a painful chore; R liked spending time with his guru. However, several of the concepts that Doobay had taught him seemed esoteric, unrelated to what his future life was likely to be in America.

"*Gurudji*," he began, handing the basket of fruits he had brought for Mrs. Doobay, "I am conscious that there are so many things that I do not know. Actually, I don't know what I don't know ... if you see what I mean."

Doobay smiled under his bushy, white mustache, guessing what his disciple was trying to express. "I understand, Son. Don't worry. You may not fully understand all these new concepts yet, but you will later, with the experience of real life. In fact, I planned to talk to you about that later today."

"About what, *Gurudji*?"

"About how you can cement your newly acquired wisdom and knowledge. But for now, let's proceed with what I want to talk to you about. ... And, by the way, I was pleased to learn that I can skip a few topics, among which, the difference between *vidya* and *shiksha*."

The young man tried not to look surprised. Clearly, there were no secrets in Doobay's little family. "Gaetri must have told them about our conversations. I wonder what else she said," he worried, recalling that awkward moment in the bus, when the pundit's pretty daughter had smiled, sensing that he was staring at her.

Doobay's clear and warm voice interrupted his thoughts. "I will offer you some more *vidya* today, R." The old sage closed his eyes and started to breathe in and out in a slow, rhythmic fashion to stimulate concentration. His palms rested on his knees and his legs were folded in a typical meditative posture. R followed suit. He knew that he should be ready to receive knowledge, and for that, he needed to be receptive, physically, mentally and emotionally.

"Now that you have swept distractions out of your mind, R, listen to me," Doobay finally voiced.

During the hours that followed, and until lunchtime, an old Indian sage shared many words of wisdom with a young man who planned to leave for a distant, foreign land with such a different culture: America. R sincerely did his best to pay attention, ask relevant questions, and understand; although he was there essentially because Ashok had requested their guru—and the latter had accepted—to teach the young man a few essential things prior to his departure.

"The other day, we explored a few basic concepts of our culture."

"Yes, *Gurudji*. We discussed *arth*, *kam*, *dharm* and *moksh*."

"Excellent. And did you understand everything?"

"Well, I found it clear except for *moksh*. I can understand that we need to work hard to earn a comfortable living; that we should also enjoy the fruits of our efforts; and that we should ensure that proper values and principles are upheld in society. But *moksh* still eludes me. Did you say that we set out to look for *moksh* when we realize how futile everything else is?"

"No, I did not say that. If life was futile, we should head for the mountains and live in caves like the most reclusive of *sadhus*, rejecting all forms of participation in society. What I meant was that the attainment of the three previous goals of life will lead us to realize, in this life or the next, depending on our individual spiritual evolution, that our ultimate goal is in fact liberation. Liberation from all our limitations."

"In other words, once we have attained the first three goals, we would ask ourselves: what next?" R pondered on this for a moment, then voiced a comment that was in fact a question. "But *Gurudji*, so many people seem to die without even attaining all of the first three goals. In this country and so many others, people die of starvation, of disease, sometimes even in childhood, without enjoying life's rewards. All over the world, people are cringing under injustices and oppression. ... Billions of people will never even get a chance to ask themselves that question."

"No doubt. Last time, you mentioned *karm*; now is the time to talk about that. But first, you should understand that reincarnation is a fundamental belief of Sanatan Dharm. You are well aware that the world is full of suffering and that life seems unfair at times. So many newborns and children endure horrendous and deadly diseases in Africa, while in America for example, people's lives seem filled with heavenly pleasures. Have you come across a just, plausible explanation for these disparities?"

"No, *Gurudji*. I have not. With a few friends at university, we tried to explore the issue, but opinions were divided. Some spoke of evolution and natural selection, others of the unquestionable will of a puppeteer-like god, and the remaining few believed in a supernatural but mysterious explanation."

"Which explanation appealed most to you?"

"Although we do not discuss these topics at home, I have heard of *karm* and reincarnation. I believe that I understand certain things, but I may be mistaken ... so could you please tell me about it, *Gurudji*?"

Doobay paused emphatically, locking his eyes onto R's, and then said, "Do you believe that there is no God? That all this," he asked, waving his arms, "is just the result of some sort of chance event?"

"I have given some thought to that and I feel that denying God's existence is like burying one's head in the sand. However, it may be that some people just *do not want* to face the fact that 'all this' cannot exist without a proper explanation," he concluded, thinking of Professor Varma.

"That's quite all right. Content with achieving *arth*, *kam*, and *dharm* only, a great number of people prefer to live in a spiritual void, and therefore do not seek *moksh*. Currently, in *kaliyoog*, many even do away with *dharm*, preferring to live a life unconstrained by principles."

The old sage paused to quench his thirst with a few mouthfuls of water, which he poured carefully from his *lota*, making sure that his lips did not touch the copper pot. Then, he continued, "Sanatan Dharm provides us with answers, R. For those who believe in a divine reality, all the injustices and sufferings endured by apparently innocent people call for an explanation. Why are some people born in poor, desert countries to scratch a living out of arid lands while others are born in rich countries that enjoy favorable climates and where harvests are always abundant?"

Doobay answered his own question, "According to Sanatan Dharm, we are born where we deserve, based on our past deeds. You see, R, all our actions, words and thoughts have consequences, some more positive than others. If you do well in your exams, it is because of the hard work you put in, not because of some miraculous external force, right? On the other hand, if you allow yourself to fall prey to frustration and despair—like so many youths—you will weaken yourself and reduce your ability to succeed in the future. Such cause and effect relationships work not only in this life, but they also extend into our future lives as well."

"Is that *karm*?" interrupted R.

But Doobay just carried on. "*Karm* is an autonomous mechanism, independent of God. Our *karm* represents the sum of all the consequences of our past thoughts, words and deeds. Imagine a huge database. Under the law of *karm*, each of us has a record in that database. That record, perpetually updated by our actions, influences our future. It determines, for example, our next place of birth and our potential at birth—very much like the contents of their bank account determines what people can afford to buy."

Then, with a mysterious smile, Doobay added, "However, we are unable to remember our past lives. ... Only the spiritually advanced can."

Impatient to clarify the concept of *karm*, R chose not to question his guru's latest, cryptic remark. "So, is my fate sealed? Some people think that I should consult a *jyotishi* to find out if I will become rich in America," he blurted, recalling one of Mohini's suggestions. And R knew that his guru was a master *jyotishi*.

"I never said that *karm* seals the fate of people. If that were the case, life would not be worth living. No, R. The law of *karm* is not fatalistic. If the *karm* mechanism did not allow us to make choices, how would we be able to evolve materially and spiritually? The real purpose of *karm* is to help us improve, in many ways and through many lives. Within the limits of our *karmic* potential, we are free to make choices throughout life. And these choices have an impact on our future because their results keep updating our *karmic* account."

"So if we murder someone, and then make a few charitable donations, we could erase, or neutralize the bad *karm* that results from that first bad action? How convenient!"

Doobay sighed. "No, that is incorrect. You see, Sanatan Dharm preaches responsibility, self-discipline, justice. Accordingly, the *karm* mechanism is impartial. It will settle *all* accounts—positive or negative—separately. Therefore, it is not possible to compensate. Even if you perform a hundred good deeds after committing a crime, you will still have to account for your crime ... but you will also reap the rewards resulting from your good deeds. However, the good will not erase the bad. *Who lives by the sword will perish by the sword; you reap what you sow*. We cannot cheat or negotiate with *karm*. There is no absolution, no favor, and no miracle. It is this firm belief in self-discipline that gives the followers of Sanatan Dharm a strong sense of responsibility; *responsibility*, not fatalism."

Doobay paused for some more water, then continued, "As you may have noticed from your brief experience of life, or from your history books, R, some people end their lives in a dramatic way, in abject poverty or intense suffering, although they may have lived exemplarily. They just do not seem to reap the rewards that they deserve. On the other hand, tyrants, torturers, criminals of the worst type seem to defy justice and live most of their lives in luxury and pleasure. If you did not believe in *karm*, you would have trouble explaining such disparity and injustice. You see, according to the law of *karm*, dues have to be collected, if not in this life, then in the next ... or the one after. R, Sanatan Dharm has a fair, just explanation for life, but it requires a lot of courage to accept it."

"*Gurudji*, you mentioned that *karm* is independent of divine intervention?"

"That's right. It is a perfectly fair mechanism; no divine favors for anyone; no chosen few."

As R mused for a while, Doobay smiled impishly, guessing that his disciple was readying another question.

"*Gurudji*, a few of my university friends felt that the law of *karm* does not encourage compassion."

"Compassion! The *karm* mechanism is here to help us improve our lives and make spiritual progress. You would not expect an exam supervisor to allow some candidates to copy from their notes, and forbid others to do so, would you? That's the problem with compassion, you see. Who gets to decide who should benefit from compassion and who should not? What would be the criteria? No, R. The law of *karm* is tough, but it's tough love. There are no shortcuts, no favors, and no exemptions. It teaches us that we, and we alone are responsible for shaping our material life ... and for our spiritual progress. And you know what? Everybody gets a fair deal under the law of *karm*."

R mused over these concepts as Mrs. Doobay brought them some cardamom-flavored chai, which they enjoyed over a brief pause. The young man's thoughts wandered towards Gaetri. Where was she? No sound in the little house seemed to indicate her presence, but he hoped that he would see her again at lunchtime.

Later, the men resumed their discussion. A puzzled R asked Doobay, "*Gurudji*, the concept of *karm* seems infinite—like a circle. As all our actions, words and thoughts lead to *karmic* reactions, we will therefore be born and re-born unendingly to settle our *karmic* accounts. Is that right?"

"Good question, which leads us back to *moksh*," the old sage replied with a smile.

"... *Moksh* ... liberation ... from the cycle of births and rebirths?"

"Exactly. R, you should now understand this fundamental belief of Sanatan Dharm: that the purpose of *karm* and reincarnation is to offer us chances to improve, to perfect ourselves spiritually—so that we can eventually attain *moksh*."

They paused, in one of those many moments on that special day that R would never forget; a day during which he learned so much, albeit somewhat reluctantly.

"But how?" the young man asked eventually.

"Before I answer that, we need to discuss another important concept of Sanatan Dharm. That of *Maya*."

"The illusion?"

"Excellent. Many, in our own country and elsewhere, are barely aware of what we have talked about today, R. They live happily ... or not, wallowing in ignorance, mistaking the illusion for reality. Among them, are those who smile condescendingly at—even mock—those who seek spiritual enlightenment."

"I think I know a few," remarked R, thinking of Professor Varma.

"Those who submit to the spell of illusion only believe in what they can see, touch, feel, smell or swallow. Where there are trillions of molecules, they see a car; where there is energy, they see light, colors. Few of them can see beyond illusory material objects. However, at a certain point in our spiritual evolution, we become able to discern ... that all that our senses present to us are products of *Maya*."

Clearly, Doobay had lost his disciple during his last few sentences; the guru understood that when R grinned, hit the ground with his open palm and exclaimed, "But *Gurudji*, this solid earth does not seem to be an illusion!"

"Amusing. But that illustrates what I have just said. Although you have been through our British-style education system, you are unable to 'see' that the solid surface that you just struck is made up of molecules, which are made up of atoms, which are themselves ... condensed energy! And what is energy, can you tell me?"

"... Energy ... is light, heat ..."

"You are describing what energy *does* ... but not what it *is*," interrupted Doobay. "Now, let's turn to the concept of *Maya*. Our voluntary or involuntary submission to *Maya* prevents us from realizing our true identity by maintaining us under a veil of ignorance. However, when we evolve enough to start asking fundamental questions, like we just did, *Maya* erects formidable obstacles in our path to slow down our spiritual progress."

A slouching R straightened with a jolt. 'Obstacles' was the word Doobay had used during the first day of his visit. He recalled the exact words that the old sage had uttered with a mysterious smile: '*... don't you agree that the better prepared you are, the easier it will be to face any obstacles ahead?*'

"What are those obstacles, *Gurudji*?"

"They are numerous, R. *Kam*, *krodh*, *lobh*, *moh*, *ahankar* and *bhay* are the most important ones. By *kam*, we mean the excess of pleasures ..."

"But I thought ... you said that *kam* was one of the goals of life," R interrupted.

"Sure. However, when our journey through life stops at that stage and we do not try to progress beyond, then it is a wasted life. *Krodh* is anger, hatred, borne out of our frustrations. We are frustrated because we cannot obtain what we desire, and we allow ourselves to be swept away by anger, which, unchecked, turns into hatred. Of course, that makes it difficult to progress spiritually. ... R, imagine *Maya* as a tumultuous ocean, and the unwary self as a cork bobbing up and down, right and left with every wave."

"What about the other obstacles?"

"Another of *Maya*'s weapons is *lobh*, desire for material objects and pleasures—even those that belong to others. Then there is *moh*, attachment to those little material pleasures and things that we believe we possess. *Ahankar* is the arrogance that blinds us into believing that we know everything; that we are always right and therefore do not need to seek any kind of enlightenment. Finally, *bhay* is fear; fear of losing our material possessions ... or the image that we believe defines us."

"It's true that we seldom pause to ask ourselves fundamental questions. Sometimes through arrogance, I think, but also through fear; fear of facing some disturbing truths; fear of losing the feeling of comfort associated with what we are familiar with: our material possessions, our carefully nurtured image; fear of the unknown; and fear of facing another

reality that may have escaped us altogether." R commented, reflecting deeply upon his relatively short experience of life.

"Excellent thoughts, R. You are much closer to the truth than you realize."

Before the young man could react to his guru's enigmatic remark, Mrs. Doobay appeared. "Lunchtime," she announced joyfully.

Time had indeed flown. R had not felt bored at all. In fact, the morning had been captivating. Some of the terms that he had overheard during mundane conversations in the middle-class circles of New Delhi were now much more meaningful.

After the customary washing up, R and Yogish Doobay silently honored the meal prepared by the pundit's wife. Gaetri was nowhere to be seen. She had probably gone to university, a disappointed R guessed.

As expected in a *bramhan's* house, the vegetarian food served by Doobay's wife was *satvik* in nature: conducive to attention, concentration and clear thought, and unlikely to rouse passion or lead to somnolence.

"*Chachi*," R said during the customary brief digestive walk in the backyard, "preparing vegetarian meals like the one we just had requires a great deal of time and effort. Ashok says that in America, people eat deep-frozen meals prepared in advance, which they just warm up in microwave ovens."

"Really! I am not surprised that the levels of cancer are so high over there," she frowned.

R stopped in his tracks, curious. "What has that got to do with the convenience of frozen meals?"

Doobay responded for his wife, "Do you remember what we call our physical body in Sanskrit? *Annamay kosha*: the layer made up of food."

"Yes, you told me that; I remember."

"Well, if you want to maintain your physical self in excellent condition, you need to provide it with the best kind of food. Once food is cooked, it starts to oxidize and decay. Freezing only slows down the decomposition process. People eat badly and they are not even aware of it. When they fall sick, they wonder how it could have happened and rush to the doctor for a quick fix. *Ayurved* teaches us that we should consume food that is rich in *pran*, in vital energy, and we should avoid *tamsik* food, or food that has been preserved for long or is decomposing. That is one of the reasons why we are vegetarian."

R enjoyed a rare whiff of cooling breeze, then said, "Ashok also writes that in America there are different types of vegetarians: those who don't eat meat but eat fish, chicken and vegetables; others who eat only fish and eggs as well as vegetables; and those who do not eat any animal products, even those derived from milk."

"*Chi, chi, chi*<sup>147</sup>!" Mrs. Doobay exclaimed.

"Vegetarians who eat fish, chicken and eggs?" Doobay chuckled under his beard.

"Don't they know these don't grow on trees? And those who do not consume milk products, don't they understand that you don't need to kill a cow to obtain milk? All you need to do is feed the cow, care for it, and she will reward you with her milk; the same milk that she produces for her calf and which contains so many essential nutrients."

R looked at his guru. "Is that why we consider cows to be sacred? According to Ashok, that's a big joke over there."

"As babies, we drink our mother's milk to help us grow. While we are still toddlers, cow's milk replaces our mother's milk. Why is it so hard to understand why we give cows such a high status?" a piqued Mrs. Doobay argued.

"In the past, our ancestors realized that it was much smarter to depend on milk, ghee, yogurt and cheese which a cow could provide for many years, than to slaughter the animal and feed off its carcass for a few weeks."

"Wise choice," R commented.

"And one that requires much fewer resources," Doobay added. "Apparently, a hundred times less land is needed to feed lacto-vegetarians than carnivores ... or omnivores."

"Ashok says that he still feels uncomfortable at times. Vegetarians are still ridiculed over there. That's one of the things that bothers me ... a little," R said, wondering how hard it would be for him to remain a vegetarian in America.

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<sup>147</sup> Exclamation of disgust.  
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Doobay threw him a baffling glance, in which R thought he could detect a hint of pity. Then, the old pundit commented, "I am not surprised. It is always easier to bury one's head in the sand, or mock those who you suspect are one-step ahead of you than to face tough ethical issues and questions of principle. Questions like: do people still need to kill animals to survive? Isn't the Stone Age—or the Ice Age—over? In countries where there isn't a long tradition of vegetarianism, ridicule and mockery may be effective ways to stifle a fad that challenges established tastes; and to ensure that it does not grow into a threat for entrenched industries."

"However, in Los Angeles, Ashok has no trouble finding all the vegetables, *dals*, dried peas and beans and dairy products that he needs to prepare healthy and enjoyable meals—in any season. He said so in his letters and emails," R said, trying to reassure himself. Indeed, he had grown up as a vegetarian and had no desire to change ... even in America.

"Vegetarian food is cheaper to produce. It is better for health, is tasty and provides all the protein that an adult needs to be productive. In addition, a balanced vegetarian diet is full of nutrients that can help protect against so many kinds of diseases. Besides, aren't elephants—the largest of land mammals—vegetarian?" Mrs. Doobay declared emphatically as she left them to return inside the house.

Reaching the end of the small backyard, the two men paused, glancing distractedly over the mud and stone wall at the steady stream of passers-by. A short while later, Doobay turned around. He breathed in an out slowly and rhythmically for a full minute, half-closing his eyes. Then as they walked side-by-side back to the house, the pundit explained, "R, we are vegetarian because we are convinced that we can live a healthy, productive and happy life without having to kill. You should know that at the base of our way of life is the concept of *uhinsa*, non-violence, respect for life. Sanatan Dharm guides us towards a harmonious life, and recommends respect for the lives of all the other creatures that share this planet with us. By the way, do you know that this principle was another one of our successful exports in ancient times?"

R's blank stare answered his guru's question. The latter therefore carried on, "Aristotle and other Greek philosophers became vegetarian; probably when they understood that a *satvik* way of life is more conducive to meditation and clear thinking." He paused, looked at R, and then continued, "However, many do not share this belief. They prefer to believe that this world is theirs to enjoy and that the sole purpose of other animal species is to be farmed for food, hunted for pleasure, skinned for shoes or peeled for fur coats."

They were close to the kitchen window when the pundit said that, and Mrs. Doobay's long, pointed nose and rotund face popped out unexpectedly, startling R.

"*Chi, chi, chi!*" she exclaimed once more.

Regaining his composure, the young man said, "I remember that one of my university friends once wrote a paper about attitudes towards vegetarianism. He argued that during the Stone Age, men hunted and killed animals for food while women and children gathered plant food from the safe areas around their caves. This led to the perception—passed on until our times—that vegetarian food is meant for the weaker members of society."

Doobay waved dismissively. "The *Danaw*, *Asur*, and *Rakshas*<sup>148</sup> never shared the beliefs of the *Manush*<sup>149</sup>. But we continued to evolve over many thousands of years, aligning our way of life increasingly with an unwavering quest for harmony with the entire universe, long before the birth of modern ecological science."

Once they were seated in their respective places, R asked, "*Gurudji*, what has all this got to do with spirituality, though? Did you say that vegetarian living favored spiritual progress?"

"Yes, vegetarianism is linked to *uhinsa*, respect for life, non-violence; and Sanatan Dharm promotes harmony with the whole creation. R, my ancestors have been spiritual guides for hundreds of generations, and all along, we have embraced *uhinsa* and maintained a tradition of vegetarianism. Sanatan Dharm recommends that we reject violent thoughts, words or actions, fending off the weapons of *Maya* that are fear, anger, and hatred. Practicing *uhinsa* helps us to pierce the veil of illusion and recognize divinity in the whole creation. We can then love this creation in all its forms, with an equal love; and that is one of the first

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<sup>148</sup> Names of rival nations mentioned in ancient Indian scriptures.

<sup>149</sup> Ancient name of the inhabitants of Bharat.

steps towards *moksh*. Do you recall that Sanskrit prayer that I taught you, in which we wish the well-being of *all* creation?"

"Yes, I remember it *Gurudji*," R replied, embarrassed. It was a short prayer, but he had rarely uttered it in New Delhi, so preoccupied had he been with finding a job to secure his material survival. He then recited the Sanskrit hymns.

Yogish Doobay asked, "So tell me how anyone who sincerely wishes the well-being of the entire creation can also enjoy eating meat daily? Is it *uhinsa*? Is it in line with 'respect for life'?"

R's face was expressionless for a moment as he reflected on his guru's last words. The latter added, "Meat comes from animals that were killed so that their flesh can end up in people's plates. Many farmed animals grow up in narrow, 'cost-effective' spaces. After a brief, constrained life wallowing in their own droppings, they are slaughtered and hacked to pieces to satisfy people's hankering for meat. If we can close our eyes on the suffering of these creatures, how can we also say that we wish to evolve spiritually—at least under Sanatan Dharm, which recommends that its followers love the entire creation? How can we possibly leave violence behind us if we are reminded of the result of violent actions in our plate everyday? Can we pretend to love the whole of creation if we don't love animals enough to let them live?"

"Now I understand better, *Gurudji*."

"So you should also understand that there is no better way of life to promote spiritual development than a *satvik* one. There is nothing better than a *satvik* diet based on vegetables, fruits, dairy products, *dals* and grains. A meat-based diet is *tamsik*. Those who eat meat regularly—like carnivorous animals—fall prey to anger, excessive sexual desires, fear and other negative emotions. Have you ever seen a happy or peaceful tiger? They rarely are; they are usually irritable. In addition, a diet that requires the death of animals brings a negative influence over our body, leading to premature aging and promoting diseases like cancer."

"So, carnivores face a longer path towards the same spiritual goals?"

"It has always been that way. History proves it and contemporary events confirm it: turmoil and cruelty have always been more widespread within carnivores than among vegetarians."

R asked a question that had been in the back of his mind for a long time. "*Gurudji*, is that why you do not wear anything made of leather? I noticed that you always wear wooden sandals."

"We do not use leather goods so as not to contribute to the demand for products that require the death of animals. Some of our neighbors have pets: birds that they keep in narrow cages, or monkeys like that one, chained to the tree over there," he said pointing to the garden next door through the open window. "That is unnecessarily cruel. Animals are entitled to freedom, just like we are."

Doobay swallowed some water from his *lota*, then looked at his disciple. "Now, I would like to talk to you about *yog*. Tell me, what do you know about it?"

"... All that you taught me, *Gurudji*. The *asans*, the *pranayam* exercises. I practice these ... nearly everyday," a puzzled R replied. Had his guru forgotten what he had taught him?

"That is only a small part of what I mean by *yog*, R. I will now tell you about the rest of it. We talked about *moksh*, liberation from all material constraints. Well, that liberation is not linked to a place where we should go to, or to a specific time or period of our life. In fact, we catch a glimpse of *moksh* when we are able to recognize reality through the veil of illusion. Liberation is close at hand when we cease to be the slaves of our desires, of *Maya*, and when we realize that we are *one* with *all*."

"I am not sure that I understand. How do you get to that *liberation*?"

"R, Sanatan Dharm offers us several paths to realize that we are united with the universe, with creation, with God. The main paths leading to that *yog*, that union, are *karm yog*, *bhakti yog*, *gyan yog*, and *raj yog*."

"So many? Which one of those have you taught me, *Gurudji*?"

"I regret to say none. What you call *yog* is in fact *hath yog*, which, along with *pranayam*, are two components of the eight steps of *raj yog*. I am now going to explain what these four main paths consist of."

Closing his eyes, the old sage took a deep breath, held it in his lungs for a few seconds, then released it slowly. He then looked at his disciple and resumed his teachings.

"*Karm yog* allows you to attain *moksh*, a state of seamless union, by offering service to humanity, to creation; by working for good causes selflessly, without any desire for rewards or recognition. It is a path that appeals to those who have an active nature and who enjoy helping others."

R's eyes lit up as he wondered how his guru would respond to the objection he was about to throw at him. "But all actions lead to consequences, according to the law of *karm*. So how can the followers of *karm yog* ever hope for liberation?"

"*Moksh* transcends *karm*; it is a state of perpetual realization of our unity with all. *Karm yogis* go one step beyond that realization, participating fully in the *lila*<sup>150</sup> through positive actions, all the while being aware of its illusory nature. Through their awareness of *Maya* and their detachment from it, they are already free. They have attained *moksh*."

A skeptical R tugged at his chin, mulling this new concept. He then responded, "Interesting. As for *bhakti yog*, *Gurudji*, I think I know what it is. It's the path of devotion, of divine love. It is the path of prayers and *bhajans*, such as the ones chanted by Gaetri and her friends at the temple yesterday."

"And in which you participated, I believe," the pundit smiled.

R just nodded, waiting for his guru to speak.

"*Bhakti yog* is a path for those with a strongly emotional nature ... and who are not ashamed of showing their love of God. You will find them praying and chanting *bhajans* in temples, and reciting *mantras* in their homes. They convert their emotional energy into divine love, seeing God in all. Ultimately, they pierce the veil of *Maya* and recognize the hidden truth: that we are all *one*."

"And what are *gyan yog* and *raj yog*?" R asked, a little impatiently. The young would-be emigrant failed to see any relationship between this and his future life in America ... and it was beginning to feel like a long day.

"*Gyan yog* is a path that appeals to the philosophically inclined. It requires strong intellectual abilities to understand the illusory nature of the world as presented by our senses. The *gyan yogi* uses two powerful tools: *vivek*, the capacity to differentiate between illusion and reality; and *vairag*, the ability to remain detached from the challenges of *Maya*."

"This seems to be an arduous path indeed," R commented politely.

"Yes, attaining *moksh* in this way requires a great deal of self discipline and inner strength. In the beginning, you need to monitor your thoughts and feelings constantly until you are able to achieve complete control, demonstrating *vivek* and *vairag* at all times. Only then are you truly liberated from material constraints and united to *all*."

"So it's *raj yog* that you taught me, then," R interrupted. He was more and more eager to get to the end of this last day.

"I have nearly finished, R," the gentle old priest replied with an indulgent smile. He knew that he was attempting a very challenging task indeed. In his *gurukul*, he would take several years to gradually, carefully inculcate the knowledge that he was trying to cram into R's mind in just two days—all because of Ashok's request. However, he knew that the goal of Ashok's initiative was well worth it. "*Raj yog* is very interesting indeed. It consists of eight steps described by *rishi* Patanjali in his landmark work, the *Yog sutrs*. Among these steps is the practice and mastery of *hath yog*, which comprises the *asans* that I have taught you. Another step is the mastery of the techniques of *pranayam*. These are breathing exercises for achieving various goals, including excellent health; itself a prerequisite for the subsequent steps that can ultimately lead to *moksh*."

"I know about these two steps, *Gurudji*. What are the other six?" R asked, shifting his upper body sideways to ease the flow of blood in his numbed behind. Unlike the pundit, he was not accustomed to sitting for long periods on his folded legs.

"First, have some chai ... flavored with ginger this time. You two have been talking so long, your throats need some soothing," Mrs. Doobay chirped jovially as she brought a stainless steel platter with two cups of steaming, fragrant tea.

R was grateful for this excuse to get up and walk a few steps, albeit under the pundit's amused gaze.

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<sup>150</sup> Play staged by God at the scale of the entire universe.  
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A few minutes later, the *vidya* session resumed.

"*Raj yog* prescribes an eight-step approach requiring a great deal of self-discipline, patience and perseverance, R. These steps are: *yam*, *niyam*, *asan*, *pranayam*, *dharan*, *dhyān*, and finally *samadhi*."

"I did not hear you say *moksh*. Doesn't *raj yog* lead there?"

"*Samadhi* is conceptually similar to *moksh*, but let's not jump to the conclusion right away, my young disciple," the old sage restrained.

He then explained what each of these steps consisted of. R learned that the quest for liberation through *raj yog* starts with *yam*, the avoidance of negative actions and thoughts, the elimination of arrogance and other negative attributes through non-violence and detachment from material attractions.

During the next step, *niyam*, *raj yogis* perfect the ability to think and act positively, practice strict truthfulness, and ensure purity of their intentions.

"*Asans* and *pranayam* allow *raj yogis* to maintain excellent health and to build self-confidence," said Doobay.

His guru then explained that the next step, *pratyahar*, was one in which the *raj yogi* strives for freedom from the influence of the senses. "*Pratyahar* leads to controlling our reactions to the constant bombardment of our senses. Our goal is to avoid being rocked back and forth, dangled up and down, and swayed from side to side, by all of life's little challenges, like a small boat in a rough sea. After that, *dharan* is the stage during which the *raj yogi* concentrates his psychic resources through regular practice. The majority of people, who live an essentially material life, rarely utilize these resources. This ability to concentrate allows the *raj yogi* to meditate effectively during the practice of *dhyān*. Finally, regular meditation can lead the *raj yogi* to *samadhi*, the state of pure consciousness, of ultimate oneness ... which is another way of saying *moksh*."

The conversation continued until dinnertime, R doing his best to pay attention and to understand what his guru was attempting to convey to him. He asked a few questions from time to time, politely feigning interest, even when it was unclear to him how these teachings would influence his life in America. He was well aware of the value of the pundit's time, though. While the two men talked on both days, Mrs. Doobay politely turned away several devotees who came knocking on the pundit's door to request his services.

As it grew darker outside, Yogish Doobay sped up to share his wisdom with his young disciple.

"One last, important thing, R. Sanatan Dharm does not impose restrictions on its followers. A *gyan yogi* can therefore practice *karm yog* as well. Similarly, a *karm yogi* can enjoy chanting *bhajans*, and a *bhakti yogi* can meditate. All the streams of Sanatan Dharm lead to the same ocean, that of oneness, of union with the divine."

Later that evening, after a tasty dinner, R bade farewell to the old couple, thinking that this could be the last time that he would see them, "*Chachi*, thank you for having welcomed me as a son, as always. I will never forget that."

"You know that I consider you as my own child, R," the pundit's wife replied, wiping a tear off her cheek with her sari's *anchal*.

"*Gurudji*, how can I ever thank you for all that you have taught me?" R asked solemnly, his hands joined in traditional salutation, his head bowed in front of his guru.

There was a brief moment of silence, then R heard the pundit say, "That's easy R, I'll tell you right now."

A startled young man straightened, hands still joined. Hiding his surprise, he looked at Doobay, politely waiting for his guru's words. Although he had not expected Yogish Doobay to ask for a *gurudakshina*<sup>151</sup>,—he had never visited him empty handed, always bringing a basket of fruits and flowers purchased on the way—he was ready to offer Doobay the fee that the old sage was entitled to ask for.

According to tradition, the disciple should not bargain a fee, once demanded by the guru. Tradition also required that the guru should not ask for anything before the disciple's studies were completed. *Bramhans* were not allowed to ask for any kind of monetary reward; however, the disciple's parents could offer more than the requested fee: fabric for new

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<sup>151</sup> Fee payable by the disciple to the guru upon completion of the studies.  
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clothes, rice, pulses, fruits and vegetables—whatever they could afford and felt proper to offer.

"R, you told me that Ashok has asked you to deliver parcels to five of his friends. As you may know, under our traditional education system, once a student is deemed to have completed his academic studies, his guru sends him off on a tour of the country—which may last up to a year—in order to validate and reinforce what the student has learned. At the end of the tour, when the disciple returns to the *gurukul*, his teacher asks him to narrate his experiences and to explain how 'real life' relates to the *vidya* received. This way, a guru ensures that his students have effectively internalized his teachings and are able to apply their newly acquired wisdom in their daily lives. I would therefore like you to take advantage of your journey around Bharat to open your eyes and ears, to observe and to try to relate what I have taught you with the 'real' life experiences that you will face during your *yatra*<sup>152</sup>."

Smiling at R's clearly mounting anxiety, Doobay reassured his disciple, "I know that you did not receive *vidya* from me in the traditional way, and that your *yatra* will last two to three weeks at the most, not a whole year. Nonetheless, I think it will be a worthwhile exercise. I will certainly feel more confident that you can utilize what you have learnt from me. I would therefore like you to return here after you complete Ashok's mission," he added. "Then, I want you to tell me what you have found out and how that relates to what I have taught you." Looking at his disciple, the pundit then solemnly stated, "That will be my *gurudakshina*!"

R responded as he was expected. With an enthusiastic expression, hands joined respectfully, and bowing his head, he replied, "It will be with utmost pleasure that I will accomplish what you ask, *Gurudji*. My journey will take me to Jaipur, Jamnagar, Goa, Madurai, and finally Bodhgaya, which is only a few hours from Varanasi. I will be happy to meet you again at the end of this trip. I thank you again for all the knowledge that you have imparted me and I will do my best to look at all the experiences of my journey through the lenses of that *vidya*."

"One more request, R. I would like you to transform your journey into a *tirthyatra*, a pilgrimage, by visiting a few holy sites along the way."

As the young traveler flinched in spite of his self-control, Doobay raised his hand in an appeasing gesture. "Don't worry! There are many holy sites along the itinerary that you just described, but I only want you to visit a few of those."

R accepted this additional request with equal grace, and the guru then raised his right hand to bless his disciple. "*Ashirvad. Shooobhyatra*<sup>153</sup>. One last piece of advice, R. Don't forget that we are now in *kaliyoog*. The roads of Bharat are not safe. Keep in mind the *Panchtantr* story that I once narrated to you about *true friends*."

R left his guru's house with a full head. Knowledge, wisdom, instructions and advice seemed to overflow from a brain that had been highly solicited over the last few days. "It seems that I will be quizzed upon my return here. That may be a blessing in disguise. It will force me to keep my eyes open during what could otherwise have been a boring and unpleasant 'delivery trip'. Now it will still be unpleasant, but at least I will be forced to stay awake and pay attention. I should note down what he has taught me over the last few days before I forget some of it; I was beginning to feel that all these esoteric concepts were too high-flying to be relevant to my future life over there, in the land of opportunities, in America," he thought, concluding his musings on a buoyant note.

One hour later, in Varanasi Junction Station, R dropped his 'Los Angeles' backpack on the comfortable seat of a first-class train compartment and hastily opened a paper bag full of delicious bengali cakes that he had just purchased from a snacks seller on the platform.

His free hand caressed the bald eagle logo and the American flag, then slipped into the backpack in search of those carefully wrapped brown paper parcels sent by Ashok for his friends. Having found one, R's fingers gauged the object for a few seconds, then, giving up, grabbed a postcard. The young traveler and would-be migrant gazed longingly at the picture of the Statue of Liberty as he finished the last of his cakes. He had brought along Ashok's postcards to remind himself of his ultimate goal, and to fill his mind with pleasant American images ... while enduring the much bleaker Indian setting.

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<sup>152</sup> Journey.

<sup>153</sup> May this journey be beneficial to you.

Thinking about the trip to Jaipur, his next stop, he felt an electrifying thrill snake throughout his body. The actual journey was about to start. Soon, he thought, he would deliver all five of Ashok's parcels, and, if there were no more surprises,—as in Varanasi, where Doobay had asked him to stay four days—he would return to Delhi and prepare to leave for Los Angeles. There, Ashok would welcome him ... and he would find out who his brother's mysterious girlfriend was. A new life would then start, in the New World, and eventually Mohini would share it with him ... and they would live happily ever after, year after year, in delightful America, the images of India fast paling into oblivion.

When he called the Singh residence, a manservant picked up the phone. The line was noisy and the sound level so low that he had to yell to be heard. In the end, he hung up, hoping that the man actually did say that he would '*notify 'Colonel' Singh about R's imminent visit*'. R was a little surprised that Vijay had been promoted so quickly to the rank of colonel. After all, he could not be older than 30. "I hope that Ashok gave me the right phone number," he worried. "There are so many Singhs in that part of the country."

He thought about the people he had just left behind. He felt so comfortable in their presence and yet he knew that he was so different from them.

"I am not sure that I share *Gurudji's* perspective on several topics. In Delhi, everybody I know says 'Hinduism' when talking about our religion,—on the rare occasions that they talk about it—whereas Gaetri and *Gurudji* only use the term 'Sanatan Dharm'. So many people in the capital, including Mohini, Professor Varma, and my parents say 'India' or 'Hindustan' when talking about our country, and yet Doobay and his daughter insist upon saying 'Bharat'."

He recalled his guru's words, "R, our country was known as Bharat for thousands of years. When the first Moslem invaders reached the western bank of the Sindhu<sup>154</sup> River, they needed a term to describe the people who lived east of that waterway. As they could not pronounce the 's' sound, they turned 'Sindhu' into 'Hindu'. The term persisted until the British reign. Now, the rest of the world knows us, the *Bharatiy*<sup>155</sup> who practice Sanatan Dharm, as 'Indians' and 'Hindus'. Ironically, these days, many of our own people use these foreign terms, either through ignorance ... or through subservience. As my disciple, R, you should know that we called our country Bharat in honor of one of our earliest emperors, who reigned thousand of years ago. As for Sanatan Dharm, it was coined by our *rishis*, in even earlier times."

After such a long and tedious day, R urgently needed the kind of comfort that only Mohini could bring him, through her melodious voice and crystalline laughter. Reclining comfortably on the seat, R dialed his girlfriend's number. The next half hour was indeed relaxing, as Mohini filled his ears with the latest Bollywood gossip, humming the tunes of the current hit songs. That night, rocked gently from side to side by the train's rhythmic motion, he fell asleep with a smile.

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<sup>154</sup> The 'Indus' river, now located in Pakistan.

<sup>155</sup> Inhabitants of Bharat.

## **Part 3**

### **Past and Present in Jaipur**

## CHAPTER 12

Much to R's surprise, there were no unpleasant events during the long rail journey to Jaipur; the train did not break down, the toilets worked, the food was edible and above all, there were no cockroaches in his sleeper compartment. It was a monotonous trip, during which the young man slept a lot, and rested his overworked mind, taxed by the recent conversations with Yogish Doobay.

Towards the end of the trip, he started to think about his next stop, and about the man he was supposed to meet in Jaipur. Having filled the pages of a second notepad with his impressions of Varanasi and with Doobay's teachings, R grabbed a new one and jotted down a few thoughts.

The upcoming meeting with Vijay Singh was taking him into the state of Rajasthan, territory of the Rajputs; the land of kings, battles and chivalry. One of the most arid areas of India, Rajasthan is dominated in the north-west by the Thar Desert, which borders Pakistan. Nonetheless, it is one of the most picturesque states in the entire country; an exotic, colorful, magical land, personifying the traditions and codes of honor of the Rajputs, that race of noble warriors whose land it is. "The Rajputs' beautiful cities were protected by legendary forts that defended their fiercely independent lifestyle against invaders," his grandfather had once told him. "However, in spite of their martial nature, their military valor and their monumental fortifications, it was the profoundly independent streak of that proud race that brought about their eventual downfall by preventing reigning Rajput families from establishing durable alliances. As a result of their rivalries, nearly all Rajput kingdoms fell prey to the Moguls, whose forces rode united under the banner of Islam, led by a single commander. The few Rajput rajas who survived the Moslem onslaughts reluctantly became vassals of the Mogul empire, and subsequently those of the British."

R rested his pen and lifted his head to look out the window. Rajasthan was indeed a scenic, vividly colored land with a rich history. Jaipur, its capital, where the train was taking him, was entirely painted in pink, the local color of hospitality, following a decree by its king in 1876. It was a grandiose gesture of welcome in honor of Edward the 8<sup>th</sup> of England. The Pink City, as it was thereafter known, is located less than two hundred miles southwest of New Delhi.

R guessed that the train had just passed north of the Sariska National Park, where the region's last few tigers still lived. British sahibs had nearly wiped out those predators. Then, after independence, the local rajas and their rich friends perpetuated that exciting sport—until it was finally banned in one of the government's rare moments of ecological lucidity. "Or was it because they finally understood the impact of tourism on the local economy?" R pondered cynically.

R turned his gaze to the opposite window. In the southeast of Rajasthan, close to the Gujarat border, was Udaipur. The town, whose predominant color had earned it the nickname of 'White City', was famous for the splendid *havelis*<sup>156</sup> garnished with exquisite sculptures that dotted the shores of its surrounding lakes.

To the east was the honey-colored town of Jaisalmer. Its fort, perched on a nearby hilltop, still appeared to keep watch over the city.

Pushkar, the magical city, reigned supreme in the middle of the State, with its sacred lake and an annual camel fair that drew thousands of visitors.

R had also heard of Jodhpur, painted in blue all over and protected by Mehrangarh Fort, which looms majestically over the city from a neighboring hilltop.

As the train slowed down to enter the station, R stretched lazily, then picked up his belongings. Glancing at the wall-mounted mirror, he decided to comb his hair one more time. "After all, you only get one chance to make a good impression—and the locals are among the most traditional-minded of the whole country." To avoid any embarrassment, the young traveler had donned a pair of blue jeans and a long-sleeved blue and red checkered shirt. "This should make me look fairly neutral," he hoped.

A quick look out the window confirmed that he was right to worry about the dress code. Indeed, the platform was vibrant with colors. He recalled one of his father's last

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<sup>156</sup> Villas.

recommendations, "Be mindful of what you wear in Rajasthan. Different colors are associated with different social classes."

In their latest phone conversation, Mohini had also offered him her two cents about this exotic region, "I went there once, when I accompanied Daddy to a conference. It's such a dreadfully conservative place; the women only wear traditional costumes; no jeans and mini-skirt allowed, no sir! And the men still think mustaches are a sign of virility; so, expect to see all shapes and sizes of those hairy appendages, Hero. And, whatever you do, don't smile or laugh; they are a very hot-blooded lot ... and they still walk around with their ceremonial daggers."

R teased her, "I have never been there, but from the images I have seen of Rajasthan, it seems that the dresses of the local women are very colorful; they use cosmetics with plenty of good taste; and they wear lots of jewelry."

To which his girlfriend tersely replied, "Try not to admire them too openly ... that is if you want to return to New Delhi in one piece. The local men are very territorial!"

R's gaze swept the crowd as he climbed down onto the platform. How different it looked from the gray colors of New Delhi. Here, men swaggered around in their extravagant turbans and traditional costumes ... and those long, curvy mustaches. The women, wearing yellow, red, blue or green, ankle-long skirts strewn with tiny mirrors and beads, chatted in small groups, barely shielding their white smiles under variegated *odhis*<sup>157</sup>. Here, the young traveler observed, *more* was definitely *better* for jewelry. In spite of the apparent overload of precious metals and gemstones, the women seemed to wear their silver and gold rings, bracelets, necklaces, bell-shaped earrings, *phoolis*<sup>158</sup>, *bichiyas*<sup>159</sup> and *payals* with grace and simplicity; there was no feeling of ostentation here—unlike at that Varanasi wedding.

Just as R was about to reach into his backpack for his camera, eager to capture the folkloric scene in front of him, he noticed a sign bearing his name. The man holding the piece of cardboard wore a white uniform and a cap with a black visor. "A driver, I presume," R deduced, stepping forward.

"My name is R. Sharma," he said, pointing to the sign, "and I am here to meet Mr. Vijay Singh. Are you here for me?"

The man bowed his head once, and without a word, turned around and started walking briskly towards the station's nearest exit. Every now and then, without stopping, he glanced back to confirm that R was still following him through the dense crowd.

Outside the station, the driver stopped in front of a 1950s-style white Ambassador and opened the back door for R. "The car seems brand new," the young man observed. "It's owner must not suffer from financial constraints." At first the tinted glass hid the passenger from his curious glance. R was expecting to see Vijay Singh. He was therefore startled to see a much older man as he popped his head inside the car.

The man returned his gaze somberly ... or was it sadly? His enormous white mustache arched along his cheeks all the way up to his ears, and he looked elegant in a white *sherwani*<sup>160</sup>. His thick fingers, covered with massive gold rings strewn with rubies and other precious stones, firmly held a finely sculpted walking cane. The splendid red turban pressing against the car's ceiling indicated that its owner was quite tall. R guessed that he was facing a Rajput, whose aristocratic bearing and attire commanded respect.

"Namaskar. My name is R. Sharma and I am from New Delhi. I was expecting to meet Mr. Vijay Singh. I am sorry; this seems to be a misunderstanding."

"*Captain* Vijay Singh!" the man corrected sternly. "Get in, young man." The Rajput's booming voice echoed through the car as R sat down and the driver slammed the door shut. The young traveler turned towards the turbaned elder with an inquisitive stare, unsure what to say. Fortunately, he did not have to wait long for an explanation.

"I am Colonel Baldeo Singh ... retired. Vijay Singh *was* my son," said the Rajput with a deep but gloomy voice.

R felt a jolt, understanding why Vijay had not answered, and why the manservant said that he would inform 'Colonel Singh' of R's impending arrival. Vijay did not answer ... because he was no more!

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<sup>157</sup> Silk scarf used to cover a woman's head, neck and shoulders.

<sup>158</sup> Nose ring or bead.

<sup>159</sup> Toe ring.

<sup>160</sup> Formal, Indian-style suit with a narrow, straight collar.

"Vijay ... is dead? But how?" The young traveler's mind raced furiously. "What a surprising start to this journey! What will Ashok say when he finds out? He sent a gift for Vijay ... and now ... his friend is dead!"

Singh answered stoically, "He died a true hero, defending his countrymen at the expense of his life. His men and he were escorting a busload of Hindu pilgrims among whom was a local member of parliament. They were on their way back from a shrine close to the border when the Pakistanis, probably informed by their spies, ambushed them. Vijay and his men fought like lions and successfully repelled the attack, but he was hit by a stray bullet ... and did not survive."

R paused in respectful silence for a moment, then said, "I am so sorry to hear this. When I met Vijay, he said that he was eager to join the army to follow his ancestors' footsteps. My elder brother Ashok and he were good friends. Please accept my sincere condolences, Colonel."

As Baldeo Singh just nodded in mournful silence, R understood why he was clad all in white,—except for the red turban—white being the traditional color of mourning.

"When did this happen?"

"Two weeks ago. My driver Kapil answered your phone call. Other family members were still too upset ... and I was probably busy with something else," Singh said in a steady voice. However, his face was turned towards the window, as if to hide his sorrow.

"Had I known, I would not have bothered you at a time like this ... while you are mourning."

"No. You are welcome at Vijay's house ... at our family's house," said Singh, pulling himself together and managing to put a welcoming look on his face. "In Rajasthan, and especially in the Singh household, we have always upheld the maxim *atithi dayvo bhavah*<sup>161</sup>."

As the old-fashioned vehicle sped through the busy streets of Jaipur, R told the old Rajput how his emigration plans became linked to his current mission to deliver gifts to the university friends of his elder brother.

"How interesting ... and somewhat mysterious too," the retired military officer commented. His eyelids narrowed, and his sharp, inquisitive gaze seemed to drill through the young man. "Do you know what these packages contain?"

Startled by the implied doubt, an uncomfortable R replied, "Not at all, Colonel. My brother sent me these parcels wrapped up, and he wants me to hand deliver them to his friends. I certainly intend to do so." Then realizing his mistake, he added, "Of course, I will give you the one that was meant for Vijay."

Singh smiled, his eyes lost in distant memories. "My son was exemplary, and I know that he chose his friends very carefully. I am sure your brother's parcel just contains a gift from a friend to another."

The car stopped in front of a ten-foot high metal gate that sealed the entrance to a large mansion surrounded by thick concrete walls. As soon as the driver honked, a *gurkha*<sup>162</sup> emerged from a wooden guard post located just outside the gate. With a military gait, he walked to the car and peeped inside. Recognizing Colonel Singh, he saluted formally, then opened the gate.

As the car drove briskly along the paved lane leading to the mansion's entrance, R gazed around. In front of the house, a beautiful flower garden surrounded a small pond, in which a few lotus flowers floated, a rare luxury in such an arid climate. As for the Singh residence itself, four large, sculpted concrete pillars framed its entrance.

"It's a pity that you missed our annual elephant festival, young man. It's such a spectacular event. The elephants are washed, painted and magnificently decorated. Then, these splendid animals are paraded around the city. There are even 'elephant polo' tournaments."

"I am sure that I would have enjoyed it. The photos would have been spectacular," R replied politely.

"Really? Well then, to compensate, we shall go to the Pushkar camel fair together. It's the day after tomorrow," Baldeo Singh proposed with genuine enthusiasm.

"... But ... I," R protested, eager to shorten the stops on his itinerary so as to make up for the three days 'lost' in Varanasi.

<sup>161</sup> Indian (Sanskrit) maxim asserting: 'Treat your guests with the same consideration that you would give God'.

<sup>162</sup> Nepalese or Tibetan men often employed as guards by wealthy Indians.

As the old Rajput extricated himself from the car, his red turban was knocked to one side of his head, and it hung at a ridiculous angle on his snow-white hair. The retired military man growled irritably as he straightened his splendid accessory, then frowned at R, "Don't say no. I had planned to go ... I do it every year."

R noticed that Singh was nearly as tall as his son, who was a head taller than most of his five university friends. He appeared frail, though, leaning on his thick cane as he climbed the stone steps leading inside the two-storied mansion. In spite of his weakness, the elderly Rajput impatiently waved away the driver who had rushed forth to help him.

"We have prepared a room for you," the Rajput said after they settled comfortably in luxurious burgundy armchairs in a vast living room.

R briefly admired the opulent décor. Hunting trophies hung from the walls, above the finely sculpted wooden furniture. "Probably the work of Colonel Singh and his ancestors," the young traveler reflected, gazing at several portraits, all encased in gold-plated frames. The men shown, all tall and mustachioed were dressed in western hunting gear and held various types of rifles.

A large, fierce-looking, stuffed tiger drew R's attention. Singh noticed. "Those were the good old days, young man. We were much more than mere soldiers then. We were rajas! Our kingdom was located east of Jaipur, and back then," he said, pointing to the tiger, "*they* were not 'protected'. It was the peasants and their livestock who were defenseless against the tigers' attacks. My ancestors and the British sahibs were worshipped as saviors whenever they killed one of those man-eaters."

R turned around to thank the servant who had handed him a gold-rimmed glass full of lemonade. However, the man vanished behind thick, maroon curtains as swiftly and silently as he had appeared. The young traveler sipped his cool drink. Much to his delight, it was real lemon juice, not the fizzy, chemical-laden, commercial soda that he dreaded.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Colonel."

R placed the empty glass on a coffee table and took out the package destined for Vijay. "As I said, my brother and your son were good friends at university. Ashok asked me to deliver this to Vijay, and like you, I believe it is just a friendly gift," he said, handing the parcel to Singh.

The young traveler watched in tense silence as the elderly man tore the brown wrapping paper, unceremoniously tossing it aside. "What if it is something illegal? ... Drugs ... or worse?"

R muffled a sigh of relief when he saw what Singh held in his broad fingers: it was a wooden elephant!

While Baldeo Singh put on his glasses to examine the object, with his younger eyes, R distinguished a fist-sized, elephant-shaped paperweight, of the type sold at souvenir shops all over the country. "On second thoughts, it's not one of those cheap souvenirs," he decided. Indeed, the paperweight was made of rare and fragrant sandalwood; its telltale smell having reached the young man sensitive nostrils by then. In addition, it was delicately hand carved, painted and studded with semi-precious stones. "I wonder why Ashok sent an expensive version of such a common Indian souvenir to a friend who lives in India. This is so bizarre," he puzzled. "Just the other day, at the Palika Bazaar, Mohini was admiring one of these, but that one could be opened by twisting its head ..."

R sat up with a jolt as Baldeo Singh did just that ... revealing a cavity inside the elephant's belly. The hollow paperweight obviously contained something, considering how Singh struggled to remove it. However, his fingers being too thick—or his eyesight too dim—the frustrated Rajput turned the elephant upside down and tapped its behind. A sheet of notepaper, rolled into a cylindrical shape, tumbled out and fell onto the coffee table.

Baldeo Singh adjusted the glasses resting on his long, sharp nose, and then read the note. It was dark in the room, which was lit only with a few antique wall lamps. Nonetheless, it seemed to R that his host's eyes were brimming over with tears by the time he finished reading. The retired army officer then got up and limped towards a painting on the wall. Lifting it, he opened a large concealed safe in which he placed the wooden elephant. Before he closed the safe's door, R thought that he could distinguish five elephant-shaped objects inside—but he could not be sure from that distance. "Did Vijay collect these elephants?" he wondered. "Strange!"



As Singh turned around towards his young guest, R's curiosity overcame his middle-class upbringing. He asked, "This note seems to have troubled you, Colonel. What was it about, may I ask?"

The elderly gentleman's features steeled instantly. "Young man," he answered dryly, "you should forget what you just saw. I know that you are from a good family. Vijay once mentioned his friendship with your elder brother, whom he trusted deeply."

A shamefaced R, realizing the impropriety of his question, hurriedly attempted to clarify, "Of course, Sir. And you can be sure that if my brother did not trust me completely, he would not have assigned me this mission. I know that he did not want to send these by mail, so it must be important. I just hope that I did not bring you any bad news ... in the note that you just read."

R could not conceal his curiosity. It oozed out of his eyes. He had only a few weaknesses; and inquisitiveness was one of them. While it was a useful trait for a student, R knew that he needed to reign in this tendency, especially when dealing with other people's private matters.

An irked Baldeo Singh voiced a gruff response, "This note is indeed important, my boy. But I cannot reveal the name of the person it relates to." Then, calming down, he smiled under his thick, white mustache. "Let's talk about something else. I hope you will honor our household with your presence for a few days. The trip from Delhi must have been exhausting."

Before R could reply that he had actually made the journey in a first-class compartment from Varanasi, and that he was feeling in great shape, Singh added, "You told me that you have other deliveries to make, but I am sure that you can rest for a while before resuming your journey." Without waiting for any sign of acquiescence from his young guest, Singh continued, "I would like to show you around Jaipur tomorrow; then, the day after, we will visit the camel fair in the delightful town of Pushkar."

R was disappointed that Singh did not want to say anything about the obviously disturbing message. In addition, the elder's edgy reaction to his question had taken him by surprise. He nodded reluctantly. "Thank you, Sir. I just hope that I will not be a burden."

"Nonsense my boy. Come, let's have dinner now," Baldeo Singh said, raising his eyes towards the silent manservant whose head suddenly popped out between the curtains.

As he took his place at a monumental dining table that could have seated at least twenty, R pondered about the new questions that he had just added to his list: "Who is this mysterious person whose name Singh cannot reveal? Is this paperweight identical to the other five locked in the safe?"

Throughout dinner, Baldeo Singh poured his heart out to his young guest, speaking at length on a variety of subjects. Guessing that his visit provided an outlet for his host's repressed emotions, the young man tactfully avoided mentioning the events linked to Vijay's premature death.

At first, he was surprised by the absence of any of the household's women. Then he remembered that in Rajasthan's aristocracy, women dined separately from men, especially when strangers were present.

"You are right to say that Vijay was eager to join the army. I was about to retire when he graduated. You see, our family's military tradition was all that was left from our glorious past. In the early 70s, when the central government stripped all rajas of their hereditary titles and kingdoms, we left our lands and settled in Jaipur ... in this shack," Singh grumbled between two mouthfuls of tandoori chicken.

Sensing that his host's mood was turning bitter, R tried to steer the conversation towards a more pleasant topic. "Jaipur is such a nice city; so well planned, it seems."

Singh seemed to swallow the bait, "That's right. It was built by Raja Jai Singh. He was fascinated by astronomy and *jyotish*. He believed so firmly in the teachings of the Shilp Shastr that he had his new capital built in accordance with the guidelines of that ancient *vastu* text." Waving a piece of chicken towards R, he added, "You know, this ancient science must have some strong foundations indeed, because it is truly a harmonious city."

Baldeo Singh sucked on his chicken bone and then tossed it on his empty plate, resuming his earlier, somber discourse, "We Rajputs have always defended our land against invaders. However, what could we do against our own government? We had no other choice but to submit, and accept the loss of our hereditary property. Although the seventies were

dark days for us, it was also a period of major socialist reforms in India, and a decade of major social and political changes throughout the world. In those days, it seemed possible that the world would change for the better; that the gap between rich and poor nations would somehow vanish; and that wars and hatred would disappear, replaced by peace and goodwill ... everywhere. However, we Rajputs know too well that war can never go away forever, especially when hatred, greed and jealousy are so deeply rooted."

"Still, there are fewer armed conflicts these days. In the past, invading, fighting, looting and conquering seemed to be a favorite pastime," R argued.

Baldeo Singh scowled, unsure whether R was hinting at the Rajputs martial traditions. "In those days, our ancestors waged war according to the rules of *dharm*. In Rajasthan, that's how we have always fought, as men of honor, not as barbarians like those on the other side," he roared, thumping one huge fist on the table, pointing west with his other hand—towards the Pakistani border.

R waited cautiously for signs that his host had calmed down. Then, keen to compensate for his inflammatory remark, he echoed, "The rules of *dharm* as in the Mahabharat, thousands of years ago? I read that in those days, warriors agreed to stop battling at sunset; that they never killed a disarmed foe, or struck their opponent from behind; and that they only fought those who could match their valor and weaponry. They had so many rules of chivalry. But even so, Colonel, some of them did not respect those rules; Shakuni, the uncle of the Kaurav princes, for example. He cheated ..."

Baldeo Singh interrupted, "So you have read the Mahabharat. Then you should know that Shakuni was not a son of Bharat. Remember that he accompanied his sister here when she got married to Dritarashtra, the blind king of Hastinapur<sup>163</sup>. That sister was the Afghan princess Gandhari, and her sons became the Kaurav princes. They initiated the Mahabharat war on the advice of their uncle Shakuni. Yes, young man, that foreigner clearly did not adhere to our *dharm*."

"That's right, Sir. I had forgotten about that," R admitted sheepishly.

"The true *Arya*, the noble people, the people of honor have always adhered to *Dharm*."

"The *Arya*? They also invaded India long ago, right?"

Singh gaped in horror. "Absolutely not!" he sputtered. "Don't tell me they still teach Max Muller's theories in our history classes. I expected everybody to know by now that this myth about a mysterious white-skinned tribe that came from the north had been invented only to prop up the Nazis' racial superiority theories. The British also echoed that 'Aryan invasion' theory to try and establish to the rest of the world that the dark-skinned Indians they were trying to civilize could never have been the originators of Sanskrit and the Veds; no sir, it had to be some mysterious, blond, blue-eyed race from the north. You see, in colonial times, the 'civilized world' was not ready—or willing—to accept that Indians enjoyed advanced civilization in the days when most European nations were still in infancy." Singh gradually calmed down, then chuckled. "Actually, some people even hypothesized that the *Arya* could have been aliens from outer space."

It was evident to R that Baldeo Singh was passionate and knowledgeable about history. "However, Sir, what about those ancient Indus Valley cities that seemed to have been abandoned; as if their inhabitants had fled?" he objected.

"Abandoned is the right word, young man," Singh replied with renewed passion, disdainfully sweeping aside R's argument with a swing of his cane. "Over thousands of years, the fertile Sindhu valley slowly became arid and barren due to climate change. The mighty Saraswati river, mentioned in the earliest of our scriptures, the Rig Ved, dried up on the surface of what is now Pakistan. It still runs underground through, now only carrying a small fraction of the water it used to convey from the Himalayas to the ocean. This gradual change in the land, from fertile to arid, forced the inhabitants of ancient India to migrate massively eastwards towards the Gunga valley."

Reddened by this outburst, Singh paused to catch his breath. He then added, "No one has ever been able to prove that there ever was a so-called 'Aryan invasion'. No, young man, the *Arya* always referred to *our* people. *We* are the *Arya*, and our ancestors have always lived in Bharat!"

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<sup>163</sup> Capital of a major northern Indian kingdom in ancient times.  
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This conversation reminded R of those he had with Gaetri. Singh seemed just as passionate about his country's history as the pundit's daughter was about Sanskrit.

R had always been fond of such verbal jousts. In Delhi, Professor Varma provided him with ample opportunities to exert his debating skills. He loved getting people to talk about their passion; it revealed so much about them. In Singh's case, he just needed to avoid being too provocative. He did not want the elderly Rajput's blood pressure to rise, especially when the latter was still recovering from the loss of his son.

"Nonetheless, I remember that my school history textbooks mentioned that the Indus Valley civilization vanished thousands of years ago, and it was only about a thousand years afterwards that the *Arya* appeared in India. In addition, according to the authors of these textbooks, the *Arya* came to India from Central Asia."

Baldeo Singh shook his head, swallowing a mouthful of delicious mango *lassi*. As his host wiped off the excess orange-colored liquid from his mustache, burping loudly, R noticed the letter B embroidered in gold thread on Singh's napkin.

"Firstly, the steppes of Central Asia have never bred any kind of civilization. It is simply ridiculous to fantasize that those who possessed the ability to write gems like the Veds could originate from such a desolate area. Secondly, don't forget that prior to independence, all our history textbooks were written in England. The British therefore wrote a version of Indian history that suited their purposes. The fact that you had to learn this material in your history classes suggests that these textbooks have not been updated, either through lack of funds or because of the lack of initiative or courage of bureaucrats."

R seemed lost in thought for a while. He then asked, "Could it be that the *Arya* were Greeks, Sir? I read in a novel—not a history textbook, mind you—that Alexander invaded India."

Baldeo Singh's thunderous laugh seemed to echo in the dining room. When he was able to stop, he replied, "No, young man. Alexander did not *invade* India. Exhausted by the time they reached the northwestern border of Bharat—now located in Pakistan—the rag-tag band of mercenaries that he had assembled along the way threatened him with mutiny if he did not turn back. In any case, Alexander and his meager troops would have been no match for the massive armies of the larger Indian kingdoms; in those days, Magadh<sup>164</sup> alone had tens of thousands of soldiers, thousands of chariots, horsemen, and hundreds of war elephants. Alexander was wise to turn back—without ever having *invaded* India!" Singh added.

"How interesting."

"In addition, that episode of our history took place about two thousand five hundred years ago, and the Veds were written thousands of years before that. In fact my boy, it's the reverse that happened. Some of the Greeks who camped on the northwestern frontier learned a lot from our *acharyuhs*<sup>165</sup>. Among other things, they became familiar with our philosophy, our medical science and advanced mathematics. They observed how our warriors exercised to keep fit, and how they trained in various martial arts. They admired our notions of chivalry on the battlefield, and learned to value the *Arya* warriors' *dharm*. Back in their mountainous country, they disseminated that gathered knowledge, and adopted some of our customs. No, young man, stop looking for far-flung explanations. We are the *Arya*, and our sages wrote the Veds!"

R pondered in silence as he savored a succulent *rasgulla*<sup>166</sup>, served by the same quiet manservant. He then decided to venture into another topic likely to arouse his host's enthusiasm. "Over here, in Rajasthan, you Rajputs have always upheld the rules of *dharm* on the battlefield, Colonel, haven't you?" he asked in a flattering tone.

"Absolutely. And do you know what the Rajputs' most important maxim was? *Better death than dishonor*. For hundreds of years, ferocious Mogul invaders pounded on the gates of our cities and scaled the walls of our forts, and our ancestors fought them bravely."

"I read that Rajput women burned themselves to death on a collective pyre whenever they realized that their men were about to be defeated and killed."

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<sup>164</sup> Major, ancient, Central Indian kingdom.

<sup>165</sup> Learned sages.

<sup>166</sup> Sweet treat. A 'dough and dried milk' ball, fried and soaked in cardamom-flavored syrup.

"That's right, my boy; better death than dishonor! They preferred to take their own lives than to perish at the hands of ruthless invaders ... after enduring unspeakable torments."

"In some cultures, suicide is taboo—illegal even."

"In the context of war, especially a war that lasted several centuries against savage predators who did not obey any of the rules of *dharm*, and who did not show mercy to defeated civilians—to women and children—, suicide became justifiable. Those invaders felt that they could kill, torture, loot and burn without consequence. You can imagine what they did to women. That's why, for the wives of the *Arya*, suicide was preferable to falling in the hands of victorious Moguls."

A seething Baldeo Singh paused for breath, then added, "Instead of sympathizing with what our ancestors endured in those painful centuries of continuing conflict, foreign writers in Britain and elsewhere popularized a myth according to which Hindu widows were systematically burned alive—against their will—on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands. What a distortion! But we know that those stooges only did it to amplify the colonial propaganda that painted India as a primitive country; one that needed to be 'civilized' by the British sahibs ... while exploiting its resources, of course. When I hear such nonsense voiced even today, I wonder how people can be so hypocritical. What about the tortures and the burnings at the stake during the Inquisition in Europe? And the massacres of aboriginals in South America by the Spanish *conquistadors*? And the burning of so-called witches in Europe and even in America? And the Holocaust?"

Much later that evening, when their passionate conversation eventually ended, R thanked Baldeo Singh again for his hospitality. Kapil, dressed as a butler, then showed the weary young traveler to his room.

After a good shower, R spent the next half-hour on the phone with Mohini, delighting her with a narration of the day's exciting events and a description of Jaipur's scenic imagery. In return, and in spite of his repeated protests, Mohini narrated Ahmed Khan's latest movie—in nauseating detail.

## CHAPTER 13

In spite of his lingering urge to complete his journey as soon as possible, R was pleasantly surprised by the images he saw—and which he could not resist photographing—during his two days in Rajasthan. The following day, he woke up early for a guided tour of Jaipur, the State capital; a city vibrant with colors, sounds ... and smells.

The Singh's house rules were strict, a reminder of the family's military tradition. Kapil, still dressed as a butler, awakened the young traveler at 6:00 a.m. sharp. The first few gentle rays of sunlight seeped through the curtain of stringed beads. Although he felt like sleeping for another two hours after the previous day's tedious rail journey, R dragged himself out of the regal bed.

"This is the ideal time for a *Suryanamaskar*, like *Gurudji* recommended; facing the early rays of the morning sun."

Standing on the balcony outside his room, the young man breathed in deeply to start his *hath yog* posture—and regretted it immediately. Already, the morning air in this centrally located neighborhood reeked of suffocating fumes from the swarms of motor vehicles that buzzed around in the streets of central Jaipur. Although the sky was blue, the air appeared hazy. As R looked around, he guessed that most of the dust raised by vehicles eventually settled on the city's walls and buildings, darkening their original pink color.

The guest room in which R had slept was located at the back of the mansion, and its balcony overlooked one of Jaipur's narrow residential alleys. As he stretched through his *yog* posture, R first heard, then saw a hawker walking alongside his bicycle, advertising his services to the alley's inhabitants in a high-pitched voice. Whatever he was selling—some kind of morning snack, R guessed—was enclosed in a glass-paneled box tied onto his vehicle. Suddenly, one of the alley's doors opened. A young woman dressed in a blue sari appeared and beckoned.

Barely a minute later, his sale made, the hawker moved on, resting his vocal cords, relying instead on his bicycle's bell to drum up business. "Some people around here are early risers ... and don't seem to have time to prepare breakfast ... or their office lunch," R concluded distractedly.

He closed the window, which he had left open at night. In spite of the Singhs' apparent affluence, the mansion was not air-conditioned. After a power outage in the middle of the night, the ceiling fan had stopped working. A sweaty R had then opened the window for relief. Eventually, the cool night air allowed him to enjoy a refreshing sleep.

A few minutes after his morning shower, the young traveler hurried downstairs to the dining room. Baldeo Singh was already seated, finishing his breakfast. R glanced at the antique grandfather clock that Kapil was rewinding; it was six thirty already. His host looked up at him. "Young man! I hope that you had a restful night. We will set off at seven sharp. There is so much to see in this beautiful city of ours."

R hastily munched a couple of buttered toasts with orange marmalade and gulped down some tea. As he ate, the imposing Rajput outlined the day's itinerary and schedule to him. "As I told you, Jaipur was built according to *vastu* guidelines. We will first drive around so that you can see how this influenced the design of the entire city. Then we will then stop at the Jantar Mantar, the stone observatory built by Raja Jai Singh."

His mouth full, R nodded, too polite to tell his host that he had visited the Delhi version of the Jantar Mantar several times with Mohini. Singh continued, "We will then proceed to the Hawa Mahal. It is one of the most spectacular palaces of Jaipur. We will also walk through the bazaars, in case you want to buy a few souvenirs; Rajasthan's unique and colorful craft is very popular with tourists, you know."

"Yes, Colonel, how can anyone resist the intricate and colorful costumes of Rajasthan ..." his sentence ended lamely, as he noticed that his host was dressed entirely in western style, except for the inescapable turban. Singh's elegant blue sports jacket covered a white shirt, highlighting a burgundy tie embroidered in gold thread with the letter B.

After Singh left the table, and before he gulped down his last mouthful of tea, R gazed at the dining room for a confirmation of what he was beginning to suspect about Vijay's father. The photographs and paintings of the family's prestigious male ancestors, the Victorian-style clock and furniture, the heavy burgundy curtains, the candlestick-type wall

lamps, the coat of arms of Baldeo Singh's former regiment; all these hinted that their owner was nostalgic about a prestigious past.

They set off at seven, comfortably seated in the white Ambassador, driven by Kapil, now in his white costume. The skillful driver deftly avoided swarms of *autorikshas*, scooters and bicycles that dove in between the heavier vehicles with kamikaze-like daring. To make things even more challenging, scores of pedestrians crossed the streets just about everywhere each time the traffic slowed to a standstill.

At one point, when the cars, buses and trucks stalled for a few minutes waiting for an old cow to cross the road, R pulled out his camera. "This will be a nice reminder of the unusual constraints people face in India," he thought with a mischievous smile.

However, just as he was about to press the button, Singh's voice thundered in the vehicle, startling him, "Why waste costly photographic film on such boring scenery, young man? Wait until we reach the important and beautiful monuments!"

Eager to respect the feelings of his host, whose thick white eyebrows had merged into a frown, R forsook the chance to add another picture of the 'real India'—not the glitzy Bangalore office towers or the luxury condos shown in foreign magazines—to those that he had already stored in the digital camera's memory. "There will be other opportunities along the way," he thought.

Baldeo Singh's proud bearing, his impressive physique, and his deep and authoritative voice commanded respect. In addition, he was older than most people R frequently interacted with—with the exception of his guru. The young man felt a little intimidated by this extraordinary character, custodian to so much historical tradition and knowledge.

He turned his gaze outside the car, dreamily absorbing images of dry and dusty roadsides as the white car sped along towards their first stop. His mind drifted to the strange dream he had during the night. In that dream, Ashok had drawn a map leading to a treasure chest on a sheet of paper. He had then torn the map into five pieces, concealing those into the five elephant-shaped paperweights. R had then seen himself conveying the elephants to Ashok's five friends ... all of whom remained tight-lipped, refusing to share the treasure map—or the treasure—with him.

R smiled. "This dream was so weird; Baldeo Singh said that the message was about a 'person' ... not a treasure." As he turned towards his host, who sat in silence, absorbed by his own thoughts, R wondered, "He mentioned a person whose name he 'cannot reveal'. Why not? What will happen if he does? What is all this secrecy about? What is Ashok involved in? What is, or was, the link between Ashok, Vijay Singh and this mysterious person?"

R exhaled softly ... with contained excitement. The urge to pierce this veil of mystery suddenly made his journey appear much less boring. He was curious by nature, and was therefore eager to uncover the story behind the elephant and the message it contained. "It would be so easy for me to open one of these parcels and find out more about this," he thought. "But then, this whole matter is between Ashok and Vijay ... and perhaps his other friends. So, it's none of my business, really."

"We are nearly there, young man," Baldeo Singh reassured, thinking that his guest was getting bored. Indeed, shortly after leaving Bhagwan Singh Road, the longest highway in central Jaipur, the car's wheels screeched as Kapil braked hard, parking the vehicle right in front of the Jaipur Gentlemen's Golf Club.

Following his host inside the club's main building during this unscheduled stop, R was fascinated at the astonishing number of hunting trophies hanging from the walls of this clearly prestigious local institution. The stuffed heads of tigers, black bears, leopards, antelopes and even an Indian rhinoceros stared fiercely down at him. "That rhino was probably one of the last ones before the species was completely wiped out," the young man thought regretfully. Underneath each trophy, an engraved brass plate proclaimed the name and credentials of its generous donor.

The deferential welcome that Colonel Singh received suggested to R that his host was an eminent member of the club. As Singh introduced his guest to the well-dressed, middle-aged men who gathered around them, one of the members queried—in English—, "Do you play polo, Mr. Sharma? Vijay was one of our best players. We haven't found anyone who could replace him yet."

"Unfortunately not. Besides, I am just visiting."

Paternal pride helped Baldeo Singh straighten his upper body, temporarily vanquishing the opposing forces of old age. "Yes, Vijay had been an excellent polo player," he confirmed to R as he took his young guest for a quick tour of the premises, nodding to several club members along the way.

Some eyed R with curiosity; others just turned away with ill-concealed disdain. "I clearly do not meet the expectations of Jaipur's high society," he felt, regretting that he had not brought a jacket. "I don't own one myself but I could have borrowed Dad's ... or actually not. I am taller than him; it would not fit ... and his suit looks as if it was made in the 60s."

A few minutes later, the two men stepped inside the car, R politely concealing his reservations about the place they had just left. As Kapil drove them north along Sawai Ram Singh Road, Baldeo Singh commented, "The Maharaj Sawai Man Singh museum is located in the earlier, walled part of Jaipur, where we are now heading. It displays the splendid ceremonial costumes of several Maharajs. As it is close to the Jantar Mantar, I propose that we visit it if time permits. But first we'll go to the observatory, then to the Hawa Mahal and to the bazaars."

R smiled back, showing his appreciation for the guided tour. However, the words of Vikram Varma still echoed through his mind, "Buckling under Mogul domination, the Rajput kings gradually forsook their sense of values. Their decadence was accelerated by the manipulative British, always keen to 'divide and rule'. The Rajput kings forgot that in addition to offering protection and justice to their people, they were also expected to promote prosperity in their realms. Instead, they gradually turned into decadent despots, squandering their kingdom's wealth for personal enjoyment, encouraged in this by the British, who leveraged the rajas' authority to siphon out the region's vast natural resources, like our bountiful gemstone deposits. The government was right to take away their hereditary rights in the seventies," the Marxist professor had once commented ardently.

R shared his academic mentor's distaste for extravagance. He therefore felt no desire to gawk at the richly decorated ceremonial costumes of rulers who lived in luxury while their people endured acute deprivation. However, he could not admit that to his host, as Baldeo Singh was a proud scion of those kings ... even if he personally lived a much simpler life.

Near the end of the street, on the right, a faded sign pointed towards the local zoo. Pointing to it, his host said, "We will not visit it; it's not worth it. Besides, in Jaipur, elephants walk freely on the streets."

In response to R's astonished look, he clarified, "I meant under the guidance of their mahouts, of course, young man."

The car slowed down to let a wedding procession pass—slowly. About a hundred guests, all dressed lavishly, followed a trio of wedding musicians clad in red and yellow. The elder of the three entertainers blew continuously through a whining *shehnai*<sup>167</sup> while the second one followed a few steps behind, beating rhythmically on a *dholki*<sup>168</sup>, his costume wet with perspiration. The last musician, barely a teenager, trailed his elders, the metallic sound of his clashing *jhals* barely audible over the general din.

Singh smiled approvingly as R took out his camera; this scene was indeed worth a few photos. The young traveler snapped a picture of the beige-clad bridegroom riding a splendidly adorned white horse, his face hidden from jealous eyes behind a veil of tiny, white flowers.

Close behind the accompanying *baraat*<sup>169</sup> of relatives and friends, an elephant lumbered. Guided by its mahout, the docile animal carried two children comfortably seated in a covered turret that protected them from the scorching sun.

R took pictures of the kids, a boy and a girl. Both were dressed in wedding clothes in honor of the two adults who, later that day, would become husband and wife.

A few minutes later, Kapil dropped off his employer and R close to one of the gates of the old city. The two men walked side by side on Chaura Street, R adjusting his normally brisk pace to match the old Rajput's.

Noticing this, Singh said, "Yes, my sciatica now forces me to rely on a cane. I can't even play golf anymore. You wouldn't believe that I used to be a cricket champion ... a long time ago. That's old age for you."

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<sup>167</sup> Type of Indian trumpet used mainly in weddings.

<sup>168</sup> Type of Indian drum.

<sup>169</sup> Wedding procession accompanying the bridegroom.

Finally, they reached the Jantar Mantar, and R understood why Singh wanted to start with this monument. The site was indeed impressive—a lot more than the one in Delhi. “Maharaj Jai Singh must have wanted to build a bigger and better observatory here, in his own State capital,” he concluded.

The old Rajput painfully tried to climb a few steps with R, then gave up, motioning to his young guest to pursue the visit alone. The young man walked around for a while, taking pictures of the giant, eighty-foot stone sundial and other awe-inspiring astronomical instruments. When he climbed down later, he exclaimed, “This is so impressive, Colonel, I can’t wait to share these photos with my family and friends.”

“Really?” commented Singh with a mysterious smile. “Excellent. Now, let’s proceed to the Hawa Mahal.”

As they walked, the old Rajput explained, “As you may know, this ‘palace of winds’ was built by a king, so that the ladies of his household could watch the everyday life of their people in the streets below. That explains why it has so many narrow, finely sculpted, wooden windows. They allowed a great view of the surrounding area while protecting the ladies from the sun, dust ... and unwelcome stares.”

R was stunned by the famous monument. It looked like a pink beehive. He could easily imagine the royal women peering at the crowds below from the dozens of windows on each of the five floors of the building. On Singh’s advice, he proceeded to its roof to capture some spectacular views of Jaipur. There, as he zoomed in on the people below, R saw his host bend suddenly—as if he had felt an unbearable pain. The young man rushed downstairs as fast as he could. Once at the old Rajput’s side, he inquired, “You are not feeling well, Sir?”

“It’s my sciatica again. It’s a pity that it should peak during your visit here, young man,” the old Rajput replied, shaking his turbaned head.

As the two men sat side by side in front of the building, R felt at a loss for words; he did not want to offend his proud host. The retired military officer whacked his leg a few times with his cane, all the while wincing in pain. He closed his eyes for a moment, his head bowed, then looked at R, “I propose that we visit the bazaars now; then we should head back home. ... I need some rest.”

“We could return to your house right now, Sir.”

“No. I think I can manage to walk straight for a short while. You know, during the war, I dragged this wounded leg over five miles of Thar Desert before meeting fellow soldiers. They took me to a surgeon’s operating table and the man did his best under the circumstances. However, a fragment of that Pakistani’s bullet remains lodged close to the nerve.”

“You fought in the Thar Desert ... in the war against Pakistan?”

“Yes. Like so many of my friends, some of whom stayed there, buried in the sand dunes. Like my son, so many of our soldiers have given their lives since independence to defend our land against those relentless, hate-filled foes.”

“But what do the Pakistanis want? What are they fighting for? Didn’t they get what they wanted after independence? They got their own country, which they turned into an Islamic state, rejecting Gandhi’s vision of a secular, all-embracing India. There aren’t that many Moslems in Rajasthan, so they cannot invoke the protection of any oppressed ‘brothers’—as in Kashmir—to justify their attacks.”

Singh smiled benignly at his young guest’s ignorance. “Rajasthan was always rich in natural resources. We are still one of the world’s largest suppliers of rare and precious gems. From time immemorial, our mines provided the rubies, the amethysts, and the sapphires that adorned the crowns of Indian royalty, and the jewels of millions of ordinary Indians. Pakistan is a much poorer country than ours, young man. As a military dictatorship, they need to find as much money as possible to buy weapons ... to build more nuclear missiles. And our mines are still very rich; even after decades of overexploitation under British rule.”

“The British! They filled their pockets every way they could while they were here,” R exclaimed.

Baldeo Singh frowned. “To be fair, they also left us a few useful things. Like the railway system that they used to ferry raw materials and goods out of our country. And their parliamentary system ... although that does not work very well in our context because of our exceptional diversity. You are probably aware that while the rest of the world sees us as a nation, we are in fact a multitude of communities. We are certainly not homogeneous, like so



many other countries. The large number of competing interest groups that flourish in this secular and democratic society of ours present a formidable challenge to the stability and effectiveness of our political system."

Baldeo Singh stopped abruptly to greet a group of local dignitaries walking towards the old city's main palace. They accompanied a group of foreigners. "Probably diplomats or businessmen," R guessed after a glance at their formal attire. The notables, who discussed with Singh about local politics, seemed to hold his opinion in high regard, confirming to R that his host was indeed a local VIP. A short while later, the two men resumed their walk towards the Sangneri door, which leads out of the old Jaipur. On the other side, Kapil would be waiting to take them home.

Along the way, in the Johari Bazaar<sup>170</sup>, R was struck by the number of skinny children dressed in dirty rags. "The poorest among the poor seem drawn to this market," the young traveler reflected somberly. "They know that the well-heeled come here with their pockets and purses full of rupees, ready to splurge on expensive trinkets that catch their fancy. ... And these poor kids hope that guilt will be their ally."

As he glanced around, it seemed that the eyes of well-off pedestrians simply glazed over at the sight of the tiny, outstretched hands of those street urchins. Proudly pushing their rotund bellies ahead, or twirling their mustaches, the Jaipur bourgeois focused exclusively on the jewelry and other wares displayed in the market. Not all the kids were begging, though; some were selling fruits or souvenirs at street corners, and others toiled as cleaners or apprentices at some of the bazaar's shops.

Distacted by the unusual sights, R nearly tripped as his feet got entangled in one of the numerous, used plastic bags that littered the narrow lanes. A few kids giggled, hiding their missing teeth behind grubby hands.

As he raised his eyes, a woman stood right in front of him, smiling invitingly with two perfect rows of white teeth. To avoid any misunderstanding, she promptly pointed her eyes skywards. On her head was a large rattan basket that she kept perfectly balanced with her hands. The basket brimmed over with mouth-watering red and yellow mangoes. R shook his head politely at first. As she insisted, Baldeo Singh tapped his steel-tipped cane authoritatively on the ground and ordered her to move out of their way with a curt wave of his large hand.

R observed the scene in silence. Here, things were so different from the much more urbane and cosmopolitan Delhi. In Jaipur, traditions were still strong. Men were authoritative and women obedient. "This is not surprising, considering their martial traditions and their prolonged, historical resistance against both the cruel Moguls and the belligerent, southern Maraths," he concluded.

Moving on, he could not help but admire—just like the few foreigners who ventured in the Johari Bazaar—at the intricacy, the sheer sophistication of the Rajput jewelers' masterpieces. Most of the jewelry on display was of typical Rajasthan design, but the wide range of motifs, shapes, sizes and colors was breathtaking—even for R, whose interest for such objects was limited to their potential for making his girlfriend happy. "I wish I had enough money—my own money—to buy Mohini several of these baubles," he sighed, "... but I don't."

Later, back in the Singhs' luxurious dining room, enjoying a tasty meal, R renewed their conversation about British rule. "Sir, most people in India feel that getting rid of the British was a good thing. After all, they were just parasites, plundering our resources to enrich themselves and their country. Why should we be grateful to them for a railway network and a parliamentary system?"

Baldeo Singh slowly and carefully wiped the curry sauce from his lips and mustache. "Young man, when the British snatched power from the Moguls, our country was like one of those war elephants of ancient times, pin-cushioned with spears and arrows, lying down on its flank and bleeding profusely. Bharat was on its knees after seven hundred years of violence and terror caused by the assaults and domination of cruel, barbaric foreigners: Turks, Arabs, Persians, and Moguls. Our ancient civilization, which had been the envy of the world for millennia, was traumatized. Under the prolonged, adverse conditions, it started to

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<sup>170</sup> Jewelers' market.

regress in many ways, not just economically but also socially. As you may know, before the barbarians invaded from their desert lands, bringing tyranny and fanaticism, *our* culture favored the exact opposite: openness, freedom, diversity."

R agreed. Intense psychological pressure from the male-dominated culture of Moslem invaders successfully eroded Indian women's freedom over those dreadful centuries. Fear for their safety made many simple things difficult; things that they had taken for granted for thousands of years: walking in the streets unaccompanied; dressing according to personal taste and in garments adapted to the climate; participating in public festivals; and speaking their mind freely in public.

"Still, did British rule help that much, Colonel?" R asked skeptically.

Baldeo Singh smiled. "Young man, at least they put an end to a very long reign of terror."

"To replace it with systematic, efficient plundering," an emboldened R replied. He recalled a photograph that he had seen once while visiting a museum in Delhi as a schoolboy. That image had seared through his mind, and would probably never go away. It showed a young, khaki-clad British sahib relaxing in an armchair, reading his newspaper and smoking a pipe, while two skinny, pauper-like, Indian menservants dusted the furniture and polished the floor. A third employee, an older man, squatted barefoot in front of the master, polishing his boots.

"I understand that feeling, and I share it to some extent. But our political situation is not much better nowadays. Don't get me wrong; I am not nostalgic about British rule, but in those days, there was political stability. After independence, democratic India turned into an ungovernable chaos. This country now seems to hold together not because of inspiring leadership, but simply because Indians need to focus on their daily fight for survival."

Suddenly, the old Rajput's eyes glowed as he banged his fist on the massive, sculpted wooded table. "And do you know why? Because we have not learned an important lesson from our defeats of the last thousand years. Although our united military forces could easily have wiped out the invaders from the surface of the earth, our hundreds of kings—including my own ancestors—were too proud to form alliances. Therefore, the numerically inferior Moslem invaders swept throughout the country, toppling local rajas like dominoes in a row, one after the other. It took them centuries, and they nearly got the job done ... but then, the British grabbed power from them. And you know, young man, this lack of unity also explains why the much smaller Pakistan is proving to be such a prolonged threat to India, both on our borders and through terrorist attacks within our country. Living under the banner of Islam in a military dictatorship, they are fiercely united against the 'idolaters' that they perceive us to be ... while we gallantly uphold the idealistic banners of secularism and democracy ... in a still fragmented society."

R was stunned. He thought he had understood the old Rajput. "Nostalgic of long past—but more glorious—days. A highly conservative traditionalist," he had hastily concluded about his host. Now, he repented; Baldeo Singh's views were not mired in a distant past. His views on today's India were lucid and blunt.

It was therefore with a shiver of excitement that he renewed his conversation with the retired army officer. After a long lunch, during which a lot more was said, his host retired for a refreshing nap.

R spent the afternoon drafting a long email that he eventually sent Ashok from Vijay's computer. In it, he announced the sad news, and sent a few photos chosen from those stored in his camera's memory.

He also read his elder brother's reply to the email he had sent from Varanasi, "We enjoyed your travel notes on Varanasi as well as the photos, R. Keep emailing at each stopover of your journey. I look forward to reading about your meeting with Vijay."

"Again the 'we'," R pondered. "Who is this mysterious other person ... or girlfriend?"

## CHAPTER 14

The next day, the journey to Pushkar turned out to be quite tiring, but R found the images unforgettable.

It was the last day of the camel fair. Setting off at the crack of dawn on the three-hour journey from Jaipur to Pushkar, Baldeo Singh said, "Today is Kartik Purnima<sup>171</sup>. On this last day of the fair, thousands of buyers and sellers meet every year on the outskirts of that small, highly picturesque town."

"I can understand why they cannot meet in the town center; who would clean up the camel droppings afterwards?" R jested.

Singh's cavernous laugh resounded through the car. "Actually, there is a more serious reason, young man. Today is also the day when over a hundred thousand pilgrims—some of whom come from far away—congregate around the sacred lake of Pushkar for a ritual bath. You see, it would not be acceptable for pilgrims to cross paths with camels and their owners."

"Kapil told me that the town has about fifteen thousand inhabitants. They must feel very crowded; I am sure they must be happy to see all those people leave at the end of the day."

At the mention of the driver's name, Singh turned towards the latter and repeated his driving instructions as the 1950s-style white car roared out of the mansion's entrance. That morning, Kapil was more focused than usual, changing lanes and overtaking aggressively, eager to cover the hundred and twenty miles between Jaipur and Pushkar as fast as the state of the highways would allow. The driver understood that his employer wanted to reach Pushkar as early as possible to avoid getting stuck in the large midday crowds.

Singh then turned towards R to reply. "Well, not exactly, young man. Today, it is certainly going to be crazy over there, but on the other hand, the fair and the pilgrimage are both great for Pushkar's economy. You see, every year, the camel and livestock merchants sell over a hundred and fifty thousand animals in just these few days."

R smiled, his sensitive nose twitching in anticipation. "Excuse me for being so blunt again, Sir, but it must really stink."

"Absolutely. By the way, I hope that you are not allergic to dust or animal hair? I forgot to ask you that earlier. Because if you do, you might find it unbearable there today," a concerned Baldeo Singh asked. "These days so many young people seem to be allergic to just about anything. If you ask me, it's all because of all those synthetic chemicals they spray on crops, and all the atmospheric pollution from factories and motor vehicles. In my days, we used to ride on horseback, on camels and on elephants. Common people walked or rode carts pulled by bullocks. We did not even know what pesticides were. And guess what? No one was allergic then!"

"I have no such problem, Sir," R bragged, breathing in deeply to demonstrate his perfect health. Besides, I practice *pranayam* daily. That helps to prevent respiratory problems." R knew very well that he was sensitive to incense ash, but he did not want to show any sign of weakness to the old Rajput.

"A religious man!" Baldeo Singh exclaimed, tapping the car's floor with his cane in mock delight. "Great! Then, what you will see in Pushkar today should please you. All those pilgrims will be climbing down the *ghats* into the lake to symbolize their desire for spiritual purification."

R opened his mouth to explain that *pranayam* had nothing to do with religion ... then gave up. "Why bother? It would be too long to explain."

Suddenly, a startled R sat up with a jolt as Singh unexpectedly tapped the driver seat with his steel tipped cane. "Kapil, you haven't forgotten to load our snacks in the car, I hope?"

As the driver calmly assured his edgy employer that he had not, R concurred, "Wise precaution. I imagine that the local eateries will be swamped on a day like this."

Singh snorted. "More importantly,—for me, that is—Pushkar is a totally vegetarian town ... all year round, not just during the pilgrimage. That's why I asked to pack some tandoori chicken for me. Those camel dealers camp out of town, and they get to eat whatever they want—lucky devils!" Noticing R's anxious expression, he added with a wink, "Don't

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<sup>171</sup> The day of the full moon during the month of Kartik.  
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worry, my boy. I know that you are a vegetarian; there is something in the basket for you too."

The road seemed to whiz by. Far away, a few lonely trees stood as a stark reminder that this was one of the most parched regions of the country. Over the ages, and in the face of growing desertification, the locals had learned to use camels to travel across Rajasthan. Wisely, cities like Pushkar and Jaisalmer had grown around the region's few lakes.

"In our scriptures, the Sindhu valley is described as a green and fertile land," R remarked distractedly.

"Major climatic changes during the last ten thousand years have turned it into a desert. On top of that, millions of people throughout the ages have accelerated the phenomenon by cutting wood for building, cooking or incinerating—without replanting, unfortunately."

The elderly Rajput needed to stop frequently along the way, although, as he explained to R, he had avoided liquids since the night before. As they climbed back into the car after one such stop, Singh asked, "So where will you be heading for after Jaipur, young man?"

"I need to meet with another of Ashok's university friends in Gujarat; in Jamnagar to be precise," R replied, preferring not to mention Ashraf Ali by name.

"That's a long way from Jaipur. You will be traveling by train, I presume?"

R nodded. Singh stared through the window towards the horizon. "It's unfortunate that the railway does not pass close to Chittorgarh," he said dreamily.

"Chittorgarh? I would have liked to visit it," R said politely.

"And why is that?" a suddenly grim Baldeo Singh asked.

R felt hot with embarrassment under the imposing Rajput's drilling stare. "I ... I am not sure. I just know that it is a symbol of Rajput resistance against the Mogul onslaught."

Turning away again to stare blankly again at the horizon, Baldeo Singh solemnly narrated, "According to the Mahabharat, it was Bhim<sup>172</sup> who built Chittor's first fort, thousands of years ago. Much more recently, it became a symbol of resistance for all our people. The fort fell for the first time in 1303 to the army of the Afghan king of Delhi, Ala-ud-din Khilji. This foreign tyrant lusted after the gorgeous Padmini, the wife of an uncle of Bhim Singh, the king of Chittor. When defeat against far superior enemy forces became imminent, Bhim Singh led his remaining Rajput horsemen in a heroic, but futile, charge against the enemy. Their women, who had stayed inside the fort, burned themselves on a huge pyre to avoid falling into the hands of the barbarians. So Ala-ud-din's victory turned out to be a hollow one ... tasting of ashes."

As R digested this bleak history lesson in silence, his host continued in a frosty, unemotional voice, "Chittor subsequently fell to two other such attacks. In 1535, after a long siege, when defeat against the army of Sultan Bahadoor Shah was nearly certain, thirteen thousand women killed themselves as the last of Chittor's surviving warriors rode out to certain death. Finally, in 1568, the inhabitants of Chittor faced the army of the Mogul Emperor Akbar. Again, our valiant warriors rode to their deaths against enemy forces that were numerically far superior and much better equipped. And this time also, their defeat led to the collective suicide of thousands of their women, who preferred death to dishonor."

The two men pursued their conversation until the car slowed down to enter Pushkar. There, Kapil sweated bullets to drive them as close to the lake as possible. After half an hour of moving a foot at a time through the crowd of pilgrims, Singh ordered the driver to stop and park the car; they would walk the rest of the trip.

Coming out of the white Ambassador, and as Singh straightened his magnificent red turban, R took a photo of the sea of devotees walking to and from the lake. The two men then walked slowly to the *ghats*.

R noticed that most of the male pilgrims were clad in white. "White symbolizes the purity of their spiritual goal," Doobay had once explained. "However, as white also indicates widowhood, married women wear colored saris."

There were so many pilgrims that they had to wait in line to climb down the stone steps leading into the sacred lake. As he approached, R noticed that the steps dove several

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<sup>172</sup> The second, physically strongest of the five Pandav princes, the main characters of the Mahabharat.  
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feet under the water's surface, allowing pilgrims to immerse themselves completely. Hundreds of people stood waist-deep in the water, expressing their devotion with prayers and a sprinkling of flower petals.

Further away, under the shade of a few rare trees, sat dozens of *puja samagri* sellers. For a few rupees, those local entrepreneurs provided the devotees with fresh flower petals and other essential prayer ingredients. Here and there, *pujaris* clad in white *dhotis*, their brow highlighted with three white lines to symbolize their detachment from the three *goonns*, helped pilgrims with their prayers.

"As expected, there are fewer men," R noticed. "And most of the women are married." That was obvious from the traditional *sindoor*, the red line that marked the women's forehead and hair parting. He guessed that these wives and mothers were there to pray for the health and prosperity of their husbands and their children.

R took a few pictures, and then turned towards Singh. Barely concealing a mocking smile under his thick, curvy, white mustaches, Vijay's father asked, "Would you like to join them for a purifying dip?"

"No, thank you. I just took a few photos as a souvenir." He thought of Doobay. His guru would be happy to know that he had actually visited a holy site. Indeed, at that early stage in his journey, he could not tell for sure how many such places he would come across later on.

"All right, let's proceed to the camel fair then."

Half an hour later, they had barely moved by a few dozen feet in spite of Kapil's aggressive driving. There were just too many people on the streets. Because of his host's occasional bouts of sciatica, R refrained from suggesting that they should walk to the fair, which was located only a quarter mile west of the lake.

Eventually, a fuming Baldeo Singh got out of the car, ragingly slamming the door shut. Kapil heaved a muted sigh of relief. Now he could take as long as he needed to drive to the camel fair and park without having to endure his employer's mounting irritation.

R found that the fun started as soon as he climbed a camel loaned by one of Singh's many friends. As a teenager, he had enjoyed an elephant ride once, but this was so different. Riding the elephant, he had barely felt anything, so large and steady was the animal. In the camel's case, the smelly creature's undulating motion made taking photos quite a challenge. After a few minutes, motion sickness also set in. Even so, at the end of the tour, R heartily thanked the owner and reviewed the photos he had taken.

First, there had been that man and his monkey. As soon as his master started drumming a beat on his *tabla*, the nimble animal, dressed in multicolored rags, spun round and round to the delight of the children who had promptly formed a circle around the performers. In the end, the monkey strutted proudly, holding his hat to solicit coins from the crowd.

R had also cautiously photographed a few passers-by. There was this skinny, bearded, elderly man in a brown turban, walking around aimlessly, clearly unable to afford any of the snacks on sale at the fair, contenting himself with watching others gulp down, then lick their fingers with delight at the spicy taste of *pakor*as, *bhaj*ias and *chut*nis.

R also discreetly took a few photos of local women. He wanted to show Mohini their long, brightly colored dresses, and their blouses, strewn, in typical Rajasthan style, with scores of small, round, stitched mirrors and folkloric embroidery.

He also took a photo of a lone, unperturbed *sadhu* carrying a small cotton bag in which passers-by poured offerings of uncooked rice and other grains. However, R was careful to take his picture from the back ... as his attire was scant, at best.

Years ago, he had seen a *sadhu* in Varanasi for the first time. Covered with ashes, his uncut, matted hair looking unattractive to say the least, the near-naked man ambled along the streets of the sacred city without raising anybody's eyebrows. Unaccustomed to such sights in the relatively urbane Delhi, the young R had questioned his guru about the amazing event. Smiling indulgently, Doobay had explained that those people also had their place in society, as they lived for the sake of their spiritual quest only. "They are now free from the three *goonns*, from their families, from any type of material bondage, R."

Smiling mischievously, R decided, "I will email this photo to Ashok next time. He can then explain to his American girlfriend why the near nudity of *sadhus* is tolerated in our stuffy, prim society."

A few local notables, recognizable by their extravagant turbans, long, curvy mustaches ... and plump bellies, gathered around Baldeo Singh, nodding obsequiously after every two sentences that the old Rajput uttered. It was now clear to R why Singh had insisted on coming to the fair ... although he was still mourning his son. He was obviously very popular and respected, and seemed to enjoy discussing politics with his friends and admirers.

Keeping an eye on Singh's whereabouts to ensure that he could find him later, R walked towards a snake charmer. Sitting in the shade of a house, the man did not seem very successful. "Too many people still die of snake bites in rural areas for people to enjoy the sight of these reptiles," R guessed. He dropped a coin onto the man's mat and stopped for a short while to admire the large cobra swaying in rhythm with the movements of the man's flute. After a few minutes, the entertainer shut his snake in its basket, then got up and left, seconds before a woman stopped at the place he previously occupied. The young mother carried her little girl on her hip, with an older woman in tow.

"Too late! I wanted to show Moonni this snake—so that she would be wary if she ever sees one," the younger woman whined.

"That's all right. The snake charmer will come back later. Come, let's buy her some *mithai* in the meantime," the elder squealed, salivating as she ogled the nearest cake booth and inhaled the aroma of the frying tidbits.

Singh having accepted a lunch invitation from one of his friends, he instructed Kapil to ensure that the tasty victuals brought from home would not go to waste. The driver could therefore eat as much as he wanted, then distribute the rest to the needy. ... And there were many of these, wandering shyly through the crowd, embarrassed to be so wretched on such a festive occasion.

The meal was a joyful event, the old Rajput guffawing at each of his friends' jokes. Lunchtime conversation at the table revolved around local issues related to politics, the harvest, cattle and how this year's fair compared to the previous one. Largely unable to participate, R focused instead on enjoying his vegetarian meal in relative peace.

In the afternoon, as they walked through the fair, Singh's mood kept improving as he stopped every now and then to greet old friends and acquaintances. R noticed that most of the men that Singh met wore red turbans, just like him. Turning around, the young man noticed other colors: pink, brown and black. Interestingly, the black turbans seemed more numerous closer to the camels. When his host finished talking, R asked, "I see four main colors among the turbans that men are wearing, Sir. Over there, near the camels, there are many more black turbans. Is there a meaning to this?"

"Of course, young man," Singh replied with an indulgent smile. "And it's not only the colors; they are tied differently too. The nomad camel breeders are the ones wearing black turbans. The pink ones—and there are very few of them here—belong to *bramhans*. Mine is red, because I am a *chatri*<sup>173</sup>, and the brown ones belong to *dalits*<sup>174</sup>."

"I guessed that it had something to do with people's castes," R replied. "In New Delhi, clothes can reveal a lot about a person's occupation; here it's turbans. Social mobility between castes more limited here because people can be visually identified?" he asked candidly.

Singh frowned, and then growled back his answer, "It's our tradition, young man! We Rajputs are proud of maintaining our customs to this date. Castes have existed for thousands of years. As you know, our civilization was able to evolve faster than others in ancient times because we specialized very early into castes, accelerating social and economic efficiency. Our warriors, farmers, skilled tradesmen and even our priests and educators dedicated themselves to their respective professions, passing on their knowledge from father to son, and improving their expertise with every successive generation. In addition, because of the caste system and the tradition of marrying within one's caste, the genes favoring specific abilities became concentrated in distinct social groups. It was a process very similar

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<sup>173</sup> Caste of warriors and public administrators.

<sup>174</sup> Tribal people.

to breeding racehorses or improving the productivity and disease resistance of crop species. For example, children born in the warrior caste were more likely to become excellent warriors because they had the most favorable set of genes and the proper upbringing as well. In the early days, people also expected their children to follow in their footsteps as it was more convenient. Then, with time, the caste system became hereditary."

R recalled the strong feelings of the Marxist Vikram Varma against the caste system. "Many Indians, Sir, and even more foreigners feel that our defunct caste system was revolting; some even say inhuman."

Singh's guffawed with that characteristic laugh that seemed to echo in his cavernous lungs. Turning towards R after he stopped, he replied, "Specialization has improved our abilities over countless generations. When knowledge and skills are transmitted from parents to their children, valuable skills are preserved and can be perfected with time. In other social systems, people spend half their lives learning other professions than those of their parents. Under the caste system, children soaked in their parents' expertise from a very tender age, and this allowed them to become productive members of society earlier in life."

R was skeptical. "Still, genetic selection through the caste system ..."

Singh interrupted, "Young man, the Veds, a vital component of our ancient and uninterrupted civilization, were preserved from the destructive fury of fanatic Moguls like Aurangzeb because our *bramhan* scholars possessed the ability to memorize word for word thousands of pages of text that make up those scriptures. That Moslem tyrant ordered the burning of all the Hindu scriptures that his henchmen could find. However, thanks to the caste system, thanks to the specialization that brought about the improvement of specific traits, those attempts to destroy our culture failed. That is just one example in support of our caste system: it definitely helped us preserve the gems of our ancestral culture."

"There are many Indians who would like to see the caste system buried and forgotten. They argue that the caste system became exceedingly rigid over the millennia, turning into an insurmountable barrier that prevented new blood from flowing freely, and making social mobility impossible."

Shaking his big turbaned head, Singh snapped, "First of all, our progress got stifled by the Moslem and British invasions of the last millennia. Those blood-spattered centuries of foreign domination drained our wealth, our creativity and our drive, turning us into timid paupers. In addition, it is not true to say that social progression was impossible because of the caste system. Shivaji was a hero of the *Marath*<sup>175</sup> resistance against the Moguls and therefore he was a *chatri* through his deeds. Yet, he was born in the *sudr*<sup>176</sup> caste as were the Chola kings. Did that prevent them from moving into another occupational group? Of course not! That's a baseless argument. Besides, the caste system no longer exists, and modern means of transport allow people to travel easily if they want to start a new life elsewhere."

The old Rajput ended his reply in a harsher tone than he had started. His complexion, ordinarily coppery, darkened as blood flowed to his face. Looking straight at R, he added, "Young man, many wish that Indians could turn against their vast cultural and historical heritage and destroy it. They would like to see us despise our roots, and ultimately our own selves. Then, we would fall in a cultural and spiritual void, and eventually adopt other cultures and religions. In fact, if you look at what the most prolific film industry in the world produces, this may already be the case."

R was silent. He could feel that his host had more to say about this subject; and he was strangely curious to understand the retired Rajput's views. It was already clear that as a career military man who had spent his entire life—and sacrificed a son—to defend his country, and as a man who was so knowledgeable about history, Baldeo Singh knew that foes could strike in many ways, not just militarily.

"The caste system had its advantages and may have become too rigid over time. However, we, Indians should never feel ashamed of it. You probably know that throughout our history, we have never enslaved other people. How many nations can claim that? We never invaded other countries, nor slaughtered their people to steal their riches. Tell me, young man, how many nations can make that claim? Do you know how many Hindus were captured and taken to middle-eastern countries to be sold as slaves during the early Moslem invasions? Hundreds of thousands! Do you know what happened to those few who were able

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<sup>175</sup> Original inhabitants of the state of Maharashtra.

<sup>176</sup> Manual workers caste.

to escape along the way? To this day, their descendants, the Gypsies, still wander about in Europe,—where they had hoped to find refuge—eternally unwelcome ... obviously because of lack of compassion there.”

Singh paused for breath, still looking intensely at the young traveler, then continued, “Also, until the French revolution a little over two centuries ago, Europe had daunting social barriers too. To this day, the British have near-impregnable social classes. Do their lords socialize with the working class? And nowadays they have a new social class: that of non-white immigrants parked in urban ghettos. ... No, I do not think anyone can point a clean finger at us, young man!”

R felt contrite. He had never given much thought to these matters. But now, he understood the extent of their complexity. “I am sorry if my remarks offended you, Sir. Frankly, I was merely echoing preconceived ideas about the caste issue—ideas that float about in the capital’s middle classes.”

Baldeo Singh appeared to calm down a little. “I am happy that this conversation, although controversial, drove you to think more deeply about this. Come on, let’s go now. With all the people leaving the fair and ending their pilgrimage today it will take us at least three hours to get to Jaipur.”

Along the way back to the Pink City, R recalled what his guru had once said about the caste system. “In our scriptures, it is clearly stated that it is our deeds and not our birth that determines which caste we belong to. And don’t forget, R, that originally, castes just described people’s occupations. In addition, the various castes were interdependent, just like the limbs of a single body. The *vaishs*<sup>177</sup> were like the nation’s belly. The *sudrs*, who provided labor, were its legs. Our *chatris* were the nation’s arms, administering justice and defending against enemies. The head represented *bramhans*, who provided spiritual guidance and education.”

That night, back at the Singhs’ *haveli*, R shared some of the day’s defining moments with Mohini during their nocturnal telephone conversation. Then, gazing dreamily at a postcard showing the Statue of Liberty with New York’s skyscrapers in the background, he fell asleep, smiling at the contrast between what he had seen that day and what awaited him in rich, modern America.

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<sup>177</sup> Caste of farmers and merchants.



## CHAPTER 15

The next morning, R's first thoughts were for his extraordinary host. Baldeo Singh had expressed himself so frankly on several thorny historical and political issues. The strong opinions of the old Rajput contrasted so blatantly with the bland speeches that R was used to hearing in New Delhi. His host had spoken freely, without fear. "After all, he is retired, wealthy and has just lost his only son; therefore, he has nothing to lose," R mused as he got out of bed.

He felt stiff all over from the long, pothole-filled return trip from Pushkar to Jaipur. A prolonged session of *hath yog* and *pranayam* helped a little. The previous day had been exciting but tiring as well. He had looked forward to a good night's rest. However, a nightmare had disrupted his sleep. In that dream, he saw countless warriors being slaughtered and hundreds of women jumping into huge, flaming pyres. "Because of those conversations I had with Singh yesterday," he told himself, shaking his head to dispel the ghastly scenes.

Later that morning, after thanking Baldeo Singh for his hospitality, the young man set off on the next leg of his journey; one that would lead him to Jamnagar, in Gujarat. There, he would meet with Ashraf Ali and deliver another of Ashok's brown paper parcels.

In his air-conditioned, first class compartment,—thanking Ashok mentally once more for his generous travel allowance—he wrote several pages of notes about his stay in Rajasthan. Then, travel fatigue conspired with the hypnotic, swaying motion of the railway carriage to put him to sleep.

He woke up a couple of hours later to a growling belly. Although he had enjoyed a hearty breakfast at the Singh residence before leaving, it was now ten thirty. Nibbling a few snacks, R thought of his upcoming stop. Gujarat is located just south of Rajasthan. One of its most famous sons had been Mohandas Gandhi—the Mahatma. According to what his father had told him, Gujarat was also an incubator for the country's most successful merchants and business people. "Nature has always been on their side, Son," Mr. Sharma had explained. "You see, access to the Arabian Sea allowed buoyant trade with the Middle-East, North Africa and even Europe."

Opening his first notepad, in which he had carefully written down the names, addresses and phone numbers of Ashok's five friends, R read Ashraf Ali's address once again. His elder brother did not have Ashraf's telephone number, and no one had replied to the letter that R had sent prior to leaving Delhi. The young traveler could only hope that Ashraf still lived in Jamnagar. "I'll ask for directions at the railway station and then take an *autoriksha*," he planned, suddenly feeling an unexplainable pang of anxiety.

"So what do I know about Jamnagar?" he wondered. "Not much, in fact, except that it is one of the rare Indian towns in which the local university offers courses in *ayurved*, the ancient science of wellness." According to what he had read, those highly popular courses drew students from all over the world.

As the train passed through Madhya Pradesh—the most central of all Indian states—before heading for Gujarat, R looked out the window towards the east. Somewhere out there was the town of Ujjain, where the oldest Indian observatory still stood. "It's lucky that it survived the destructive rage of invaders," thought the young man. According to his father, that observatory, built two thousand four hundred years ago, was the place where Indian astronomers had established their first meridian of longitude.

"Such a long time ago," he marveled, "we were aware that the earth was round, not flat, and that it was not the center of the universe. And from Ujjain, our early astronomers tracked the motion of other planets in the solar system."

After a light lunch, he sat back and resumed his thoughts on the region he was about to visit. Gujarat was poles apart from Rajasthan: mercantile, not martial; prosperous, not poverty-stricken. On a historical plane, the state had witnessed the adventures of Krishna, who built Dwarka, his fortress-city, at the very end of the Kathiawar peninsula. That city, mentioned in the Bhagwat pooran, had long been derided as a myth by skeptics ... until its recent discovery.

"The Bhagwat pooran mentions that Dwarka was submerged in the ocean after Krishna's death," his father told him once. "The underwater ruins, located off the Gujarat

coast, are being explored by archeological diving teams. Of course, this research is taking place at a snail's pace, as the State's government has other priorities and concerns."

"Like what?"

"Development in general, as well as much-needed reconstruction. The last major earthquake flattened much of the Kutch region. However, many also believe that they are stalling because of the recent Hindu Moslem conflicts. You see, proving that a major Hindu scripture like the Bhagwat pooran is more historical than mythical could exacerbate religious strife there."

R felt a chill run up his spine. He was traveling by train right now, and that reminded him of the recent horrible death of Hindu pilgrims burned alive by Moslem terrorists in their train ... in Gujarat.

"The unrest is over now ... the situation has been quiet for a while," he thought, seeking to reassure himself. "And that's fortunate," he added. Indeed, he was on his way to meet Ashraf Ali ... a Moslem. "But Ashraf is far from being a fundamentalist," he smiled, remembering the plump, clean-shaven and cheerful student that Ashok had introduced him to. Ashraf then seemed a typically cool young man, even humming one of that year's most popular tunes.

He felt puzzled by the *autoriksha* driver's stunned look when he gave Ashraf's address. Starting his vehicle, the man cautioned, "Sir, if you want me to wait for you over there, you'll have to be quick. I don't usually work in that area."

A surprised R was going to decline the man's offer, but something in the driver's eyes and his tone warned him that he had better accept, at least until he met with Ashraf.

"I won't be long, I just need to meet with somebody who lives there."

The driver turned around and said, "Few people live in that area, especially after the events."

The loud, lawnmower-like sound of the *autoriksha*'s engine drowned R's question, "Which events?"

The young traveler was baffled. The earthquake that had shaken the Kutch region had struck mainly on the other side of the gulf. So what was the driver referring to? He felt a jab of apprehension. Would he find Ashraf here?

Suppressing the mounting feeling of dread that now knotted his stomach, he thought, "After all, these parcels just contain gifts that Ashok sent for his friends. I am sure that he will understand if I cannot deliver one of them."

Turning into a narrow lane bordered with mud walls, the *autoriksha* stopped abruptly in front of a battered wooden gate. Glancing nervously around, the driver muttered, "It's here. Be quick ... no, actually, pay me now. If you are not back in five minutes, I'll leave."

Shaking his head, R slapped a couple of notes on the man's outstretched palm, then turned around to scrutinize the lane. He was beginning to understand why the man felt uneasy here. The walls bordering the narrow street were covered with hate-inciting graffiti. Fist-sized rocks lay scattered along the pavement. He sensed desolation, conflict ... death maybe. The recent Hindu Moslem clashes, which had caused hundreds of deaths, came to his mind.

"Could it be that ...?" he started to wonder, when the gate he had knocked upon opened a little.

An old woman clad in a black burka showed her wizened, suspicious face. R noticed that a thick, rusty chain kept the gate—that appeared to have been painted green a long time ago—firmly attached to the side post.

"What do you want?" she screeched. "No one lives here anymore."

"Salam Aleikum," the young man saluted, unperturbed by this hostile welcome. "I am looking for Ashraf Ali. My brother was a good friend of his when they were both at university in Delhi about seven years ago."

The old woman did not reply to his traditional greeting, but her gaze appeared to soften a little. She scrutinized R's face, trying to decide whether he was trustworthy. "What was that brother's name?" she barked.

R felt uncomfortable in the face of such unexpected hostility. Nevertheless, he replied gently, "Ashok. Ashok Sharma."

The old woman bent her head as if to peer deeply into her fading memories, then she raised her hand. "Yes, I remember. My son Ashraf mentioned that name once or twice."

Her son! R felt relieved; he would soon deliver Ashraf's parcel. For a split second, his mind wandered to the packages. "These mysterious gifts! Does Ashraf's also contain a message? Will he be less secretive than Baldeo Singh?"

"Where is he? I have a gift for him," R said, pulling the brown paper parcel out of his backpack and showing it to Ashraf's mother, hoping that his gesture would reassure the suspicious woman.

Her expression hardened abruptly. "Ashraf no longer lives here, young man. He left for Mumbai with his wife and children several months ago," she snapped.

Mumbai, the economic capital of the country! The main city of the state of Maharashtra was not on his itinerary. What should he do now? "Can I have his address, please? I may have to send him this parcel by mail."

Without a word, and after peering deep into his eyes once again, Ashraf's mother slammed the wooden gate shut, leaving a startled R to wonder, "Did I say anything wrong?"

Discouraged, he began to turn around when the door opened again and the old woman's bony, wrinkled fingers emerged, holding a piece of paper.

She slammed the gate again and locked it as soon as R grabbed the note. He read the lines scribbled on it. It was a Mumbai address.

"Are you ready to leave now?" the driver asked in a shrill voice, glancing nervously over his shoulder at three bearded men walking towards them from the other end of the alley. The trio wore black turbans and *kurta-pajamas*, and all of them held shoulder-length *lathis*<sup>178</sup>.

As the danger was almost palpable, R climbed hurriedly into the *autoriksha* and the driver spun the vehicle around. As they sped out of the alley and onto the main road, R glanced back at the three men. They had stopped walking and seemed to stare at the departing vehicle. "Retreating was definitely the right move," he thought, sighing with relief.

At the train station, the young traveler spent some time reflecting on the recent events. "There may be more to this than meets the eye. I am sure that Ashok is not involved in anything illegal, but what if this has something to do with politics. After all, Baldeo Singh seemed very influential, and many of those he met with talked about politics. That old Rajput has strong opinions too. ... No, on second thoughts, I don't think so; Ashok would never risk implicating me in anything risky. If that were the case, I am sure that he would warn me first. ... Then, he *did* warn me to be cautious in his email ... and he did not bother to inform me that he had asked our guru to teach me all these new concepts. I wonder ..."

He took his decision quickly: he would go to Mumbai to deliver Ashraf's parcel. His curiosity was now turned on full blast, taking precedence over his distaste for traveling through India. Besides, Ashok had provided more than enough money to handle contingencies. "First, though, I will make a brief detour to visit Dwarka. *Punditji* suggested that I do so when I told him that I would be going to Jamnagar."

About a hundred miles separated Jamnagar from Dwarka. Arriving there late in the evening, R spent the night in a clean-looking hotel. The following morning, on the manager's advice, he rented a bicycle to ride to the coast.

At the archeologists' camp, he felt an eerie, hair-raising shiver radiate all over his body. "This is the same soil that Krishna trod upon thousands of years ago," he thought.

"Hello. I am interested in what you are doing here. How is everything going so far?" R yelled at one of the workers.

"Not bad. Look for yourself," came the reply as the man pointed distractedly to the pile of artifacts drying in the sun, still wet from sea water. "The divers just brought these up."

With the man's permission, R took a few photos of pottery fragments and pieces of stone sculptures that had adorned the houses of the submerged city.

"It must be great to work on a site like this one."

"You bet. Our work here is probably as important for Indians than the discovery of Troy was for Europeans. The discovery of Dwarka not only proves the existence of a city that

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<sup>178</sup> Long, wooden sticks used by police to control riots.  
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was considered mythical, but it also confirms that the Mahabharat and the Bhagwat pooran are historical texts, not works of fiction."

"Perhaps these should be taught in our history classes, then," R concluded, waving 'thank you' to the man as he moved on.

On the way back to the hotel, R remembered what his maternal grandfather, Homraj Mishra had once told him during one of his rare visits to Bodhgaya, many years ago. "R, the Ramayan and the Mahabharat are *itihas*, historical texts. Don't ever believe those who say that they are fictional. Besides, history should not just be a collection of facts listed in chronological order in a boring book. And who decides which historical facts are worth preserving? You see, for us, history is about the teachings that we can gather from the past—not just what can be deduced from the study of ruins or fragments of pottery and sculptures. History's lessons can help us to live the present better and pave the way to an improved future. That is why texts like the Ramayan and the Mahabharat are still so popular after several millennia: they are full of teachings that are applicable even today. And that is why our civilization, our culture are so resilient. You see, in times of intense hardships endured at the hands of invaders, we rallied around the perennial teachings of Sanatan Dharm, which are embodied in those historical texts."

Although he felt exalted by the site's importance, R left Dwarka a little disappointed. He had hoped to see more relics of the submerged city. "Unfortunately, the divers have not brought back a lot from the seabed yet. To view the entire city, I would need to dive in the ocean."

Along the way to Mumbai, he stopped briefly at Porbandar, another historical town. Being in Gujarat, he felt the urge to visit the place where Mahatma Gandhi had grown up. As the detour would not take a lot of time, he fulfilled his wish.

There, he succumbed to temptation in front of the shop of one of the local jewelers. He purchased a pair of lovely silver *payals* for Mohini. They were relatively inexpensive, and therefore, he did not feel too guilty about spending Ashok's money in that way. Besides, he could envision how happy his girlfriend would be.

The train traveled northeast at first. Leaving the Kathiawar peninsula, it passed close to the antique, 'Indus Valley' city of Lothal, then made its way towards Ahmedabad. There, R transferred onto another train heading for Mumbai. He felt a pinch of regret thinking of Gir Park, the sanctuary of the few remaining Indian lions. It was too far in the south to visit. "I am not on vacation. I should carry on towards Mumbai without any further stopovers. After all, my goal is to leave poor, kneeling India for the world's richest, greatest and most beautiful country ... soon ... very soon!" he thought, smiling smugly.

As the train took him closer to the capital of the state of Maharashtra, his thoughts wandered to the Saurashtr region, which is located on the main Gujarat peninsula. To his knowledge, no other place better symbolized the impact that the rivalry between small kingdoms had on the overall fragmentation of the country. Saurashtr, which meant hundred kingdoms, included in fact nearly two hundred small realms that remained independent, never joining the British Empire. "In spite of their large number," R reflected, "they were unable to unite to kick the British and the Moslem Sultans out of Gujarat. Nor were they able to join forces and defend the coastal towns of Daman and Diu against the Portuguese. The latter conquered both towns to erect forts that protected their lucrative colonial activities until they left. The profits they earned from those bases were so important that the Portuguese refused to follow the British example in 1947. Instead they hung on to their outposts until the Indian army eventually forced them out in 1961."

R also recalled that Gujarat was where thousands of Parsi<sup>179</sup> refugees had landed hundreds of years ago, fleeing persecution and death in their native Persia, then in the process of converting to Islam. "And last but not least, the landing site of the first British East India Company envoys was in Gujarat."

He scribbled a few lines in his notepad. "Was India ever one country, as it is trying to be today? Although Hindu emperors like Bharat, Ashok, Chandragupt and the Chola dynasty ruled large parts of the peninsula over the last few millennia, neither they, nor the Moguls, nor the British were able to control all of the subcontinent at all times. In the past, this

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<sup>179</sup> Natives of ancient Persia, Zoroastrian by religion.  
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country was a collection of disunited kingdoms, linguistic and ethnic groups, not a united and homogeneous country like so many others are—like the great country I am going to live in: America!”

He paused, thoughtful. Yogish Doobay had a different view on that. The pundit did not feel that the country's social fragmentation was an insurmountable problem. “R, an important bond between the people of Bharat has always been Sanatan Dharm, this exceptional way of life and spiritual approach that allows our numerous and diverse religious paths to co-exist respectfully under one over-arching umbrella ... knowing that all these paths lead to the same goal: unity with the divine. Another common link that cements this diverse population even today is Sanskrit. It is at the root of most of the major languages of this country.”

He then recalled a remark made by Vikram Varma in relation to India's divisions. “With all our ethnic, linguistic, regional, cultural, caste and other differences, it should not surprise us that it is more important for our current politicians to be excellent negotiators and deal makers than charismatic and inspiring leaders. It is indeed a humongous task to maintain any amount of cohesion in a democracy of a billion people composed of thousands of distinct, and often divergent, interest groups.”

On that last thought, he dozed off, missing his scheduled phone conversation with Mohini.

## **Part 4**

### **Fantasy and Grief in Mumbai**

## CHAPTER 16

R watched the rare trees go by as the train sped towards Mumbai. During the night, his sleep had been far from restful; more nightmares had plagued him. "So many new sights and sensations; extreme differences with New Delhi," was the explanation he ventured.

And there were those new questions too. Why did Ashok want him to travel across the whole country to deliver gifts to friends with whom he had clearly lost contact since their university days? One of them was dead and Ashok was not even aware of it. "Why did Ashok conceal his message to Vijay inside a wooden elephant? Who is that mysterious 'person' Baldeo Singh refused to talk about? What do the other parcels contain? Why doesn't Ashok admit that he is sharing his life with someone?" Feeling increasingly frustrated with all those unanswered questions, he turned his gaze outside, wondering what other surprises awaited him.

His thoughts eventually turned to the parcels. Even if the address that Ashraf Ali's mother had given was correct, and he did meet with her son in Mumbai, there were still three other persons on his list: Jeremy Souza in Goa, Nandan Muttu in Madurai and Gautam Toolsi in Bodhgaya.

"These parcels probably all contain the same thing: an elephant-shaped paperweight." He felt confident about that, having pressed and felt the parcels several times between his fingers, stopping short, however, of opening the brown paper wrappings. "I am dying to find out what this is all about, but I won't betray Ashok's trust ... never!" Opening one of the packages, reading the concealed message and replacing it inside the wooden elephant would have been so easy; however, that would have been contrary to the *dharm* that his parents had painstakingly instilled in him. Under their—and his—strict code of ethics, opening a present destined to someone else was unthinkable.

"And," he wondered, "Ashok has offered me such a great gift. Initially, I resented having to travel through dirty, disease-ridden, dusty and depressing India. I felt that this journey would be one long, distasteful chore. Now, however, I must admit that there were a few enthralling moments in Rajasthan and Gujarat."

The digital camera, with its high capacity memory, would allow him to take many more pictures during the rest of the trip. At this stage, the mix of photos he had taken was equally balanced between 'repulsive' and 'picturesque' ones. In addition, he now spent more and more time jotting down travel notes. "In any case, this journey is now much less boring with all those puzzling questions."

In Jamnagar, he was able to send an email and a few attached photos to Ashok. He had also read his elder brother's reply; Ashok expressed pain at the loss of his friend Vijay and warned him to be cautious. "Danger and even death lurks at every street corner over there, little brother. In Los Angeles, we don't often hear about India, but just a few days ago the media reported another terrorist incident. Apparently, a small band of fanatics executed several bus passengers. When I hear such news, and after hearing of Vijay's death, I regret having asked you to undertake this trip. So, just to reassure me that you are okay, please do email me after each of your stops."

"Again 'little brother' and 'we'," R moaned. "When will he understand that I am an adult now. And who else is he referring to? Maybe I should simply ask him that in my next email. Yes, why hesitate? All he can do is deny it."

Reclining on the soft seat and closing his eyes, he then experienced a flood of memories from his stopovers in Varanasi, Jaipur, Pushkar, Jamnagar, Dwarka, and Porbandar. All these places were so different and yet, in spite of their poverty and grime, they each had a unique flavor.

The train sped towards tumultuous and cosmopolitan Mumbai; a city recently flooded again due the monsoon rains ... and blocked drains. So many people from all corners of India had made it their home over the years, turning it into the subcontinent's economic capital.

Mumbai was also a busy port city, funneling a substantial proportion of India's imports and exports. Bollywood, the Indian capital of cinema, which produced more movies than any other film industry in the world according to Mohini, was also located there.

The thought of Bollywood reminded him of the conversation he had with his girlfriend that morning. It had not been easy to explain why he had missed their customary phone chat the night before.

"I was exhausted by all the traveling ... I don't have any other excuse. Come on, Mo, give me a break, will you."

Faced with a prolonged, hostile silence on the other side of the line, he promptly added, in a honeyed tone, "I bought you a small gift along the way."

"What is it?" came the excited reply. Gone was the sulkiness, replaced by near-childish eagerness—just what R had hoped.

"It's a surprise. You'll see it, or rather, you'll wear it soon," he whispered huskily, imagining the sound of the *paya's*' tiny silver bells at each of his pretty girlfriend's footsteps.

"I am not talking to you, R! First you forget to call me, and now a secret?" she protested, pretending to sulk again.

Avoiding any mention of Jamnagar's tense atmosphere and the scars obviously left there by religious strife, R then narrated the most recent part of his journey to her, explaining why he had to change his travel plans.

"You are going to Mumbai? Why didn't you say so earlier, Hero? That's fantastic! We'll talk about it tonight." For once, Mohini hung up first, having to rush to catch the bus to university.

The regular, swaying motion of the train launched R into another daydream. He started thinking about Gaetri—again. In fact, memories of her pretty face and her slim, shapely figure haunted him daily since he left Varanasi. The pundit's daughter had established a foothold in his thoughts and feelings—a deeper one than he cared to admit. "Why is such a lovely girl interested in becoming a Sanskrit teacher? She should get married and make someone very happy," he thought, trying to purge himself of the unsettling feelings he was beginning to experience for his guru's daughter.

"Mohini loves me; she trusts me. I should not let my mind dwell on Gaetri," he told himself. "Yet, she is so different from Mohini. She is confident, talented, intelligent, learned ... and beautiful. Her beauty is serene, reserved; as if she prefers to hide it instead of flaunting it like other girls ... like Mohini?"

That last, near-sacrilegious thought having slipped past his mental vigilance, R's musings ended abruptly. In an attempt to flush out the guilt he now felt, R turned his thoughts to the historic and religious sites of Maharashtra.

"It's a pity that I cannot visit Ajanta and Ellora; *Gurudji* would have been happy to know that I went to those spectacular pilgrimage sites. Unfortunately, they are located in the middle of the State, hundreds of miles away from this route to Mumbai."

Doobay's words still rang through his ears, "Dwarka, Rameshwaram and Gaya are close to the towns where you need to stop. Visit them as a pilgrim if you can, and turn your *yatra* into a *tirthyatra*. If you do go to these special places, remember to look around you; listen and try to understand why millions of followers of Sanatan Dharm keep coming, year after year. If you come across other sacred sites, try to visit them with that purpose too."

So far, he had added Pushkar and Dwarka to his 'visited' *tirthyatra* list; a list that had started with Varanasi itself. He knew that Ellora and Ajanta were stunning, and although he was still in a hurry to leave for America, he would gladly have paid a brief visit to those extraordinary sites. He knew that pilgrims flocked there in large numbers not only to offer their prayers, but also to admire the hundreds of monumental sculptures carved in the rocky hillsides and caves.

As a child, he had listened to his maternal grandfather talk about the Ellora caves, which the retired schoolteacher had once visited on a pilgrimage. "The site is nearly two miles long and includes over thirty temples carved directly out of the Deccan plateau rock. Those Hindu, Buddhist and Jain sites are the masterpieces of thousands of inspired monks and talented craftsmen who toiled devotedly over a period spanning several centuries. The hundreds of sculptures of Ajanta and Ellora describe scenes from the Ramayan, the Mahabharat and the life of Krishna."

His grandfather had also told R about the most impressive of Ellora's monuments, "The Kailash temple, dedicated to Shiv, is the world's largest monolithic sculpture. It was completed about 1,300 years ago. Nearly two hundred thousand tons of rock had to be carted out of the site over several years of work."



On his notepad, R scribbled a few lines, noting that Ellora illustrated perfectly what Yogish Doobay had said about the respect for diversity that made Sanatan Dharm so special. "Many rivers, all leading to the same ocean," the pundit had said. "Indeed," R wrote, "since its creation to this day, Ellora welcomed Hindu, Buddhist and Jain pilgrims alike, without any discrimination, quarrel, persecution, or religious massacre."

He looked out the window again. "Mumbai and the surrounding region also showed the same tolerance. Jews and Zoroastrians who fled persecution in ancient times found refuge here. This part of India remained a safe haven for them even during the Mogul period, thanks to the fierce resistance of the Marath people."

Once, his grandfather had narrated the story of the most famous of the Maraths. "Although he was born in a *sudr* family, Shivaji was rewarded by the title of Maharaj for his unflinching bravery and for leading the Maraths to numerous victories against the Moguls."

A quick glance at his watch confirmed that the train would enter Mumbai's railway station in about half an hour—provided it was on time, of course. That led him to think again about the great city.

"The shining lights of the country's financial capital draws destitute peasants from the surrounding areas just like a magnet attracts iron scraps, or Divali firecrackers and sweets captivate small children. They come alone, traveling on foot, their meager possessions bundled in a piece of cloth on their shoulder; or with their family, perched on a wooden cart pulled by a skinny buffalo. On the other hand, there are those who come from the country's large towns, by train or airplane, armed with their degrees, or with bundles of rupees to invest in the most prosperous of Indian cities. All those people come here hoping to build a better life. Some succeed admirably, and become famous film stars adored by millions of fans, for example. However, for each of those exceptionally lucky migrants, thousands of others survive scarcely better than in the desolate villages they left behind. In fact, the vast majority of newcomers end up swelling the ranks of the city's slum dwellers; destitute people who emerge every morning from tiny, makeshift shelters in search of their daily *chapati*."

In spite of that, Mumbai remained the undisputed industrial and financial capital of the country. According to Sridhar, a friend of his who had recently visited Mumbai, the great city was also an exciting and entertaining place. "Just make sure you don't get run over in the crazy traffic, and don't get in the way of the local criminal organizations. Those powerful mafias purportedly dip their tentacles in numerous activities, not all of which are above reproach."

The train slowed down. R got up and rinsed his face in the compartment's tiny washroom. Then, a few minutes of *pranayam* boosted his energy level. Revitalized by the intense breathing exercises, he looked out curiously at the Chatrapati Shivaji railway station. Wisely, he waited for the crowd on the platform to thin down before stepping off the train. He followed the human mass making its way slowly towards the exits like a tidal wave.

R noticed the strong presence of security forces in the station. "They must be expecting another terrorist train bombing attempt; there have been so many of these cowardly attacks against innocent workers; against men and women who travel daily from their overpopulated high rise apartments to their place of work," he thought bitterly.

However, the people in the station appeared unconcerned about the heightened security, hurrying to catch a bus or an *autoriksha*, or simply walking to their final destination. He remembered watching the TV interview of a smiling young woman shortly after the last Mumbai bombings that claimed dozens of innocent lives. "If we don't take the train to go to work," she said, "our families will certainly starve. On the other hand, there cannot be a bombing everyday."

He had questioned his father about those continuing terrorist attacks, "So many deaths, so many wounded people, and this has been going on for decades! Why hasn't the government eradicated all those local terrorist cells yet?"

"You want the truth? It's because there are so many of us," was Mr. Sharma's disillusioned reply. "Our lives are not valuable enough for our leaders to invest the resources needed to wipe out terrorists once and for all. What if a few dozen or even a few hundred people are killed by terrorist acts every year in a country of one billion? There will always be plenty of voters left!"

R turned his gaze up at the imposing walls and ceiling. The gothic-style railway station, built under British rule, was initially named after Queen Victoria. Its bizarre sculptures—which included gargoyles—contrasted singularly with its current patrons. “It’s as if this building had been dropped here by an alien spaceship,” R thought, grinning.

Outside, a forest of arms hailed the few available *autorikshas*. He gave up quickly. “I could wait here for hours. Besides, some exercise will do me a lot of good after all those hours sitting in the train.”

As he walked, his eyes soaked in the images of Mumbai the great. It was his first visit here, and the only images he had seen of the city were from newspaper and magazine photos, and the few Hindi movies that he had watched.

As such, this was the heart of the Indian movie industry; the most prolific on Earth in terms of new releases. Mohini was a great fan of Bollywood; she could name so many actors, movies and hit songs. However, he was at the other extreme of the spectrum. His parents disapproved of modern Bollywood movies. “Too much violence, too many erotic scenes, and excessive foreign cultural influences,” was their curt explanation when, at eighteen, he had demanded to know the reason behind the restrictions imposed during his childhood. Not that he disagreed with them; most of those movies were just modified remakes anyway.

He also understood why Professor Varma had allowed Mohini to spend so much time immersed in the fantasy world of Bollywood movies. “He probably could not deprive her of an escape route from the grief caused by her mother’s untimely demise. Those mind-numbing movies may actually have saved her from depression.”

As he looked around, in search of an *autoriksha*, he recalled Doobay’s words. “We try to see the divine in all. Don’t forget that the whole of creation is within God. That is why we accept most forms of reverence. Some prefer to salute the divine through water, others through air or light; still others find it easier to relate to the divine through human-like deities such as Shiv, Vishnu and others. During this *yatra*, observe carefully, try to see through the obvious, and reach out to the ultimate, underlying reality. During this trip, you will come across many unpleasant sights and sensations, some of which may seem unbearable. Examine your reactions through the light of what I have taught you.”

As R’s gaze fell on the aluminum-sheeted roofs of a few dozen grimy, cardboard-walled shelters, he knew immediately that this was one of Mumbai’s numerous slums. In spite of several governmental initiatives to eradicate these eyesores, they never seemed to vanish forever. “Because the poor keep flocking to the big city, and they have no place to live,” he guessed.

The dwellings he was looking at were ironically aligned with two billboards displaying garishly colored posters of Bollywood’s latest hit movies. “And yet, images of Mumbai’s slums are practically never shown in those movies,” he thought, watching a few kids play on the narrow, muddy path that snaked in between the shacks. Tattered rags of indiscernible color barely covering their skinny bodies, the children nonetheless laughed and shouted as they kicked an empty plastic bottle around.

R felt that this was an ideal opportunity to test the techniques of detachment that he had learned from his guru. However, as he closed his eyes to concentrate, he was suddenly forced to stop breathing. A breeze blowing towards him from the slum brought very unpleasant odors indeed.

Shaken, his eyes now wide open, R decided to take a few pictures to remind himself of Mumbai’s stark contrasts. However, embarrassed by the children’s uncomprehending stares, he promptly put back the camera in his pocket.

The fetid odor arising from this mass of precarious human shelters made him think of Lothal<sup>180</sup>, the ancient city that he had passed on his way from Gujarat, “What on earth happened to the civilization that spawned cities so well planned that they had public sewer systems to carry away waste waters from the houses? That was thousands of years ago ... and look at us now!” he wondered bitterly.

Shaking his head, he resumed his walk. “At least in America, I won’t come across such scenes. Ashok was right to leave. It has been decades since we won our independence

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<sup>180</sup> An ancient Indian city.  
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and yet our leaders have not been able to eradicate poverty ... although a few have tried. As for ordinary people, we talk and gripe a lot—but we don't *do* much!"

A few minutes later, along Abdul Rehman Street, R finally came across an empty *autoriksha* and slumped into it with a sigh of relief. He was beginning to feel hot and sweaty under the sweltering Mumbai sun, breathing the coastal city's humid air. However, the driver did not seem to understand R's Hindi and the young traveler did not speak a word of Marathi<sup>181</sup>. The problem was solved when he handed the piece of paper with Ashraf's address.

Without a word, the driver deftly maneuvered his fuming and noisy motorized tricycle through the dense Mumbai traffic, narrowly missing two collisions and causing his passenger to skip a few heartbeats. A short while later, after a drive north along Mohamed Ali Road, the man stopped his vehicle at an intersection with a narrow alley. A dazed R climbed out and paid the fare, then turned towards the lane. A few dozen feet away was a tall wooden gate towards which the *autoriksha* driver pointed. "At last!" the young traveler thought. "This must be Ashraf Ali's new home in Mumbai."

Suddenly, in one of the yards, a dog barked several times. R froze. He saw what had caused the animal's ire. In the alley, two men stood talking in the shade of a tree. They appeared so intensely focused on their exchange that they did not even turn around when the *autoriksha* sputtered away.

Their demeanor suggested that something shady was going on; they were too close to each other for a normal conversation, and they seemed to be staring at the contents of the larger man's hands. Needled by his natural inquisitiveness, R moved cautiously closer for a better view, then stopped. He could hear his father's words again, "Curiosity can be lethal. Remember the story of the monkey and the woodcutters that we read in the Panchtantr? As soon as the workers left the work site on their lunch break, the curious animal removed the wedge placed in the tree trunk ... and you know what happened to it then. In my government job too, it's better to be satisfied with what you are meant to know to avoid any trouble."

From where he was, R saw the bigger man move back slightly after handing something to the person facing him. Then, he waited, as if expecting a reply. The other man looked at what he now held in his hands, then he nodded. It seemed to R that it was a bundle of banknotes, but he could not be sure. The smaller man turned away and stepped briskly towards the other end of the lane. "I am lucky that he did not come this way," R thought. As the departing man moved out of the shade into the bright daylight, R noticed that he wore a uniform. "It's not a policeman's nor a watchman's uniform. It could be a customs officer's."

The second man emerged from the shade. He was stocky, and appeared more muscular than fat, although it was hard to tell as he wore a loose-fitting, white *kurta-pajama* complemented by a skull cap of the same color. His garments contrasted starkly with his dark chocolate complexion and thick, wooly black beard.

R's heart missed a beat when the man opened the gate. "No! This cannot be Ashraf," he hoped, leaning against the cool concrete wall. "If it is him, what transaction just took place? Did Ashraf give money to a customs officer? If so, why? ... Was it a bribe?"

He had no choice but to step forward towards the wooden gate, hoping that the *autoriksha* driver had been wrong about the address. Unfortunately, '114' was indeed the number painted in dark green on the gate. Deeply disturbed, R absentmindedly grabbed a rusty piece of iron hanging on a rope and knocked on the gate with it.

"Who is it?" a masculine voice growled.

Taking a deep breath, R shouted, "My name is R. Sharma. I am the brother of Ashok Sharma who used to be a student at the University of Delhi. I am looking for his friend Ashraf Ali."

The door opened and the same man who had just entered appeared. It was indeed Ashraf! He had grown a beard and put on about forty pounds, but it was the same marketing student who had said that war was not his thing and that he just wanted to be rich. "From the looks of this neighborhood, it seems that Ashraf has not achieved his goal yet," R guessed.

"Hey! It really is Ashok's little brother. You have changed so much, I would not have recognized you. Come in."

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<sup>181</sup> Regional language spoken mostly in the state of Maharashtra.  
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His tone was genial, just like R remembered. "Yes, it's him all right," he thought again, unsure what to think. As the heavy wooden gate slammed shut behind them, the young traveler felt a shiver run down his spine as he wondered what would happen in Mumbai.

## CHAPTER 17

R followed his host across a dozen feet of paved courtyard to the veranda of a small house whose darkened walls hid its age well. If Ashok's friend had indeed bribed a customs officer, R did not want to remain there very long.

A disquieting thought flashed through his mind, "What if I get arrested along with him for corrupting a public servant? With a criminal record, I would never be able to emigrate to America. Why on earth did you send me on this silly—and potentially dangerous—errand, Ashok?"

"Come in, my friend, and sit down," Ashraf said amicably, pointing to an old rattan armchair. Yelling a few words in Gujarati<sup>182</sup> through the verandah door, he slumped into another chair, whose creaky sounds suggested that it was well past its normal retirement age. "I am happy to see you after all this time, R. It was over seven years ago, right?"

"Yes, I remember that day very well, when Ashok took me to the university and introduced me to his five best friends."

"The gang of six! The good old days." Suddenly Ashraf paused, his black, furry eyebrows meeting in a frown. "But what brings you here? Ashok had my Jamnagar address, not this one. Is he all right?"

"Oh yes, he is fine. He has been living in Los Angeles for the past six years," R proudly replied.

"I remember that he wrote to me soon after our graduation to announce that he had won a scholarship. So he stayed there?"

"Yes ... and I hope to join him soon."

Ashraf nodded. Then, as he opened his mouth to say something, a woman came in bearing a tray with two cups of steaming chai. She was covered from head to toe with a black burka, and a veil shrouded her face. As she laid the tray on the rattan table, R noticed that her forearms were covered with gold bracelets. Without a word, and without once making eye contact with either of the men, she left the room.

As he sipped the syrupy, cardamom-flavored chai, R lifted his eyes towards his host. Ashraf was enjoying his tea, holding the tiny porcelain cup between thick, hairy fingers covered with jewel-studded gold rings. Draining his cup, R burped politely, then said, "Ashraf ..."

"My friends call me Ashraf Bhai<sup>183</sup>," his host interrupted with an indulgent smile.

"Ashraf Bhai, Ashok asked me to deliver this parcel to you in person."

Ashraf undid the wrapping paper, and held up an elephant-shaped paperweight—an exact replica of the one destined to Vijay Singh!

Uncovering large, square teeth between his thick mustache and his wooly black beard, Ashraf started to laugh quietly, his voluminous belly shaking. Then, just like Baldeo Singh, he twisted off the elephant's head and extracted a rolled up sheet of paper. As he read the lines scribbled on the note, R noticed that his host's thick lips gradually formed a sardonic smile.

Ashraf lifted his eyes towards his guest briefly, then got up. Taking both the elephant and the message with him, he moved swiftly to an adjoining room without a word of explanation.

When he returned less than a minute later, he cleared his throat, then asked, "Thank you for bringing this to me, my friend. I do hope that you will stay a day or two with us; there is so much to see in Mumbai. Am I right to surmise that you have never visited our splendid city?"

It was an Indian tradition to offer such hospitality to friends and acquaintances, yet R did not welcome this particular offer. Although he was impatient for a chance to question Ashraf about the message, and the reason for which Ashok chose to conceal it inside a hollow paperweight, doubts about his host's activities now roamed his mind.

Tactfully, he therefore declined the offer—by accepting it in part. "Thank you, Ashraf Bhai, but I cannot stay long. You see, I am now late because of the detour I made to look for you in Jamnagar. I was lucky to meet with your mother, who gave me your address. I therefore need to leave tomorrow afternoon at the latest to make up for that delay."

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<sup>182</sup> Main language of the state of Gujarat.

<sup>183</sup> Brother.

Ashraf did not flinch, ... nor did he insist. "Are you planning to leave for America as soon as you get back to Delhi?"

"No, but I need to deliver similar parcels to your common friends ... and they are scattered all over India."

R then told him about Ashok's 'mission'. He explained why he had not been able to meet with Vijay Singh in Jaipur, and described the rest of his itinerary.

"This is so exciting! Good old Ashok. He always had such original ideas," Ashraf said as he burst out laughing.

R noticed that he had not even acknowledged Vijay's death. "They were probably not very close friends," he deduced.

"So how are you doing? I remember that you wanted a commercial career after graduating."

"That's right, and now I run a small import-export business. Mumbai offers tons of opportunities to people who want to succeed."

As he said that, Ashraf's smile was somewhat defiant, and that reply made R feel even more uneasy. "An 'import-export' business? Then it could indeed be a customs officer that I saw him talking to earlier. Did he bribe that man?"

He wanted to ask the big man whether he had left Jamnagar to set up his business in Mumbai ... or because of a murkier reason. However, a little voice deep down inside him advised him against it.

The day was still in its infancy, and Ashraf invited his young guest to leave his backpack in one of the rooms of the small house before going on a tour of the fabulous city of Mumbai. "It must be the bedroom of one of Ashraf's kids," R guessed from the drawings pinned to the walls. "Another good reason not to hang around here too long; my presence will definitely cause them some inconvenience."

Ashraf appeared relaxed, but R's nerves were as tight as the strings of a *tanpura*<sup>184</sup> when they opened the wooden gate. The would-be emigrant nearly expected to see a horde of policemen waiting to nab them, then cart them to the nearest police station, where confessions would be pummeled out of them with *lathis*.

Nothing like that happened, but Ashraf noticed his anxious look. "You look tense and tired, R. You probably had a long and tedious journey; train compartments are so crowded these days. Listen, it's not yet lunchtime, but why don't we have a snack? It'll make you feel better, and we can then visit the city's scenic spots at leisure."

R refrained from pointing out that he had traveled very comfortably in a first-class air-conditioned compartment. Instead, he thanked his host with a polite smile. "But what about your work, Ashraf Bhai? I do not want to disrupt your schedule."

"I have nothing urgent to do today. I need to settle a few matters tomorrow, but I can do that along the way. Don't worry, I am doing well—otherwise I would not have been able to afford a house. In Mumbai, newcomers are lucky if they can afford a decent apartment."

They went first to the Bhuleshwar Bazaar—a gargantuan, open-aired market. Deep inside this industrious beehive, Ashraf stopped in front of an eatery and pointed to a couple of free chairs. R waved a few flies away as he sat down. The surrounding din was deafening. He had a sympathetic thought for the merchants who spent their entire working day there. "Their ears must continue to buzz all night long."

Powerful odors permeated the *bazaar*. Surmounting his revulsion, R gulped down his snack as fast as he could. "The faster we get out of here, the better I will feel," he thought. Having chosen a vegetarian *thali*<sup>185</sup>, he carefully ingested only what appeared well cooked ... to avoid the kind of travel inconveniences that his mother had warned him about. Ashraf, without any comment about R's choice, enjoyed some spicy, yogurt-marinated chicken and lamb; *muglai*<sup>186</sup>-style.

"I'd better take a final precaution," R thought after the meal, anxiously eyeing the swarms of flies that buzzed around. He stopped at the nearest *paan* stall and bought one. "The antiseptic properties of this mix of quicklime and spices could save me from traveler's diarrhea."

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<sup>184</sup> Stringed musical instrument similar to a sitar.

<sup>185</sup> A complete meal on a plate, with various cooked vegetable preparations served with several choices of rice or flat breads.

<sup>186</sup> Mongolian/Mogul.

The market itself held no particular attraction for R, so he politely smiled at Ashraf whenever the latter looked back at him from time to time. Conversation was near impossible because of the high level of background noise, so they just walked without a word towards the nearest exit. As a fair compensation for putting up with the inconvenience of the crowded and smelly bazaar, R took a few photos. "I'll definitely send this one to Ashok, and if he shows it to his American girlfriend," he thought gleefully, "she will never, ever think of coming to India." In the particular photo he had in mind, an itinerant ear cleaner plied his trade on a little boy who winced and squirmed under his father's severe gaze.

Ashraf, however, had moved on, and R hurried to catch up with the burly man in front of whom the crowd hurriedly opened up. "I'd better not lose track of him. I left my backpack in the room, and I would not even be able to find my way out of here, let alone return to his house."

They took a local train at the Marine Line station and got off two stops later, close to the famous Chowpatty Beach. R had heard Mohini talk about it so many times. With Juhu Beach, it was one of those famous Mumbai landmarks where movies were often shot. Mohini had seen Chowpatty Beach so many times on the silver screen that she was able to describe it to R as if she had been there in person. Looking around him, he had to admit that her description closely matched the actual place.

Ashraf interrupted his musings with a 'tourist-guide' comment, "Over there towards the east, on the other side of the bay, you can see Malabar Hill," he said, pointing contemptuously towards the site with his chin.

"I read somewhere that Mumbai's remaining Zoroastrians still use it for their funeral rites. Is that right, Ashraf Bhai?"

The bulky, bearded friend of Ashok spat. "Do you also know that these idolaters leave their dead on platforms so that vultures can clean the corpses of their flesh? Thankfully, they are nearly extinct."

"You mean the vultures, of course, Ashraf Bhai?"

A sudden sea breeze whipped up a cloud of dust from the beach, and R wondered if the expression of disgust that appeared on his host's face was due to that, or because of his feelings about the Parsis' funeral rites.

He tried to joke about it, hoping for comments that would tell him more about the kind of person Ashraf had become. "That's very ecological. But the remaining vultures must be overworked if the Parsi population grew as much as the rest of our population did."

Ashraf's smile seemed sinister. "Well, fortunately for them, the Zoroastrians' numbers are dwindling fast ... just like Mumbai's Jews."

R mulled over his host's reply, recalling what he knew about those two communities. Both had fled persecutions and death in their countries of origin and had found a safe haven in India.

On the beach, in front of them, a portly, middle-aged man was showing his children how to fly a *patang*<sup>187</sup>. Proud of his progeny, and showing off his pot-belly—an unambiguous sign of prosperity in India—he tugged at the string holding the butterfly shaped kite, keeping it flying against the sea breeze. Suddenly, as he took a few steps backwards, he tripped on a sandcastle built by some other kids, falling flat on his back. His two boys and their little sister did their best to stifle their laughter, but Ashraf, joining others on the beach, expressed his mirth freely.

Looking around, R could confirm that Chowpatty Beach was a favorite meeting point for young lovers; but there were also other kinds of people there, happy to get away from the noise and pollution of the nearby city. Grandparents kept an eye on kids as they played cricket or flew kites. Entire families picnicked in spite of the occasional clouds of dust and sand, stirred by gusts of wind. A few stray dogs drifted between the groups of picnickers, hoping for a few scraps. Here and there, empty plastic bags and bottles rolled, blown by the sea breeze. At the other end of the beach, a small crowd of listeners gathered around a political party's representative as he yelled to the audience from his platform.

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<sup>187</sup> Kite.

R felt relaxed, and he wondered whether the radiant, sunny weather and the sea breeze had the same soothing effect on Ashraf. This could be a good time to ask his host a few questions.

"Ashraf Bhai, I hope the message that I conveyed brought you some good news."

An amused smile appeared on his host's lips. The businessman looked at him with a strange twinkle in his eyes. Waving away a fly, Ashraf replied, "Look around you and enjoy this nice day, R. As for the note that Ashok sent me, I cannot talk to you about it. It's a secret, you understand."

R muffled a sigh and nodded calmly, trying not to show his disappointment. Once again, he had failed to clear the mystery. "Should I allow this to continue to bother me? After all, it really is none of my business."

A short while later, Ashraf pointed to another, much larger crowd, "It looks like they are filming a movie scene over there. Would you like to see how it's done?"

"Of course," R replied enthusiastically, "I'll take a few photos ... if it's allowed." He thought of Mohini; she would certainly be impressed to learn that he had come within a few dozen feet of real Bollywood stars. "If I am lucky, it will be a movie starring Ahmed Khan, her favorite actor," he hoped.

The crowd was unexpectedly disciplined, and R guessed that Mumbai residents were probably used to such situations. With the exception of the kids, everyone observed in silence, keen to avoid distracting the set's crew and performers.

"I cannot take any pictures from here. There are just too many people."

"Wait a second," Ashraf replied. The big man used his massive shoulders to open a breach in the solid wall of admirers and onlookers until they both reached the first row. Embarrassed by the resentful stares of those who had been so unceremoniously shoved aside by Ashraf, R turned his eyes to the scene being filmed. This was the first time he had come so close to a movie set. He took a few photos of the actors, recognizing them from the movies he had watched with Mohini.

The scene being repeated several times, R quickly understood that it was just another rehash of old Indian movie themes: the conflict between generations, and the unbridgeable gap between rich and poor. The rich parents of a girl, dressed in traditional style and accompanied by several servants who attend swiftly to their every need, catch their daughter strolling hand in hand on Chowpatty Beach with her poorer boyfriend. They express their outrage at her choice and behavior, and a heated argument then ensues.

"Another commercial movie, based on a boilerplate scenario already used in many other films, but which still appeals to the mass market. This is definitely not one of those rare 'artistic' movies that deal with thorny or even taboo social issues," R concluded.

The director's blood pressure seemed on the rise, judging from his voice's shrill pitch. His shrieks grew more and more strident as he kept asking for retakes. Eventually, an elderly man who was playing the role of the rich couple's driver wavered, his knees buckled under him, and he would have fallen to the ground if a crew member had not rushed to hold him. "The sun ... heat exhaustion! Bring some water!" R overheard as he saw two men carrying the unconscious old actor to a shaded spot.

"Can we find someone to replace *dadaji*<sup>188</sup>? ... Quick!" the director yelled in his megaphone.

One of his helpers rushed forth and started scrutinizing the onlookers in the first row. Suddenly, R felt a strong push and he stumbled a few steps forward. The director's helper stood right in front of him as he raised his eyes. The man looked him over, then turned round and questioned his boss in Marathi. The director glanced perfunctorily at R through his sunglasses then yelled, "He'll do. Just give him a white wig so that he looks a little like the one we had earlier. Now!"

"Three hundred rupees, take it or leave it. So, what do you say?" the helper barked, raising three fingers.

R turned to Ashraf with an inquisitive, unbelieving look. Ashok's friend shrugged. The helper's discordant voice rang again in R's ears, "So, do you agree or what?"

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<sup>188</sup> Grandfather (paternal). Sometimes also used as a nickname for elderly men.  
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"Yes!" R heard himself reply. He handed his camera to Ashraf. "The red button. ... Please take a few photos," he mumbled, following the man, who took him behind the crew's trucks. There, he donned a driver's uniform and a cap that topped the white wig. He was advised to keep his eyes lowered so that viewers would not notice the change of drivers when they watched the movie later. Within two minutes, he was among the cast, feeling the heat of the projectors needed to lighten the actors' dark complexions.

The scene was played five more times before the director was finally satisfied, so R had plenty of time to observe the actors during the shooting. They played their roles wonderfully. The parents successfully projected the arrogance that rich Indians typically display towards their social subordinates, disdainfully spitting orders to their servants ... among which he was. The younger actors, wearing jeans and t-shirts and armed with the latest cell phones, uttered laconic responses in American-accented English. Their parents' longer diatribes were in Hindustani<sup>189</sup>, the predominant language of Bollywood movies.

Later, as he walked alongside Ashraf back to the train station, R reflected on his experience as an extra. "These movies are such excellent mirrors of the upper classes of our society. However, the poor don't seem to exist for Bollywood's dream weavers. It's as if their day-to-day struggle for survival holds no interest for millions of viewers who save their rupees for an occasional dream session."

"How can average Indians spend their money watching this kind of junk?" he wondered aloud.

"What else is there to watch?"

"Ashraf Bhai, I was also wondering why we are so fond of copying other cultures in our movies."

"My friend, don't forget that you are dreaming of leaving your country for the United-States of America," Ashraf replied, grinning widely.

That was true, R realized.

"Ashraf Bhai, was it you who 'volunteered' me as an extra when that helper was looking for a replacement?"

The burly businessman sniggered. "Here, in Mumbai, if you don't move fast and seize opportunities, luck just whizzes past you, and at the end of your life you are left wondering why you are still struggling to survive. Here, you must snatch opportunities from others if you have to! R, you rushed forward and the result of your bold move is that you will now appear in a Bollywood movie. Bravo!"

R did not agree with his host's point of view, but the film shooting had been a moment that he would treasure. Although he did not enjoy 'commercial' Indian movies, he now had a few photos of his role in a film—and that was a surefire way to impress Mohini.

He sought confirmation from Ashraf. "Were you able to take some good pictures of me?"

"Sure. You looked so proud in your beautiful driver's costume," Ashraf reassured with a mellow smile that mitigated his mocking tone.

Later on, on the way back to Ashraf's house, they resumed their conversation about cinema.

"My parents haven't watched movies for decades. They say the latest songs have little to do with Indian culture; traditional instruments like the *tabla*, the *sitar* and the *moorli* are hardly used anymore; and dances look more like gymnastics than art."

Ashraf burst out laughing. "That's true, but that's what the market asks for, R. Having studied commerce you understand that, don't you? Movie producers are in this business to make money, and they know that their customers prefer foreign dreams to Indian ones ... that are too close to their harsh daily reality."

But R carried on. "Most of the dialogues and the songs' lyrics are in Hindustani. As if that's not enough, in TV serials as well, there are more Urdu and English words than Hindi ones."

"So what? Urdu is a beautiful, poetic language."

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<sup>189</sup> Mix of Urdu (language made up of Persian and Arabic, brought to India by Moslem invaders) and Hindi.  
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"But it's a foreign language for most Indians, and so is English. It seems that producers are targeting just a small segment of the market: the minority of people who understands both these foreign languages."

Ashraf smiled devilishly as he replied, "You are right ... and wrong. This may be the case today, but with the tremendous reach of TV and cinema, I predict that in just one generation, the majority of Indians will be fluent in Urdu and English. Then, no one will think of them as 'foreign' languages."

Reaching the local mosque in Ashraf's neighborhood, they stopped. As his guide went in for the evening prayer, R waited patiently outside under the watchful and suspicious gaze of a police officer. Here too, recent clashes between Hindus and Moslems had left deep wounds that had not yet healed.

Dinner, composed of a tasty and fragrant *biryani*<sup>190</sup>, was served swiftly and silently by Ashraf's wife. R guessed that she was his wife, although his host had never formally introduced her. The weary young traveler wolfed down a meatless version of the fragrant and steamy dish and savored a delightful dessert of vermicelli cooked in milk with almonds and raisins.

"Ashraf Bhai, thank you for your delightful hospitality. The meal was excellent and this has been a most pleasant and memorable day."

"It was my pleasure to show you around a small part of Mumbai, R. Sleep well; you'll need all the rest you can get tonight if you insist on leaving tomorrow."

R had a lot to tell his ecstatic girlfriend that night. Mohini could not stop asking all kinds of questions about the filming. Eventually, a weary R told her that he would show her the photos as soon as he returned to Delhi ... and that he would definitely take her to see the movie. Then, the young traveler hit the sack for a well-deserved rest, unaware of the shocking discovery that he would make the following morning.

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<sup>190</sup> Popular dish made with rice, perfumed with various spices and mixed with cooked vegetables and meat.  
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## CHAPTER 18

R's first thought as he woke up was not about his accidental cast in a Bollywood movie; it was rather about what had made him so uneasy the previous morning. What transaction had taken place between Ashraf and the uniformed man? "It could very well be a perfectly honest deal. Maybe Ashraf purchased the man's bicycle ... or ... I should just ask him about it, so that I can clear my mind. After all, he has been such an excellent host. It would be unfair to leave Mumbai with a lingering doubt about his honesty."

However, nothing had prepared R for the startling discovery he made that morning. The most intense of all the emotions he had felt during his journey from Delhi through Varanasi, Jaipur, Jamnagar and Dwarka paled into insignificance compared to the shock he was about to experience.

His day started early—as soon as Ashraf slammed the yard's wooden gate as he returned from the mosque. R got up and started rubbing his eyes, stopping as soon as he remembered his mother's advice. "Moonna, don't rub your eyes like that in the morning; you'll damage them. Just rinse them with some warm water to wash away the previous day's dust." Raising the olive-green curtains, R saw his host stepping towards the house. Ashraf beckoned him to get up, and R waved back in agreement.

"Yes, why not? I might as well start the day early," he thought, scratching his head. That evening, he was due to leave for Goa, his next stop, and he wanted to spend his last day in Mumbai visiting some of the big city's famous attractions.

He stretched lazily ... and pulled a muscle in his neck! The excruciating pain reminded him of one of Doobay's warnings, "Be careful when you wake up. While you sleep, the *pranamay kosh*<sup>191</sup> detaches itself from the *annamay kosh* to allow both the mind and the body to rest. When you awaken, it is therefore essential to reestablish the link between mind and body—between the central nervous system and the muscles—to avoid any uncontrolled movement that could lead to muscle strain. So, always start your day with the *hath yog asans* and the *pranayam* exercises that I taught you."

"Too late for that," he thought as he massaged his sore neck, "the harm's done now." He glowered at the narrow, uncomfortable child's bed in which he had slept, "I should expect more accidents like this one during the rest of the journey. After all, I hardly sleep two nights in the same bed, and I won't be back home for another ten days at least."

As he was getting dressed, he heard the wooden gate creak open. Peeking outside, he saw Ashraf's wife leave with a little boy in a school uniform.

At breakfast, tortured by his growing neck pain, he ate little, barely nodding at Ashraf's first few sentences. Initially, he thought that his host was just making polite conversation—but what he heard next turned out to be anything but that.

"I am sorry that you had to come all this way, R. Ashok had my previous address. As you know, I moved here several months ago, and your brother lost touch with me since then. I imagine he may have written, but I asked my mother to keep all my letters until I visit her—which I plan to do soon. She can't read or write, so I left my address on a few pieces of paper, asking her to give these to any friends who come looking for me."

"She did, and that's how I found you, Ashraf Bhai. As for the trip from Jamnagar to Mumbai, I imagine that the parcel I brought you on behalf of Ashok must be important." He raised his chin and gazed straight into his host's eyes as he pronounced those words, surmounting the acute pain in his neck. "Who knows? After yesterday, maybe he trusts me enough to share the secret of his message. I am now certain that the other parcels contain similar wooden, hollow elephants with a message hidden inside," he thought.

In spite of the weak light in the small dining area, R noticed that the businessman was scowling underneath his black, bushy eyebrows and wooly beard. Then, wincing as if in pain, Ashraf uttered, "... Many important things happened in my life recently."

R gulped down his last mouthful of chai and put down his empty mug—softly, hoping that Ashraf would reveal something important ... maybe something about those messages!

"Not so long ago, I used to live in Jamnagar, along with my wife, my son, and my parents. I also had a sister, but she got married and left with her husband for Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates. They settled there, and in just a few years they were doing so well that

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<sup>191</sup> The first part of the astral body, composed of thousands of nadis (channels) through which pran (vital energy) flows. The other two parts of the astral body are the *manamay kosh* (thoughts, emotions) and the *vigyanamay kosh* (decision making).

they invited me to join them as a partner in a lucrative import-export business. I knew that I would succeed admirably there, Dubai being a major regional trading hub."

As Ashraf lifted eyes brimming with sorrow towards R, the young man held his breath. Gone was the cheerful and energetic man he had seen yesterday. In his place sat a person who had clearly suffered a lot ... and, maybe, had not healed yet.

Ashraf went on. "I should have listened to them. If I had done so, after a few years, I would have invited my parents to join us ... and none of this would have happened." He paused, wincing and shutting his eyes tight. Then, taking a deep breath, he continued his story. "Instead, bowing to my parents' wishes, I stayed in Jamnagar. As he was getting old, my father wanted me to take over the reins of our family's long-standing import-export business. I also knew that my parents wanted me close by because of their fading health."

He looked up at R and added. "So, yesterday, when you mentioned that you planned to join Ashok in America, it brought back some painful memories."

Guessing that Ashraf's story would end tragically, R asked gently, "What happened, Ashraf Bhai?"

"You probably heard about the violent conflicts that opposed Hindus and Moslems in Gujarat some time ago. Those clashes hurt our family directly. Soon after a bomb blew up a group of Hindus returning home from a pilgrimage, enraged mobs went on a rampage across town, seeking revenge against Moslems ... all Moslems, regardless of their involvement in that terrorist attack." He swallowed and then continued, "My father, who had nothing to do with it, was returning home from work in the early evening when a group of infuriated Hindus bludgeoned him to death. When I found him later that night, he had already died of a fractured skull ... he who had never hurt anyone in his whole life."

The brawny man swallowed again, then bowed his head, sucking in his feelings. When he was finally able to speak, he said, "We were barely able to mourn his death in peace. There were many more clashes, houses were burned down and other people were killed. A few weeks later, when the madness subsided, I found out that I could not take over my father's business due to administrative hurdles created by local bureaucrats. I struggled for a while, then gave up and left for Mumbai to earn a decent living and raise my family. At the time, I felt that this was the best alternative. However, my mother never recovered from the shock of her husband's horrible death. She did not want to leave her house. ... She still clings to it until today, hanging on to the memories of a once happy life. ... Now you know everything."

There was an awkward pause, nearly a minute of silence. Then R found a few words to express his feelings, "Ashraf Bhai, it's a tragedy. Please accept my condolences." In Jaipur, he had not been able to meet Vijay Singh, the latter having died a soldier's death. Here also, he was encountering another sad story. "I hope that the rest of this journey will be different." The selfish thought flashed through his mind, but he swept it aside immediately.

He tried to find other words to break the tense silence, "As I mentioned to you, in Jaipur I met with a father who had lost his son. We are going through difficult times."

Ashraf's eyes were ablaze as he looked up at his young guest. "Yes ... and I know that you saw me when I was speaking with that customs officer in the lane yesterday." His tone was intense and his words blunt.

The direct approach surprised R. Why did Ashraf want to speak about that? And why now?

Ashok's friend continued with the same intensity. "I belong to a minority; a minority hated by the majority. No," he interrupted, raising his hand as R opened his mouth to protest. "Don't defend what you know little about. You see, when you met me at the university, seven years ago, I was not aware of this reality, shielded from it by an academic cocoon. Eventually, I grew out of my daydream of a perfect world, and I had to face harsh challenges that life threw at me. This is why I have no remorse about bribing a corrupt customs officer to ensure my family's prosperity. I wanted you to know that before you judge me."

R felt his cheeks glower—as if, somehow, he was at fault. Reeling from Ashraf's awful revelation, he struggled to get hold of himself. "Wait a minute, I have a clear conscience. It is Ashraf who just acknowledged his involvement in a case of bribery and, most probably, fraud." He then understood why he had felt that fleeting pang of shame: it was because he had enjoyed the hospitality of a self-avowed criminal!

"I do not believe that the end justifies the means, Ashraf Bhai. I do understand, however, that you have been through very trying times," he said tactfully.

Ashraf's vehement reaction startled him, "No, you can't understand, R. *You* don't belong to a minority!"

R wanted to reply that he did understand—very well indeed, actually. The caste to which his family belonged was a minority facing suspicion and criticism from increasingly vocal sections of the deeply divided Indian society. However, he could not reply, as Ashraf just ranted on. "In Mumbai too, I face religious discrimination. After the recent bombings, we could not even leave home for several days. As a result, the business I had launched began to flounder. It's because of all those accumulated injustices that I decided that it is okay to circumvent a few laws ... if it can help my family survive."

He paused, then added defiantly, "And I'll continue to do so. At first, I suffered in silence, but my pain turned into anger, then into hatred. Now, I can only find peace in prayer. You probably remember me as a 'modern' youth at university. Now, I have realized the value of my religion. Yes, R, I intend to grow wealthy illegally if need be; and I'll ignore the laws of this country because people like myself are not treated fairly here. And do you know what? I'll invest part of my profits in changing this society—radically!"

R was flabbergasted. What had Ashraf turned into? He tried to reason with his elder brother's friend, "How can you 'ignore' our laws? I agree that injustice and hatred need to be tackled, Ashraf Bhai. But I prefer Mahatma Gandhi's approach. Peaceful protest, dialogue and tolerance were *his* weapons against injustice. And he was a native of Gujarat ... just like you."

The big man's laugh made his belly shake under his white *kurta-pajama*. It was a scornful laugh that lasted just a few seconds.

"I am happy that Gandhi helped us to get rid of the British. Before they came, we were the masters of Hindustan. However, Gandhi never solved India's problems with his pacifist approach. Those problems lasted and got worse over the last few decades in spite of the liberation of Pakistan and Bangladesh and the exodus of millions to those two countries."

R turned an indifferent ear to Ashraf's mocking tone. "Those who chose to stay in India after its partition knew that they would be living in a multi-religious and tolerant society. Pakistan and Bangladesh are both totalitarian countries that have an official state religion. That is not the case in our country, Ashraf Bhai!" This time, his voice rose gradually as he spoke, and he over-emphasized the 'Bhai' on purpose. Indeed, his host's words could no longer be considered brotherly.

"Many of us lived too far from the new borders at the time of partition and could not reach them in time." Ashraf then added with a sinister smile, "As for myself, my conscience is clear; India is not an Islamic country. Therefore, I do not feel compelled to be loyal and to obey the laws of this land."

The Delhi-born son of Mr. and Mrs. Sharma, raised by his parents to respect authority and to obey rules, felt revolted at those words ... and disgusted with himself. He had a fleeting thought for his elder brother. "Where did you send me, Ashok? Because I agreed to your stupid request, I am now indebted for his hospitality to somebody who openly brags about being a criminal." His tone was frigid when he replied, "I believe, like Gandhi, that, with a lot of goodwill, we can forget our scars and build a better, more fraternal society."

"Ridiculous! Ashraf shouted as he got up and leaned on the table. "It's only through a show of strength that minorities can inspire fear and respect. Maybe there needs to be a lot more bombings before the majority cowers and lets us live in peace. Or maybe we need to keep multiplying—faster than the majority—so that we can deter threats more effectively through the sheer size of our community."

R gaped as he stared at his host. "What is he talking about? India is a free and democratic country compared to our neighbors. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, minorities have practically been wiped out. There are still sporadic news reports of the remaining Hindus being slaughtered in those countries. So how can he justify the death of innocent people through terrorist bombings?"

It took a phenomenal amount of self-control to keep calm in the face of such brutal, insensitive words. "I remain convinced that a few gestures of goodwill on both sides of this Hindu Moslem conflict could tip the balance towards lasting peace within our country ... Ashraf Bhai. For example, if members of your community offered to demolish a few of those

mosques built on sacred Hindu sites and rebuild them somewhere else, I am sure Hindus would appreciate a lot. It would be a conciliatory move that would help to heal centuries of conflict and suffering."

Ashraf burst out laughing. "Absurd! Those monuments were erected to celebrate victories, and as such, *they* are now historical sites to be preserved. And the suffering you refer to was only 'collateral damage' during wartime."

"Wartime that lasted centuries? Collateral damage? Humanity as a whole lost precious history, knowledge and wisdom when barbaric and fanatical Moguls destroyed antique monuments and burned down ancient universities and libraries," R snapped back.

"To subjugate a numerically superior population, the Moguls knew that they needed to strike hard and cut the deepest roots of Hindustan. Therefore they had to dismantle all the symbols that made Indians proud of their culture, of their civilization. It was not enough to decimate their military class and bring down their temples; other warriors would have sprung up elsewhere, and priests would have stirred up the masses. War can only be won when the enemy can no longer dream of rising ... ever!"

"Ashraf Bhai! Most of India's Moslems—including you—are not descendants of those barbarians. The Moguls, sword in hand, terrorized the most vulnerable among Indians into converting to Islam."

"That's a moot point nowadays. However, it is true that wherever invasions were successful, as in Africa or in America, invaders first had to weaken the spirit and beliefs of the natives in order to rule them."

Wetting his thick brown lips, a wild look in his eyes, Ashraf continued to rant. "Thanks to our friends in the Middle-East and to military support from our brothers in neighboring countries, we feel increasingly able to raise our heads and our voices to claim what's ours by right. In Kashmir, it's practically a done deal; even foreigners print red lines on their maps to indicate that this territory is disputed—and not the property of India! On top of that," he said, smiling sarcastically, "we are supported by India itself."

"How is that?" R asked, briefly forgetting the intensity and bitterness of the conversation in his eagerness to understand Ashraf's cryptic words.

"India has still not understood an important lesson of history—that 'unity makes strength'. This country is as fragmented today as it was a thousand years ago when the first believers came here. It was an easy task for Mahmud of Ghazni and all those who came later to topple the thousands of arrogant, squabbling Hindu rulers one after the other. If the British had not set foot here, we would have turned Hindustan into the greatest Islamic caliphate in the entire world," Ashraf roared, his mouth frothing as he slammed his massive fist on the table.

R did not reply. Recalling his guru's teachings, he allowed tranquility to flow and settle throughout his entire being. He now regretted having allowed himself to be drawn into this highly controversial and upsetting conversation. "But it's too late to be wise now." He bitterly realized that he belonged to the majority of Indians that Ashraf considered his foes. Until then, he had held his ground and tried to argue with Ashok's 'friend'. "I put up with all this only because yesterday, the man I met with was welcoming. ... And in the beginning of this conversation, when he told me about his problems, I felt compassion for him. But this is too much! All his sorrows and challenges must have had an impact on his mental equilibrium."

R knew that he had no other choice, after those harsh, hurtful words, than to leave Ashraf's house immediately. Reaching deep into reserves of civility that he did not suspect he possessed, he spoke. "Ashraf Bhai, thank you for your hospitality. I have to leave now."

"So be it," his host replied with a shrug, avoiding the young man's eyes.

R returned to the room he had slept in, picked up his backpack and left, slamming the heavy wooden gate behind him. Walking briskly away from Ashraf's house while keeping a lid on his anger, he wondered briefly why that veiled woman, covered in a black burka, was staring at him. Much later, he guessed that it was Ashraf's wife, returning home after dropping off her son to school.

At ten o'clock that night, he would board the Konkan Kanya Express, which would take him to Goa in about twelve hours. He therefore had a whole day to spend in Mumbai. Stopping at the first newsstand on his way, the young traveler purchased a tourist map of the city. Now he could visit other parts of Mumbai without getting lost and missing his train.

At 8:00 p.m. sharp, after a whole day spent visiting several of the city's main attractions, the exhausted young traveler slumped into an *autoriskha*. He arrived well in time at the Chatrapati Shivaji train station to board a first class sleeper compartment. Once inside, he threw his backpack on the seat and massaged his sore neck; the morning's pain was back with a vengeance. He had walked a lot around the city and visited several picturesque sites, carrying the heavy backpack all the way. "It's as if my *karm* wants me to suffer today, one way or another."

Prior to boarding the train, he sent an email to Ashok, giving a laconic account of his stopover in Mumbai, just as his brother had requested. "You can draw your own conclusions; I merely present the facts to you," he wrote as the email's last sentence.

He also attached three of the day's best photos to the email. One of them showed him standing next to the Trimurti statue on Elephanta Island, located a short distance off the Mumbai coast. After the morning's shock, he had decided to head directly to that pilgrimage site. There, observing the devotees and meditating, he was able to subjugate his inner turmoil. As he wandered about, he asked a pilgrim to take a picture of himself—which he eventually sent to Ashok.

Elephanta island turned out to be a haven of peace and serenity; an extreme contrast with the city nearby with all its pollution, noise, traffic congestion and the continuous motion of teeming millions. On the island, time seemed to stand still, frozen by the mighty Trimurti statue, a stone sculpture that showed three different aspects of the divine: Bramha, the initiator of the universe; Vishnu, its preserver; and Shiv, who destroys the entire creation, leading to a fresh start in the infinite cycle.

R also took photographs of the huge caves sheltering statues of different manifestations of the divine; he was particularly impressed by that of Shiv dancing the *tandav*<sup>192</sup>.

"Renewal is often preceded by major upheavals—which are often painful," commented a *sadhu* next to him.

In the afternoon, he visited other famous sites, after a light lunch consisting of *bhaylpuri*<sup>193</sup>, Mumbai's favorite snack. Along the way he stopped once, massaging his aching neck. As he did, a *malishwalla*<sup>194</sup> appeared out of nowhere to offer his services, displaying his few remaining teeth in a professional smile. Not at all discouraged by the young traveler's firm 'No, thanks', the man moved on and promptly found a client.

Before setting off for the train station in the evening, R called home briefly to address his mother's perpetual concerns about his health and well-being. He then called Mohini and told her all about the day's events—omitting his clash with Ashraf. As he had hoped, his girlfriend's gaiety—as contagious as ever—and her frequent topic changes helped to dispel what was left of the morning's negativity.

"Can't you stay a few more days in Mumbai, Hero? Do you know how Ahmed Khan got his break in cinema? He used to be a taxi driver, and that's how he met Manish Chawal, the famous film director. ... Pure luck, I tell you. If only you could hang around Bollywood for a little longer ..."

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<sup>192</sup> Shiv's cosmic dance, which precedes the destruction of the universe prior to a new beginning.

<sup>193</sup> Fried, wheat-based flatbread, served rolled-up around a filling of chutni, chopped onion, lemon juice and other ingredients.

<sup>194</sup> Itinerant masseur.

## **Part 5**

### **Joy and Anger in Goa**



## CHAPTER 19

Like an old cobra, the Konkan Kanya Express snaked at a leisurely pace on the railroad that led from Mumbai to Goa, slowing even further to cross the Terekhol river, which separated Maharashtra from one of the smallest distinct regions of the Indian subcontinent.

Goa is indeed different. A must-go place for tourists who want some sun, sand and ... entertainment, this former Portuguese colony is renowned for its relaxed and fun-loving atmosphere. R glanced outside. Disappointingly, the scenery still looked very similar to that of Maharashtra.

He began writing a few lines about his last day in Mumbai. On the previous night, he had not found the time to do so, falling asleep like a log only a few minutes after the train left Chatrapati Shivaji Station.

A few minutes later, he turned again towards the window, straining to spot anything distinctive in the landscape that would indicate that he was now in Goa. Then, once again, he mulled on what he knew about that region. The former Portuguese colony had lasted long ... too long. Although India gained independence from the British Empire in 1947, the Portuguese, on the other hand, had stubbornly refused to relinquish their profitable Indian colony.

"Leeches," thought the young traveler. "They only left when the Indian army expelled them by force in 1961."

That thought reminded him of Jeremy Souza, Ashok's friend whom he would soon be meeting in Goa. When he had breached this subject with Jeremy at the university, about seven years ago, the seemingly mild Goan's reaction had been scorching.

"The Portuguese brought us many good things, R. That's why most Goans did not want them to leave. We wanted Goa to remain a distinct nation simply because we are different from the Indians."

R was too young at the time to understand all the political implications of Jeremy's words. Now however, he remembered that he had said 'Indians' and not 'other Indians'. He also recalled Nandan's reply, "In Tamil Nadu, we are also different from other Indians in many ways, but we don't yearn for separation from the Indian federation. 'Unity in diversity is the great strength of India' the Mahatma once said ... or was it somebody else?"

R recalled his history lessons. Over two thousand three hundred years ago, Goa formed part of the vast Mauryan Empire. In the fourteenth century, it was fiercely defended against the advancing Moslem sultans by Harihar, the Hindu king of Vijayanagar. Unfortunately, its strategic location and its natural harbors caught the eye of the first Portuguese explorers. They landed over four hundred years ago, armed to the teeth with guns and cannons. Determined to establish a foothold in the Indian subcontinent and grab a share of the rich trade in spices, silks, gold and jewels, they slashed and burned their way to that goal.

R also remembered the conversation he had with his guru, Yogish Doobay, just before leaving Varanasi. "*Gurudji*, you mentioned a few religious sites that I could visit during this journey, but aren't there any in Goa?" he had asked.

The wise old sage's reply was grim. "You will not find any pilgrimage site related to Sanatan Dharm in the whole of Goa, R. You see, the Portuguese only wanted to exploit Goa. Their strategy was cruelly simple. During the first few decades of their invasion, they destroyed hundreds of temples. They also hunted down all those who had not fled the region in order to convert them. That activity even became part of an annual festival. On that day, priests set out in search of remaining 'heathens'. Helped by their African slaves, who restrained those unfortunate enough to be caught, they smeared the lips of those potential converts with beef fat, with the weird hope that those Hindus would then feel impure, and consequently, would accept to convert. In addition, those who persisted in following Sanatan Dharm were excluded from positions of responsibility within the colony and were compelled to listen to derogatory sermons—in churches that were usually built with stones from demolished local temples. Of course, during this long reign of terror in Goa, Hindu priests were not allowed to practice."

This time, prior to his arrival, R was able to speak with the person he was due to meet. On the previous afternoon, he dialed the number provided by Ashok. While the phone rang, the young traveler felt a shiver run down his spine. "I hope there won't be any complications this time."

Jeremy Souza picked up the phone almost instantly. "Of course I remember you," he replied cheerfully after R explained who he was and why he was calling. "Ashok was such a good friend of mine. I hope you will stay at least a week in Goa to enjoy all the pleasures that our enchanting region has to offer!"

R thanked him, mumbling his now standard excuse about having to meet other friends of Ashok and needing to return to Delhi at the earliest for the formalities linked to his forthcoming departure for America.

After meeting with Ashraf, R was a little wary of Ashok's friends. It was clear that his elder brother had no idea who they had turned into. "... But then, why is he sending them gifts after all those years?" he wondered.

In addition, R was not keen to stay too long in Goa. The atrocities wreaked upon the local population by the early Portuguese invaders were a blot on the region's history, and he knew that Goa was not really the paradise that tourist brochures claimed it was.

When she learned that Ashok wanted him to meet with Jeremy in Goa, his mother had wailed, "Goa? ... Ashok must be out of his mind! I don't want you to go there. Everyone knows that place's reputation."

Fortunately for R, his father intervened, "Yashoda, your son will soon be living in Los Angeles where he will be exposed to all kinds of threats. Honest people get mugged, stabbed and shot everyday in the streets there. So let him go to Goa if he has to. Besides, he will be with Ashok's friend. After that, he will be able to compare a haven of crime, drugs and prostitution like Goa with Los Angeles."

R did not share Jeremy Souza's idyllic perspective on the region. The only foreseeable benefit of a stop in Goa was its beaches. Visiting these would contribute some substance to his dreams of the American pacific coast. He pulled out one of Ashok's postcards from his backpack and immersed himself in its contemplation. It showed a Californian beach with people surfing in the distance and girls playing beach-volley. His mother would not have approved of it, so, on the wall of his room, he had concealed it under a postcard of the Golden Gate Bridge.

His thoughts wandered to Jeremy Souza. Ashok had this to say about Jeremy in his email: "After completing his studies in Finance, Jeremy went to Mumbai where he joined a financial investment company. I heard that he made a lot of money from the excellent investments he undertook on behalf of his clients. Between you and me, he left the firm soon after that huge stock market crash in Mumbai. And a last detail about Jeremy: he has always been very demonstrative in his religious beliefs."

"Great! Just what I needed now," R thought apprehensively. After Mumbai, he had hoped that Ashok's remaining friends would not all be oddballs like Ashraf.

However, reflecting on his journey so far, R grudgingly admitted that discovering new places and meeting people with widely different backgrounds and views had been enriching, surprising ... although very challenging at times. He began to understand Doobay's recommendation to consider this journey as great opportunity to study 'real life' and to practice what he had learnt. "I'll try to keep an open mind as *Gurudji* advised—whatever happens," he thought, closing his eyes and lying back on the plush first-class seat.

Later, when the train finally stopped, R felt his stomach growl. "It must be the sea breeze," he imagined, craning his neck to catch a glimpse of the Indian Ocean. However, it was a futile effort, as Karmali Station, located in the old Goa, was at least four miles away from the nearest beach.

Surprise greeted him as he stepped off the train and onto the platform. Here, the locals dressed quite differently from his previous stopovers. "Most of the girls are wearing skirts, and I can't see any men wearing turbans, nor any women wearing saris," he observed as he walked towards the exit. "Even the hairstyles are different," he thought, noticing that the Indian woman's most popular hairstyle, the single pigtail with a parting in the middle of the head, was nowhere to be seen. For a few seconds he felt that he was in a foreign country—although he had never traveled abroad. That feeling persisted outside the railway

station, the town's old buildings adhering to an architectural style uncommon in the rest of the country.

He was about to call Jeremy on his cell phone when he felt a tap on his shoulder. "I would never have recognized him," the young traveler thought. Indeed, the Goan, who now stood facing him, had put on at least thirty pounds—fat rather than muscle, though. A finely trimmed mustache made him look like a fifties-era playboy, and gray hair already peppered his temples. Apparently immune to the muggy Goan weather, Jeremy Souza smiled as he stood in an elegant tweed sports jacket, ignoring the sweat beading on his forehead.

"Hello there. My name is Jeremy Souza. Are you R. Sharma?"

"Yes, that's right. Pleased to meet you again, Jeremy."

"You have changed so much since we last met," said Jeremy in a whiny, nasal voice. "Is this all your luggage?" he asked with a snigger, pointing to R's 'Los Angeles' backpack with a finger adorned by a massive gold-ring crowned with a huge ruby. "You travel really light, my friend. Come, my car is parked right over there." He raised another bejeweled finger to point at an imported convertible, bright yellow in color.

Jeremy spoke fast, like a busy—and wealthy—man, R thought. Recovering his wits, the young man quipped, "Is that your car? It's a good thing that I did not bring more luggage."

A surprised Souza turned towards R, then smiled. "You are quick-witted, just like Ashok."

R did try to yell a few answers to Jeremy's questions as they sped well over the speed limit in the peppy convertible, but it proved to be quite a struggle against the sports engine's roar. Holding his hair flat against the breeze, he noticed that Jeremy was enjoying the drive to the fullest, a broad smile etched on the Goan's face as he waved occasionally to friends and acquaintances along the roadside. "He must use powerful hair gel," R concluded. "His hair looks as if it has been painted on his head."

Eventually, he understood that Jeremy was taking him first to his house to drop off his backpack and freshen up. They would then head for the beach for a picnic with the Goan's friends. That seemed a very reasonable plan to R, as he was beginning to feel quite hungry.

From the outside, Jeremy's *bungla*<sup>195</sup> looked like a little palace, leading R to conclude that his host was very well off. In the villa's front yard was a superb marble fountain surrounded by a shallow pool. Water spurted in all directions from the mouth of a marble dolphin before falling back into the pool. R remembered that these sea mammals—a significant draw for tourists—were common along this part of the Indian coast. He also admired the alley of dwarf palm trees that lined the paved pathway along which Jeremy drove before stopping in front of the villa's front door, right in between two large stone lions.

A white-liveried manservant rushed to the car's side to open his master's door, then R's. As they got out, Jeremy said, "Let's go inside for a drink. You can also leave this ... bag in your room—you won't need it. We are in Panaji right now. It's the capital of Goa. We should be setting off pretty soon to meet my friends who must already be waiting on Sinquerim beach." He then smiled reassuringly, "You'll see, they are nice people."

Two minutes later, R met his host again in an immense living room. Through the ceiling-high glass panels on three sides of the room, R could see two gardeners busily tending to a lush tropical garden and a perfect lawn. Reclining nonchalantly in a stylishly sculpted, leather-upholstered armchair, Jeremy Souza was enjoying a cocktail. A full glass stood on a marble-topped coffee table. His host waved towards a nearby chair. "I ordered a cocktail for you. It's a specialty of mine. I call it the Jextasy. Let me know what you think of it." As R lifted his hand in protest, he insisted. "Go ahead, drink it. It's only some rum, coke, beer, and mango juice. You'll feel relaxed and have more fun. Come on, you are a big boy now."

Jeremy's smile had a taunting twist as he uttered those words. R took the glass and tasted the drink hesitantly. He practically never drank alcohol, but this tasted very good. "Never drink on an empty stomach," Ashok had warned him once. Too late now!

Then came the moment he had come to dread: handing over the parcel to its addressee without understanding. "Ashok asked me to bring you this parcel, Jeremy."

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<sup>195</sup> Bungalow. Small villa usually close to the sea.  
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R sighed; his eyes tracked his host's ring-covered fingers as they deftly unwrapped the brown paper parcel. A fleeting smile appeared on Jeremy's face as he twirled the elephant-shaped paperweight between his fingers. "He seems unconcerned. And is that an ironic smile?" R wondered. The Goan nonchalantly twisted the elephant's head, removed the rolled-up sheet of paper and read the lines scribbled on it. As he did so, his face remained impassive. "Just as wooden as that sandalwood elephant," a disappointed R thought.

As he had expected, the paperweight was an exact replica of the two he had already delivered. Unlike Singh and Ashraf, however, Jeremy put the sheet of paper into the elephant, snapped its head back on, and placed the paperweight on the coffee table. "As if he does not care," was R's impression.

The Goan then turned to his young guest. "R, Goa had so much to offer to young, fun-loving people. I would like you to stay at least a week here to enjoy the sun, the beaches ... and everything else."

"Thank you very much for your hospitality Jeremy. However, as I had mentioned on the phone, I still need to leave tomorrow."

"Why is that? Is university resuming so soon this year?" Jeremy's smile seemed sarcastic, but R could not be sure.

"No. First, I have two more of these parcels to deliver to Ashok's remaining university friends: Nandan and Gautam. Then, I would like to return to Delhi to ... I am still looking for a job. You know what it's like."

Jeremy sneered. "No. Actually I don't. Seven years ago, my uncle introduced me to a friend of his. That man owned a financial investment company in Mumbai ... which I joined immediately after graduating."

"That's lucky ... and not very fair for the thousands of equally qualified young graduates out there," R thought. However, if Jeremy was not as principled as Singh, perhaps he could obtain one of the answers that had been eluding him so far. Pointing to the elephant, the young traveler asked, "I hope that I did not bring you any bad news?"

Jeremy just smiled and got up. His response was curt ... and not as enlightening as R had hoped. "That's right. Now let's go. We are *so* late."

They reached Sinquerim beach in no time in Jeremy's flashy convertible. As R's host disregarded a red light at a crossing, he waved casually to the police officer standing on the other side of the road.

"I grew up in Panaji, R. Many of the local police officers were my classmates ... and they all like me," the prematurely retired investment advisor explained with a devilish smile.

The car practically flew across the bridge to the north bank of the Mondovi River. There, Jeremy took a left turn onto a narrow, bumpy, costal road. The first few coconut trees then appeared, tall and slender-looking, their leafy tops swinging in the sea breeze.

As they slowed down just before Sinquerim beach, R noticed two men crawling up a tree trunk. Wearing only a loincloth, they hoisted their sun-darkened bodies swiftly up the scaly coconut trees, using only their hands and bare feet. R pulled out his camera from his pocket just in time to snap a picture of one of the men cutting a bunch of coconuts with his machete.

A few moments later on the beach, R met with Jeremy's friends. Feeling a little drowsy from the 'Jextasy', he could not guess that it was going to be another surprising day.

"R. Sharma, younger brother of a university friend of mine," Jeremy introduced. "Mrs. Almeida and her three lovely daughters: Jenny, Monica and Linda; Father Antonio Dacruz and his nephew Thomas."

They sat down on straw mats underneath a very large beach umbrella. After the usual exchange of civilities, R's host started a one-on-one conversation with the priest, while the Almeida girls and their mother resumed their chat with Thomas Dacruz. Mrs. Almeida smiled at every one of Thomas's repartees, leading R to conclude that the young man was a welcome suitor for one of the Almeida girls.

He cast an eye around. The beach was littered with empty plastic bags, beer bottles and plenty of other, unidentifiable trash. Closer to them, a few bony stray dogs sniffed and whimpered as they stared hungrily at the group's picnic baskets. Standing to attention under the burning sun, an elderly man—presumably the ladies' driver from his white uniform—seemed to wait for Mrs. Almeida's signal to unpack the food and drinks. R was getting hungrier every minute, although Jeremy's cocktail seemed to have numbed his stomach to

some extent. However, it seemed that it was not yet time to eat. As he turned around, he caught the eye of one of the Almeida girls ... Monica perhaps.

"R? That's not a Christian name. Are you Hindu?" she asked.

Although the question's tone was candid, everyone in the small group froze and stared at R. He suddenly felt grateful to Jeremy for daring him to swallow the cocktail before leaving. As a result, he felt relaxed, and therefore replied casually, "That's right." Then, trying to divert the conversation to a non-controversial topic, he added, "Nice weather today, don't you think so, Ms. Monica?"

"Actually, I am Jenny. That's Monica over there, with the shorter hair."

Jeremy came to his rescue swiftly. "Why not eat now? I don't know about you, but the sea breeze always stirs up my appetite. R has had a long trip all the way from Mumbai, so he must be hungry too."

"Count me out then, I have to return to church. Thomas, I leave these ladies under your care," Father Antonio said, rising to his feet and dusting his black clothes. After a quick glance at R, in which the young traveler thought he detected some curiosity mixed with suspicion, the priest turned to Souza. "I hope to see you tomorrow, Jeremy. We need to develop an ambitious strategy for the coming months. The number of people we ... helped has dropped significantly since ... you know what. Our generous foreign donors have been asking me for an explanation."

As Jeremy nodded meekly, R recalled Ashok's comment about the Goan's strong sense of religious duty.

After the priest's departure, the atmosphere relaxed considerably. The food was promptly laid out on paper plates by the Almeidas' manservant, and two bottles of rosé wine also appeared. The little group noisily enjoyed fried fish and roast chicken as R sat on the side, munching on a cheese and cucumber sandwich, the only vegetarian item available.

As he ate, he noticed the driver chasing away a few skinny kids in dirty rags. Turning to Jeremy's friends, R observed uneasily that they carried on chatting and eating merrily as if those kids were invisible. Starting to feel uncomfortable in their company, he got up, mumbled something about needing to find a restroom and wandered off with a sigh of relief.

Walking on Sinquerim beach, R took a few photos of the shoreline. There were many tourists lying on the sand, most of them hippy-like backpackers. He made his way towards a coconut milk seller. "That will soothe my burning stomach," he hoped, regretting that he had not brought that unfinished packet of snacks purchased at Mumbai's railway station.

The coconut milk seller was a young man, also in his early twenties. R noticed that he wore simple, worn-out garments, like most of the locals who walked about on the beach selling things to tourists and well-off visitors. Showing ivory-white teeth under a thick black mustache, the young merchant was carving holes in four coconuts. After inserting colored drinking straws, he handed them jovially to four young tourists who were speaking in English and laughing loudly. As he got closer, R understood that they were making fun of the coconut seller. However, the young man kept on smiling as he handed them their change. "Even if he does not understand English, he should guess that they are laughing at him," an angry R wondered.

The two blonde girls and the athletic-looking young men walked away under the radiant Goa sun, savoring the cool and sweet coconut milk. Suddenly, one of the girls started swaying her hips exaggeratedly, mimicking a female fish seller who was walking right ahead of the group, a heavy basket of fish poised on her head. All four friends burst out laughing, then sat down on the sand to finish their coconut milk.

The fuzzy feeling brought about by Jeremy's cocktail vanished within seconds as R struggled to stifle his fury. As Doobay's recommendations flashed through his mind, he turned towards the coconut seller. "Tell me, do you speak English?"

"Yes, Sir. I even graduated from university."

"... But ... I don't understand. Why didn't you react when those louts were making fun of you?"

"Poverty, hunger, the need to work to ensure that I can help my family survive ... Sir," the coconut seller explained with an unflinching, professional smile. However, the young man's eyes crossed R's questioning gaze fleetingly, betraying his hurt feelings.

The young tourists now looked relaxed, taking turns to smoke a small, strange-looking pipe. An incensed R walked silently towards them. He stopped right in front of the

group, hands on his hips, scowling. "Hello! I can see you are having fun ... and your idea of fun is to laugh at poor people who can't talk back to you?" he yelled.

Startled, the young tourists held their breath—and their smoke. R noticed kangaroo logos on two of their backpacks. Mohini had told him once that he looked very scary when he lost his cool. The four looked at each other, red in the face. Then, one of the girls hesitantly broke the silence, "Please ... we ... we did not mean to hurt anybody with our silly jokes."

R's wrath ebbed away as he looked at them. They seemed genuinely contrite and embarrassed at their puerile behavior. All four were about his age or a few years younger. "All right. But you should understand that we are like you, and our feelings can be hurt too."

The other girl stood up and held her hand. "I am Janice. That's Sarah, and Ron and Mark," she said, pointing to the other three who also shook R's hand. "We are from Sidney, Australia."

"And I am R. Sharma, from New Delhi."

They all sat down and started talking. The four young Australians told him how their trek through South Asia had brought them to Goa in search of fun and excitement—in vain. In return, R shared his experiences of northern India.

"That's interesting; we are heading north now. We still have three weeks before university resumes in Sydney," Mark said.

"We are keen to go to Rajasthan, R. What you told us confirms that it's definitely worth visiting," Sarah added.

"For my part, I'd really like to take pictures of Khajuraho's erotic sculptures," Ron smirked.

His remark sent a chill through the group. His friends turned to stare at him in silence, clearly annoyed.

"What?" he asked defiantly.

R remembered that Ron was the one who laughed loudest when they made fun of the coconut seller. In an icy tone, he said, "Actually, Ron, the sculptures you are referring to are ancient works of art that we Indians are very proud of. Although many see them as 'erotic sculptures', in fact, they represent the process of creation, the oneness of *purush* and *prakriti*, the creator and the created universe. In addition, many scenes of our *poorans* are depicted in these sculptures. Therefore, they symbolize deep spiritual concepts, not plain eroticism."

The four youngsters then spoke openly about their preconceived ideas on India, and R sought some inspiration in his guru's teachings to debunk some of the myths that clouded their understanding of his culture and civilization. They talked for another half-hour, until R spotted Jeremy Souza and his friends walking casually towards the coconut seller. Realizing that they might feel offended by his desertion, he got up hurriedly and wished the Australians well on the rest of their journey across the subcontinent.

"I have to leave now, so I'll wish you a pleasant and safe trip. I hope that I was able to dispel some of your misconceptions about India. The world would be a better place if we all tried to understand each other, and *respect*—not just *tolerate*—our differences." On these last words, he turned away, with a brief, regretful thought for Ashraf Ali.

As R joined his Goan hosts, he was initially relieved that their curiosity about his long conversation with the young tourists was more compelling than any displeasure resulting from his lack of courtesy. Mrs. Almeida and her daughters insisted on knowing what they had talked about. Obliging, R narrated his entire conversation. However, their reaction took him by surprise, and the rest of the afternoon was very unpleasant—to say the least.

That night, he resisted the urge to tell Mohini what had happened. Instead, he stretched his imagination to find a few nice things to say about Goa. His girlfriend was clearly unimpressed by his lack of enthusiasm, and her concluding remark left him speechless. "R, you are just too blasé. Do you know how many scenes of Bollywood's most famous movies were shot on Goa's gorgeous beaches?"

## CHAPTER 20

From the balcony, the view on Jeremy Souza's gardens was superb, R thought as he tried to forget the previous day's unexpectedly heated exchange with the Goan's friends. He now felt the same way as in Mumbai when he discovered Ashraf's dark side. It was an oppressive feeling; his throat felt tight and dry, and his stomach knotted.

The day before, on Sinquerim beach, the tension had been electric, nearly tangible, as R related his meeting with the young tourists to Jeremy and his friends—especially when he spoke of Ron's desire to visit Khajuraho. It happened just after they returned to the shade of the large beach umbrella and sat down for tea—served in old china teacups—and plum cake.

When he told them that he had encouraged the young Australians to visit that splendid, historical site, Mrs. Almeida had nearly choked. Monica and Jenny patted their mother's back to help her regain her composure as Linda gazed at him, a shocked look in her eyes, and Thomas Dacruz concealed an impish smile behind his teacup.

Jeremy leaned towards Mrs. Almeida, looking very uncomfortable. "Please forgive him. It's his first time in Goa," he muttered apologetically. Then, turning towards R and keeping his tone gentle enough to avoid hurting his young guest, he rebuked, "R, how could you? It's so shocking!"

But Ashok Sharma's younger brother felt neither regret nor embarrassment. "Why are they so upset at the idea of those tourists visiting Khajuraho? After all, the entire site is a unique artistic realization, not pornography!" he wondered. "Are you shocked by the so-called 'erotic' sculptures? Forgive me for being blunt, but by now, everyone should understand that they are highly symbolical," he said.

"Young man," Mrs. Almeida rumbled after she finally stopped coughing, waving a meaty finger threateningly in his direction, "do you want tourists—on which our local industry depends for survival—to leave with photos of these depraved sculptures? It's not surprising that everyone in the world thinks of that perverted book, the Kama Sutra, when talking about India. When will we be counted among those civilized nations where such obscenities are forbidden? Personally, I strongly feel that this diabolical place should be razed."

The beefy Mrs. Almeida crossed herself, then waved imperatively at Jenny to shut up ... not before her daughter had innocently asked, "But what is so special about those sculptures?"

Thomas Dacruz could not stifle his mirth any longer. As he burst out laughing, hot tea splattered all over his immaculate white shirt. The group's attention shifted to him, offering a brief respite to R.

Mrs. Almeida turned towards Jeremy, "I wonder why those tourists want to look at Hindu idols when there are so many lovely churches to visit here in Goa, and elsewhere in India. And we are like them; we share their beliefs," she said, glaring at her daughters and Thomas to elicit their support.

But the priest's nephew did not respond, as he had bent down to tie a shoelace ... that was not really undone. That move gave Thomas ample time to regain his composure, and he managed to put on a disapproving frown as he looked up.

Feeling hurt by Mrs. Almeida's latest outburst, the young traveler knew that he could not avoid replying. After all, he was their guest, and the woman's remarks were offensive to him. The fact that she was jealous because he had struck a conversation with the young Australians did not justify her harsh words.

"Our idols, as you say, Madam, represent the one and only God under different aspects. Our religion allows its followers—among whom I count myself—to have a rich and diverse spiritual life by choosing the path—or the idol if you prefer—that best suits their personality and inclinations at any point in their life. As for the sculptures, eroticism is part of life, of creation. That's how God made us ... so that we can grow and multiply. You see, we are neither hypocrites, nor bigots, and therefore, we are not inconvenienced by those sculptures."

R's sanctimonious little speech seemed to inflame Mrs. Almeida's fury even further. Her excessively colored hair,—which did a poor job of masking her true age—seemed to stand up on her head. Her penciled eyebrows arched skyward, folding the skin of her forehead like an accordion, and her triple chin shook with suppressed indignation as she screeched,

"Young man! The Portuguese, whose proud descendants we are, did their level best to civilize this barbaric region. The first few who landed here set out to destroy the local idols and bring the good word to the native heathens. If those stone statues had anything to do with the one true God, why didn't they lift a single finger to defend their devotees?"

"I don't think you understand. I am trying to say that our religion allows us to see God everywhere, in everything. Because God is omnipresent, we feel free to use a stone statue—an idol—to worship," R replied calmly, deciding not to respond directly to Mrs. Almeida's perspective of local history.

Feeling Monica's reproachful gaze, Thomas Dacruz intervened. He did not want to appear inadequate to the girl who could become his wife. After all, Mrs. Almeida owned several of the local hotels. "Even so, Mr. Sharma, you must admit that 33,000 idols—or gods—, that's ridiculous! And to treat cows as sacred ...," he scoffed.

R sighed. Something deep inside him told him that it was a waste of time to argue with those ignorant bigots. They had no desire to hear about the freedom that Sanatan Dharm offered, preferring their familiar cocoon. Not that it was his intention to convert anyone; he was merely defending his own beliefs.

*His own beliefs?* Suddenly, he realized what he was feeling, what he was thinking. How had he, who used to care little for religion or spirituality, suddenly turned into a follower of Sanatan Dharm, to the point of feeling compelled to defend its fundamental concepts, some of which he had only recently learned from Yogish Doobay? Nonetheless, he could not let Jeremy's taunts go unchecked.

"33,000 or 33 million, Mr. Dacruz, symbolizes the fact that Sanatan Dharm allows each of its followers to have a unique spiritual path, contrary to other, more rigid, more dogmatic religions that show little flexibility to accommodate the varying needs of people. As for the cows, and as I told the young Australians, we believe that it is far wiser in this climate to feed cows, care for them, and in return, to enjoy their milk over a lifetime, than to kill them and eat their meat in just a few days. Milk is the first food that our mother gives us after we are born. Eventually, cow's milk replaces our mother's milk. We are therefore thankful to cows and consider them sacred—like our mothers."

It was evident that R's obstinacy did not please Mrs. Almeida. Jeremy, who seemed highly apprehensive of her mounting rage, chewed on his lips with frustration. "The return trip to his villa won't be cheery," R thought.

"Idol worship is just diabolical," Mrs. Almeida shrieked hysterically.

An incensed R snapped back in a raised voice, "Tell that to the millions of people in the richest parts of the world who watch and mimic every habit of their idols: pop music stars, actors, athletes, TV show hosts ... and even politicians. The truth is that humanity needs to feel inspired by exceptional beings, be they living or imaginary. We are all seeking perfection ... in one form or another, in line with our personality and aspirations. Freedom of thought and belief is extremely important for humans."

The situation was clearly beyond the point of no return, a painful reminder to R of his last morning with Ashraf in Mumbai. Why couldn't his journey be problem-free?

As Jeremy rose and mumbled apologies to Mrs. Almeida and her daughters, R knew that it was time to leave. With a curt nod to the stern-looking group, he turned to follow Jeremy to the yellow convertible.

As he had expected, the return trip took place in leaden silence, except when Jeremy asked coolly, "Would you like to visit Panaji tomorrow?"

He tried to sound as casual as his host, "Sure, why not. My train leaves in the evening, anyway."

Now, in the early morning, recalling the previous afternoon's events, he struggled with that feeling of unease, the same feeling he had experienced in Mumbai. He picked up his belongings, which were scattered on the bed, and packed them in his 'Los Angeles' bag, keeping only a pen, a notepad and his digital camera in his pockets. Then, he went downstairs to have breakfast with his host.

It was another typically English meal. On the menu were toasts, marmalade, bacon and eggs; and as beverages, freshly-pressed orange juice and tea. As he sat down, R felt an urge to dispel the unease that resulted from yesterday's heated arguments. At first, though,



he attempted some light conversation, "Good morning, Jeremy. What a great-looking breakfast. Very English, too."

His host smiled proudly as he lifted his cup of tea towards a large portrait of the queen of England. "Hello R. Yes, as you know, in India, we are also known as 'Anglo-Indians'. So, it's not surprising that many of our traditions are English. Besides, several close relatives of mine left Goa and now live in London, England."

R concealed his surprise at Jeremy's demonstration of allegiance to the British monarch. He had always believed that Portuguese cultural influence had left deeper roots in Goa than just family names and religion. On the other hand, Britain was by far the richer and more powerful of the two European nations. "Which is probably why Goans prefer to identify with it rather than poorer Portugal," he surmised.

"I am sorry if I embarrassed you yesterday, Jeremy."

The ex-financial advisor did not answer immediately, but carried on chewing his bacon. R thought he saw a flicker of anger flash through Jeremy's eyes. Maybe he should not have reminded him of the previous afternoon's events.

Finally, wiping his mouth carefully, Jeremy answered, "R, I share many of my friends' views." His features hardened and his eyes focused on a point on the wall behind R, as if the young man was made of glass. "You see, Goa and the state of Kerala are strongholds of true civilization in this country. I am happy that Vasco de Gama decided to land in this part of India rather than elsewhere. He and his troops did their best, in very little time, to subdue the savages who lived here since the dawn of time and to bring the good word to those pagans."

A startled R sat up straight as if he had just been slapped. His reply was equally blunt, "Really? In fact, the story of that invasion shows how bloody and cruel it was. When Gama arrived in the port of Calicut with his twenty-five war galleons, he looted and burned down over twenty trade vessels that had weighed anchor in the harbor. His men captured the crews of those ships, taking over eight hundred prisoners. When the alarmed population of Calicut sent him a peace envoy in the form of a *bramhan*, Gama then ordered his men to cut the poor man's ears, nose and hands. They threw him in a rowboat, then covered him with the hacked body parts of the prisoners they had made. Gama ordered the mutilated prisoners to be loaded on other rowboats, which were then set on fire. Only the boat in which they had placed the *bramhan* was not burned, as it contained Gama's horrific message to the population of Calicut: make a stew out of all this chopped meat!"

Jeremy dropped his knife and fork as he listened in silence to R. The young man carried on, "The next time Vasco de Gama visited Calicut, the locals sent another *bramhan* to parley. Ill-advised, the poor man brought his two young sons and a nephew along. Gama did not even try to listen to his pleadings; instead, he ordered the children hanged and sent the priest back with their corpses. Prior to that, however, and to show his contempt for that inferior race he had come to conquer, he ordered his men to cut off the priest's ears ... and to sew a dog's ears in their place. Jeremy, the 'civilized' rule of the Portuguese in this part of India started with terror!"

R was clearly shaken after evoking those gory episodes of the relatively recent history of the Goa and Kerala. As for Jeremy, if he was embarrassed, he hid it well by buttering a toast to perfection. When he finished, the Goan looked up and replied, "All that is history now. In those days, violence was commonplace, and much more acceptable than in our times. In military terms, it was necessary for Gama to shock the local population into a state of awe, so that a relatively small number of Portuguese soldiers would be able to subjugate the native population. And don't forget that the locals did not possess any guns or cannons. If they had tried to resist, there would have been a lot more collateral damage. Gama's approach was perhaps the best one in that context."

R's reply was sarcastic. "Yes, it's true that the Portuguese arrived in empty galleons, ready to carry the fabulous riches of India back to Lisbon. They came armed to the teeth with guns, cannons ... and their religion. In those days, however, they showed little compassion to the peace-loving Indians. They did not love them as their neighbors, albeit distant ones; instead, they terrorized them. Nor did they turn the other cheek to those few Indians who dared resist their barbaric invasion; instead, they did horrible things to them, things that they would not have wished others to do to them."

Once again, Jeremy did not reply immediately. He chewed on his toast, avoiding R's burning gaze. Then, swallowing the last morsel, he changed the topic, "They say that there is religious freedom in India, that this is a secular country, a tolerant country and all that. But I don't believe a word of it. Some of my foreign friends, who belong to a large and well-funded religious organization, and who are here to do good deeds, to help some of this country's numerous poor, are facing many hurdles. For example, it's such a scandal that the state of Tamil Nadu dared to legislate to make proselytism illegal. What if other Indian states followed their lead? Then, the poorest of Hindus would not have the choice that our friends now offer. So, is this the so-called freedom of choice that you were talking about yesterday?"

"Sanatan Dharm does not encourage proselytism. Nor does it seek to impose a single religious path through terror; or by purchasing people's consciences for a few rupees, some used clothing and a little food. Those types of approaches cannot lead to long term spiritual benefits for those who accept to be converted. On the contrary, it's better to respect people's freedom of choice and to let everybody decide to set off on their personal spiritual quest as and when they are ready to do so, and then guide them if necessary."

At that point, Jeremy's thin veneer of polite composure finally shattered. "Absolutely not! It is imperative to show the way to the flock so that they don't wander off and get lost. It's the duty of every believer."

"So, loving one's neighbors can lead to causing them grief through the destruction of all that they consider sacred: their temples, their idols, their unique conception of the divine, their freedom to worship in a different way? And what about not killing? Are there exceptions to that rule too?"

A seething Jeremy stood up after R's last scathing reply. He opened his mouth to say something; then, tightening his fist, he got hold of himself. Wiping his lips slowly, deliberately, he threw the silk-lined napkin on the table and said, "We should be leaving soon for that tour of town we talked about yesterday."

"If it does not fit in your schedule, then don't bother. I have seen ... and heard enough," R muttered, upset that his stop in Goa was beginning to feel so much like the one in Mumbai.

"Not a problem at all. In the morning, I have to visit an orphanage that I sponsor. You will be able to see what excellent work we do there," Jeremy exhaled with a forced smile. "After that, we'll drive around town."

Shortly afterwards, R threw his backpack into one of Jeremy's cars, a 1970's Princess this time. It looked nearly new—or, at least, very well maintained. Jeremy noticed R's surprise at the change of car. "I prefer to use this vehicle to travel to the poorer neighborhoods. I love my sports convertible too much; I would hate it if a hawker or a drunkard scratched its paint by accident."

R pointed to the two gardeners working hard under the morning sun, "You don't seem to have any money problems, that's for sure."

"When I was in Mumbai, I made a small fortune through a few wise investments."

"I thought ... weren't you just an investment advisor?"

Jeremy reddened under his milk-chocolate complexion. "I don't remember having disclosed my entire C.V. to you."

"Why didn't just you carry on? What made you leave Mumbai and return to Goa?" R questioned aggressively. Ashok had hinted that Jeremy Souza might have been involved in the improprieties that led to the Mumbai stock market crash a few years ago.

"I had made enough money," Jeremy bragged. "And I felt increasingly embarrassed about the allegations of fraud that hung over several companies linked to the stock exchange. It's amazing how the wrongdoings of a few bad apples can tarnish the image of honest financial investment professionals."

The trip was worlds apart from the previous day. The roads were littered with potholes; and skinny stray dogs, peddlers on bicycles and groups of scruffy-looking kids made driving even harder for the impatient Jeremy.

R took a few pictures of the neighborhood. The houses and the rare commercial buildings seemed dirty and gray as if they had never been painted. As it had just rained, the washed-out remains of posters of election candidates hung in tatters on decrepit wooden fences and mud walls.

"Thankfully, the car's windows are shut, and the air-conditioning filters outside smells," R thought, sighing with relief.

At the orphanage, an elderly manservant welcomed them. He was clad in khaki shorts and a worn out t-shirt riddled with holes—as if its owner had faced a firing squad while wearing it. Shuffling his bare feet, he waved them in, a stained hand towel hanging on his arm. Stopping in the middle of a small veranda and bending in two, the man invited them to sit on a couple of rickety rattan chairs. "Mr. Souza, Father Antonio is seeing some parishioners. He will be with you soon."

Fortunately, R did not have to wait long in the tense silence that settled between him and Jeremy. The priest arrived shortly afterwards, swaying majestically, his hands joined over a barrel-like belly. He smiled at Jeremy; a smile that vanished as he turned towards R. "His nephew must have briefed him on yesterday's clash," R mused.

"Peace be with you, young man. Follow me and you will see how we are helping this distressed, forgotten community."

Through a window, as they followed Father Antonio into a large room, R caught a glimpse of a long line of destitute-looking women and children waiting outside. A couple of nuns were tending to those whose turn had come. One of the nuns noted the names of the women while the other handed them a loaf of bread and some used clothes. R noticed that some of the women were diverted to one end of the room after they had given their name. Once there, they crouched on the bare floor with their children.

"How charitable! But what are those people over there waiting for?" he inquired.

"My guidance, young man. Guidance to find the right path; the only one that leads to a better life, in this world and the next. We are duty bound to preach the good word to those who come to us looking for help. But let's move on to visit the school now," the priest replied.

In the next room, a large number of young children sat together. A stern-looking, middle-aged nun pounded a stick on the chalkboard in an attempt to teach the anemic kids some basic religious facts. A younger nun moved around, goading those kids whose eyes strayed away from the board ... to the bread and dried fruit on a side table.

"This is Jeremy's initiative. He finances our efforts to feed the souls of these orphans—and their bodies as well," Father Antonio declared, waving at the class, then turning around with a beaming smile towards Souza.

R could hold his tongue no longer. "Tell me, in your religion, is your place in heaven determined by the number of people you convert while on Earth?" he blurted out.

The priest's mouth gaped, but no sound came out of it. His rounded eyes and sudden facial redness told R that he had struck a raw nerve ... and that he had probably exceeded the boundaries of hospitality. Glancing at an equally shocked Jeremy, he wondered about the ex-investment advisor, "And what about him? Is he doing this to help these poverty-stricken kids, or is he just trying to wash away his dubious past ... or making a show of compassion to win the hand of one of the Almeida heiresses? Will that compassion last long or only until he feels that he has paid off his debt to society?"

Father Antonio nodded to Jeremy and left without a word. The younger nun, who had clearly heard R's remark, turned away, concealing a smile. Before his host could say a word, R announced, "Jeremy, I have overstayed my welcome. Ashok asked me to bring you that parcel and I did. I should be on my way now. Thanks for your hospitality. ... My backpack is in your car."

The Goan mumbled a few unintelligible words, then turned around and headed for the front entrance. Less than a minute later, R was walking towards the east, in the general direction of Panaji's railway station, hoping to find a taxi or an *autoriksha*. Later, he would shudder when recalling his memorable trek in one of the Goan capital's worst neighborhoods. "If Mom saw me now, she would faint. The poor dear specifically cautioned me against visiting the nastier parts of this region."

The local residents stared curiously at the tall, healthy and prosperous-looking young man who walked their streets in broad daylight. Who was he? What was he looking for? Girls? Drugs? All the attention he generated prevented R from taking the pictures he wanted. And yet, there were some unusual sights that would have looked great in his collection of depressing scenes of India; that collection which he still wished to post on a website someday.

For example, there was that drunkard who had slumped onto the muddy ground—although it was not yet noon. His back resting against one of the wooden posts supporting a dilapidated tavern, the man snored, blissfully oblivious of the stray dog that was relieving itself only a few feet away.

The insalubrious surroundings were definitely not appetizing. However, R had eaten only one toast during the morning's unpleasant breakfast and as his stomach could neither see nor smell, it rumbled impatiently. The hungry young traveler looked around for a place where he could buy a snack—one that would meet basic standards of hygiene, that is. However, there were no groceries or restaurants in the immediate vicinity. The only commercial activity in sight consisted of a few heavily made-up girls wearing skimpy miniskirts. The young women swayed their hips suggestively as they paced back and forth in the shade of the palm trees lining the street. A few of them called out to him first in the local dialect, then in English—in vain; he was not interested. As they gave up and turned away, he covertly took a photo of the scene.

His hunger conspired with the depressing panorama and led him to reflect on what was supposed to be a region known for fun and pleasure. "This is definitely not one of those carefully selected scenes of the modern and polished India that people see in Bollywood movies or TV serials. Here, the majority of people survive any way they can, like these marginalized girls, or those kids on the beach, begging from the tourists. For them, no cell phone, no extravagant clothes or jewels, no fancy, imported cars and no palace-like villas."

Keeping a steady pace as he mulled on these somber thoughts, R soon reached a main highway. "What luck!" he thought, noticing a taxi dropping off a man at a nearby intersection. Driven by a mounting urge to leave Goa, he ran in its direction, frantically waving his arms to draw the driver's attention.

Later, at Panaji's train station, he enjoyed a filling meal, once again taking care to select only well-cooked items. He then boarded the first train going south. "Next stop, Madurai!" the young man exhaled, dropping onto the seat.

Strangely, as the train picked up speed, R recalled one of his brother's letters, several years ago, in which Ashok described his first encounter with North American natives, "Once, I visited Nandan Muttu when he was living in Canada, and he took me to a pow-wow to see the local 'Indians'. Yes, that's how they are still called over there. After that day, whenever somebody asked me where I was from, I felt tempted to specify that I was born in India, not North America. You see, R, a few hundred years ago, a host of European adventurers rushed to 'discover' our rich country—to plunder it and bring back its fabulous riches; gold, jewels, silks and spices. At the time, the tales that made their way to Europe through the Middle East had excited the covetousness of many. That's how Columbus, Gama and the others set off. Fortunately for us, upon discovering America, Columbus boasted to his sponsors that he had found the much coveted Indies. However, others like Gama succeeded where he failed, with unfortunate consequences for the population of coastal, south-western India."

## **Part 6**

### **Heritage and Passion in Madurai**

## CHAPTER 21

Before he got into the train for his long trip south, R had taken a brief digestive walk near the station. Coming across an Internet café, he sent his brother a short email, "Mission accomplished for Jeremy Souza. Here are a few photos." He had decided not to tell Ashok about his clashes in Goa, not wanting his elder brother to wonder why he was repeatedly getting into situations of conflict.

Later that evening, before he fell asleep in the train, he had a long conversation with Mohini. He could no longer conceal to her what had happened in Mumbai and in Goa, and therefore he told her everything. For once, he did most of the talking and his bubbly girlfriend lent him a sympathetic ear.

"You poor dear. And to think that I actually envied you for seeing Mumbai and being so close to my favorite movie stars. Now I understand better how your days and nights must be like."

She said that in a serious tone, very different from the one she normally used. Gone was the spoiled-brat, frivolous banter. After a moment's hesitation, as if she peeked over her shoulder to make sure that her father was not listening, she whispered, "Come back soon. ... I love you."

As she hung up just after, R smiled. They spoke so little of love when they were together in Delhi. They had been raised in a social class in which people did not indulge in romance, let alone sex before marriage. Even the Marxist Vikram Varma subscribed to such notions of propriety. "Especially when it concerns his own daughter," R mused, "and in spite of the fact that he is a proponent of revolutionary social reforms!"

In the Sharma household, his parents rarely spoke of his relationship with Mohini. When they were forced to do so, they prudishly talked about his 'friendship with Professor Varma's daughter'.

Brinda, one of Mohini's university friends and a student of sociology, had once hypothesized, "The freedom to live and love freely that existed over two thousand years ago when the *Kam Sutr* was written, was squashed by the perils of everyday life under Mogul occupation. Then, British rulers imposed constipated, Victorian morals upon us for over one hundred and fifty years. Such a prolonged trauma turned an open, freedom-loving society into the rigid, authoritarian, male-dominated and hypocritical one that it is nowadays."

The trip to the temple-city of Madurai, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, proved to be the most tedious part of his journey. After completing the first leg of that trip by train, he embarked on a noisy and smelly bus, filled with villagers returning home from town with baskets loaded with goods. He held his breath for most of the voyage, at least until the young woman seated in front of him, and who could not stop coughing, alighted from the bus. "I don't want to carry an incurable infection back home, and certainly not to America," he worried.

The toothless old man who replaced the sick woman placed a strange-looking, lidded basket under his seat. R recoiled as soon as he guessed what it contained. The snake charmer grinned reassuringly and lifted his basket's lid to show him that his cobra was actually napping peacefully.

The bus was traveling along a particularly bumpy Karnataka road, and R was unable to express his concern to the man as he did not speak a word of Kannada, the local language. So, through the rest of that trip, the anxious young traveler's eyes remained riveted to the basket's lid.

About an hour later, the bus stopped to refuel. It was to be another memorable moment for R. The incident he then witnessed would remind him of the teachings of his guru, in particular those dealing with *karm* and *Maya*, the illusion.

The rain had stopped. A rainbow colored the sky. A few passengers wandered out of the bus to relieve themselves behind the bushes bordering the road. R got down too, his camera in hand. "It's regrettable that I don't speak the local language, otherwise I would have asked the driver if we are safe from *daku*<sup>196</sup> attacks around here." Then, detecting an exceedingly foul smell, he turned around to locate its source, pinching his nostrils tight.

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<sup>196</sup> Bandits who hide in the hills and attack travelers for loot or ransom.  
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"How revolting! If people need to do that, they should go far away—at least a hundred feet away."

He then saw the cause of his revulsion. The bus must have stopped close to a town, because there was a large, open-air garbage dump, located within a stone's throw from the road.

He was about to retreat into the bus when he noticed a group of people walking in the middle of the garbage. Most of them were children, bony, filthy and barely clothed in a few dirty rags. Accompanying them were their elder sisters and their mothers, some of them carrying babies and toddlers on their hips. All those people seemed to be ... mining the garbage dump! Indeed, through his camera's zoom, R could clearly see them digging with their bare hands in the filth, picking up anything that seemed reusable ... or edible: plastic utensils, clothes, food.

R took a few photos. Then, unable to watch the scene any longer, he turned away, shuddering. He recalled his guru's wise words about the challenges that *Maya* creates, and the need to cultivate detachment.

Suddenly, all the passengers standing outside turned their eyes towards the dump. The cries they heard were piercing. At first, R thought they were wails of pain caused by an accident. "Maybe one of the little scavengers got hurt," he thought. Then, he realized that the little boy who was causing all this commotion was actually shrieking with joy, waving something in his right hand as he ran down a trash hill towards his mother. R wished again that he could understand what the boy was saying.

Turning to a fellow passenger with an inquisitive expression, he pointed to the boy. The man smiled and showed his gold ring. "So that's it," R guessed. "The boy found a ring. He knows that it is worth a lot of money, perhaps enough to keep his family in food for several months. They seem to have pulled some luck out of their *karmic* account. If that ring has any value, they will certainly find somebody in town who will offer a few hundred rupees for it. That should bring a few rays of sunshine into their otherwise miserable existence."

Then, the warm, pleasant feeling vanished. "Wait a minute! Somebody probably *lost* that ring ... maybe while putting out the trash. It could have been a token of love, or it could be part of a family's heirloom, inherited from a deceased parent. So, while this little boy and his mother rejoice, others may be crying after losing this piece of jewelry. One person's grief becomes another's joy! Yesterday, these same people were howling with hunger and tomorrow they will feast merrily. This is *Maya* at work—the divine *lila*, as Doobay says.

Heeding the driver's call, the young man climbed back into the bus, reflecting philosophically on what he had just witnessed.

After a whole day traveling in Karnataka, the southern state bordered by Maharashtra to the north, Kerala to the south and Andhra Pradesh to the east, R was exhausted. He therefore welcomed a late afternoon stopover in the coastal town of Mangalore. It allowed him to freshen up, have a bite to eat, and call Mohini. His girlfriend comforted him, "Just a few more days and it will be over. Hang in there, Hero!"

"That's right. Just two more parcels to deliver and I'll be free to return home. But Mo, in the most challenging moments of this journey, I can't help wonder what these mysterious elephant-shaped paperweights contain that warrant such secrecy. What is so important in those messages that Ashok needs me to deliver them in person? That being said, one of the benefits of this mission is that my backpack smells of sandalwood ... and, believe me, that's a great advantage when you have to travel by bus around here with ..."

His girlfriend interrupted, "Why don't you just ask Ashok?"

R's mind went blank for a few seconds. "Well ... yes, that's right; I should have asked him that a long time ago. I guess when he asked me to undertake this 'delivery trip', I was so happy at the thought that I would be going to America that I never thought of asking him what he was actually sending in those parcels. I just assumed that they were gifts for his friends. ... You are right Mo—as always. I'll definitely ask him that next time I send him an email."

"Why not now, right there in Mangalore?"

"My dear Mo, I have been wandering in this little town for an hour and I have not yet found an Internet café. It'll have to wait until I reach Madurai."

"That is so surprising. The capital of Karnataka, Bangalore—or Bengaluru as it's now called—is renowned all over the world as an IT services hub. I would have expected the whole State to be swarming with Internet cafés."

R burst out laughing, "If you could just see the state of this State, you would change your mind fast, Mo. Don't worry, I will bring back lots of photos for that website that I talked to you about; you know, the one in which I plan to show the real India. Talking about websites, I have been traveling all day in rural Karnataka and no one seems to have heard of the Internet. Oh yes, there are public TV sets in a few village community halls. But seriously, Mohini, there is a world of difference between Bangalore and the rural areas of Karnataka."

R resumed his journey later with a pinch of regret. His itinerary did not allow him to visit Hampi, the famous capital of the ancient empire of Vijayanagar, located closer to the center of Karnataka. For over three hundred years, this large southern kingdom prospered from the spice trade under the protection of *Telegu*<sup>197</sup> rajas—at least until they were defeated by a coalition of Moslem sultans.

Along the way, R was able to surmount his linguistic challenges sufficiently to purchase a little vial of sandalwood oil for his girlfriend. The town of Mysore, where they stopped briefly, is reputed for the excellent quality of that precious commodity. "I am sure she will like it. She loves perfumes so much," he thought, sighing.

The rest of the journey to Madurai was calm. The train crossed through the north of Kerala, stopping at Calicut, the same coastal town where the ruthless Vasco de Gama had landed. There, R boarded another train that took him well into the heartland of the State. Glancing through the window, he was able to distinguish the unique landscape of that tropical region, strewn with rivers, lakes, streams and marshes that still shielded its inhabitants from the depredations of non-sustainable development. "Here, the locals still fish, and farm rice, vegetables and coconuts in relative peace." From his history lessons, R knew that in ancient times, Kerala was a popular destination for Phoenician, Roman and Chinese seafaring traders who valued the region's spices and its other precious commodities. As he left the State behind, his only regret was that there was no time to watch Kerala's famous *kathakali*<sup>198</sup> dance.

After yet another change of train in Pollachi, the young traveler embarked on the last leg of his journey to Madurai. Along the way, he took a long, hard look at the results of his trip so far. Among Ashok's friends, one had died a war hero; another was sliding fast on a slippery slope, driven by hatred; and after succumbing to the temptation of easy money, the third one was trying to buy himself a new, squeaky-clean image. "What will the next one on the list be like?" he wondered. "But then, I don't really care. Once I have delivered the last parcel, I can simply forget about them."

He then remembered one of Yogish Doobay's last recommendations. "Try hard to observe and understand everything you encounter through the prism of my teachings." R wondered if he had been able to do so until now. Or had he allowed himself to be misled by *Maya* instead? He knew that upon his return, his guru would quiz him about his experiences, and would want to know how he had applied the principles learned. Doobay would look for evidence that he had remained detached in different types of situations. "Maybe he wants to confirm that I can become a *yogi*. Honestly, judging by my two most recent stopovers, I have a long way to go. I got carried away by anger. Perhaps I can still improve over the rest of this trip. Actually, I *should* do that. Yes, I'll do my level best to remain detached and unaffected while being an active participant."

As he munched with little appetite onto a cheese and tomato sandwich bought in the restaurant car, R thought of Nandan Muttu. The physician was a rare bird indeed. After studying medicine in New Delhi, Nandan left for England where he practiced a few years before moving to the east coast of Canada. A few years later, he was back in India, in Madurai, his home town. "I can understand why he left England; the weather was probably too wet and gloomy. He probably found Canada just a little too cold. But why on earth did he return to India?"

When he called Nandan from the train to confirm his arrival, the physician insisted on picking him up at the station. R hoped to ask Nandan several questions. Why had he left

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<sup>197</sup> Hindu ethnic group living mostly in southeast India, and whose language is Telegu.

<sup>198</sup> Classical dance form in which the performers wear brightly colored, spectacular costumes and masks to enact popular scenes adapted from the poorans, the Mahabharat and the Ramayan.



such developed countries to return to poverty-stricken India? How was life like in rich countries? Did Ashok have a girlfriend? If yes, why was he hiding her? And, last but not least, in case Nandan's elephant also contained a secret message, what was this all about? He knew that obtaining answers to these questions would depend on how well he would get along with Ashok's friend.

R did not remember much about Dr. Nandan Muttu. Indeed, the medical intern had barely spoken when they had met at the university about seven years ago. A forced, somewhat arrogant half-smile brightening his otherwise bland face, Nandan had retreated in the background after shaking R's hand, letting the others do most of the talking.

As the train finally screeched to a halt in Madurai, R's gaze fell immediately on Ashok's friend. Nandan Muttu had changed tremendously. The chubby medical student with a black mustache and thick glasses had turned into a slimmer and more muscular man. The mustache was gone and so were the glasses. The smile was still a little ironic, though, and a glimpse of his eyes seemed to reveal a lot. There was cold determination in them now; as if he had lived through harsh times. R hoped that this was not an indication of trouble; the kind of trouble that he had encountered in his last two stopovers. However, he was prepared to face any challenge now. ... At least, he thought so.

After the usual exchange of civilities, the two men boarded a taxi—a Premier—that seemed to be waiting for Nandan. R found the heat outside the train station oppressive, and felt relieved at the relative coolness in the car—thanks to the breeze blowing through the windows. Sighing, the sweating young man hoped that he would be able to shower soon.

As the vehicle weaved its way through the traffic towards the north along West Veli Road, Nandan turned towards R. "It's a real pleasure to see you after all these years. Ashok and I were close friends at the University, you know. When I lived in Canada, they flew north a couple of times to visit me. You are looking very fit, R, and I know what I am talking about; you see, I am now into wellness. I opened a health center here shortly after I returned. I'll show it to you later. You'll be surprised; it's a new concept around here."

Nandan's revelation startled the young man. " ... 'They'! This time I *must* find out who that other person is. I'll ask Nandan, since he mentioned it." But first, R acknowledged the compliment, "Thank you Nandan. I practice *hath yog* and *pranayam* regularly."

"Really? Sorry if I look surprised, but I thought that a young man like you would prefer weight training. Anyway, you are missing some of Madurai's most spectacular scenery, so look outside. This is an ancient city; at least two thousand five hundred years old. Don't worry; I will personally take you around some of the sites worth visiting. I am assuming that you will accept our hospitality, of course." He rushed to add, "I would be deeply offended if you said no."

"Actually, I was just going to say 'thank you'."

Nandan carried on, pointing through the window, "We are now on North Veli Road. This road and the other three Veli Roads—West, South and East—were built on the demolished foundations of the ancient fort of Madurai, at a time when the city needed to expand. You see, this town has always been a major trade hub for spices and textiles. I would also like to take you to a display of *bharat natyam*, that ancient, classical dance style. A visit to our great 'temple-city' would not be complete without that."

Nandan's verbal effervescence surprised R. The physician was so different from the reserved university student he had met years ago. What had changed him so much? R thanked his host again and their conversation about the city and its history went on. A few minutes later, as the taxi drove over a bridge, Nandan pointed to a cluster of high-rise apartment blocks, "I live in the Singarayar Colony. We prepared the guest room for you. By we, I mean my father and me. He is retired and a widower, and I am not married yet," the physician said with a wide grin, uncovering two rows of perfectly white teeth.

That remark reminded R that he wanted to ask Nandan about Ashok's hypothetical American girlfriend. However, the loquacious doctor just ignored his gaping mouth and carried on, "People ask us why we live in an apartment when I am a doctor who practiced for years in England and Canada, and my father has now retired after years of practice as an *ayurvedic* healer. They expect us to live in one of those new, luxurious villas built for 'high-tech' expatriates and rich Indians returning home from America. But you see, we decided to invest everything we had in our health center. In a few years, when we break even, I'll think about buying a house and getting married."

R was curious by nature and Nandan seemed very talkative. The young traveler was about to ask him some of his unanswered questions when the taxi halted abruptly in front of one of the apartment blocks. "Too bad. It'll be for later, then," he thought.

"We're home," Nandan said, getting out of the Premier and handing a bank note to the driver. "I imagine that you must be exhausted, R, especially if you traveled all the way from Goa without sleeping in a real bed. I suggest that you take a nap after lunch, then, later in the afternoon, I'll take you on a guided tour of the health center that we are so proud of."

R nodded with a ghost of a smile. Indeed, he was tired; too tired to engage in an active conversation with Nandan. As a physician, the latter had easily diagnosed R's ailment and the best therapy for it: rest.

The Muttus' apartment was vast, airy and bright. As he passed its threshold, leaving his shoes at the door, R experienced a deep feeling of serenity. He bowed to Nandan's father, hands joined in traditional salutation, "Namasté."

"Vanakkam," the older man replied with a welcoming, indulgent smile.

R immediately regretted that he had not saluted Nandan's father in Tamil, especially since 'Vanakkam' was one of the few words he knew.

The wizened elder seemed in good shape for his age. In the car, Nandan told him that his father had recently retired at the age of seventy after helping thousands of patients through *ayurvedic* therapy. He also confided that his father's excellent reputation as a traditional healer was such that people traveled hundreds of miles for a consultation; at least until they moved to their current apartment without leaving a forwarding address at Mr. Muttu's previous practice.

"That was the only way he could retire for good," Nandan explained in the taxi. "Now he is writing a book on his vast experience as an *ayurvedic* healer. He already wrote a lot for the web pages of our wellness center. I'll show you that later."

After a long, relaxing shower, R joined his hosts for lunch. The food, according to Nandan, had been prepared under strict *ayurvedic* principles ... and was delicious. "This is so good! I have never eaten a better meal. And your apartment is so peaceful, so bright and airy. I felt at ease immediately."

Smiling at the compliment, Mr. Muttu answered in English, as R did not speak Tamil and he did not speak Hindi. "The owner of this building is a friend of mine. He told us that he specifically hired an architect who was familiar with the Shilp Shastr, the main scripture of the science of *vastu*. You see, young man, this whole building was designed with *vastu* principles in mind. That's why we rented this apartment, and that's also why you experience a feeling of serenity in here. All its apartments and rooms are aligned with the vibrations of *prakriti*; and, as you know, we are one with Mother Nature."

"My guru told me about *vastu*, but I am not sure that I believe in it yet," R said.

"Why not?" Mr. Muttu asked sternly.

"Well, it's one of those concepts that are difficult to measure."

"Young man, can you see radio waves?"

"... No."

"The radio can. Can you see the magnetic field that surrounds the earth?"

"...."

"Well, a compass can. These fields exist, young man. They influence us. *Vastu* just acknowledges that there are many unseen, yet existing forces out there, and they all influence our lives to some degree."

Sensing his guest's increasing embarrassment, Nandan intervened, changing the topic. "As for the meal, R, my father prepared everything—with my help, of course. The ingredients and cooking methods are matched to our *doshic* profiles; I mean those of my father and my own. We should determine your profile while you are here with us; that way, you will be able to experience the beneficial effects of a diet that is tailored to your specific needs."

"My mother says that I have *vata* dominance. That's why she insists that I eat *kapha*-type food to compensate."

The Muttus glanced at each other, grinning. Nandan's father explained, "It's not as simple as that. You need to know your *tridosh* profile. That's your unique combination of the three *dosh*s. For example, you could be half *vata*, a quarter *kapha* and another quarter *pita*.

Tailoring your diet after you determine your *tridosh* profile will allow you to optimize your nutrition, and contribute to your wellness."

"R, as we learn to know ourselves better, we can gradually become our own wellness coach. Notice that I said 'coach' and not 'doctor'."

"And why?"

"Because in western medicine, physicians treat diseases, while in *ayurved*, people take charge of their own wellness by knowing themselves and taking preventive measures. By being proactive, people who practice *ayurved* avoid diseases and keep in good health. You see, *ayurved* is a holistic approach. It takes into account the entire person: mental, physical and emotional."

After lunch, as Mr. Muttu retired for a nap, R decided it was the right moment to accomplish his mission. "Nandan, here is a parcel that Ashok asked me to give you in person."

His host took the brown paper parcel and felt it, then sniffed it, his face brightening at the characteristic smell of sandalwood. He tore the wrapping paper impatiently, tossing it to the floor. Then his eyes seemed to fill with emotion as he turned the elephant-shaped paperweight in his hands. Bringing it closer to his nose, he smelled it again, this time inhaling deeply and slowly. He closed his eyes briefly, seeming to travel back in time to some distant memories. His fingers caressed the gems and the small, gold-colored metal beads that peppered the surface of the paperweight. Then, his features hardening, Nandan twisted the head of the elephant ... and extracted a rolled-up sheet of paper.

From across the table, through the thin paper, R recognized the handwriting of his elder brother. Staring at Nandan's face, he observed a hint of a smile taking shape at the corners of the physician's mouth. Then, suddenly, Nandan rose, excused himself and left, carrying the elephant and the message to an adjacent room. When he returned a short while later, his hands were empty.

Once again, R felt an urge to find out what this was all about. Curiosity was indeed his major weakness. "What secret do these messages contain which compels them to conceal these immediately—with the exception of Jeremy?" he wondered.

His host's smile was intriguing when he said, "R, thank you for bringing this precious parcel to me. I would like to reiterate my invitation to share our humble dwelling for a few days. I would be happy to show you around Madurai and some of the region's major attractions."

But R was only thinking of the parcel. Curiosity won over good manners as he blurted, "Thank you, but what about this note that was rolled up inside the elephant? Can I ask you what Ashok wrote on it?"

Nandan's reply was polite, but firm, "I am sorry, R. All I can tell you is that it is about a person whose name I cannot reveal."

Although rebuffed by his host, R was too eager to find out something—anything—about those mysterious messages. After all, there was only one stop left, and although he planned to ask Ashok about the puzzling deliveries, there was no guarantee that his elder brother would provide a satisfactory explanation. His plea therefore sounded desperate, "It's a message from my own brother Ashok; I recognized his handwriting. Maybe that person is someone I know."

"Maybe, R. But I repeat, I cannot tell you who that person is."

Then, noticing the young traveler's obvious frustration, and feeling some sympathy for him, Nandan added, "But I can tell you that this is linked to an event that we lived about seven years ago, as university students. By 'we', I mean your brother Ashok, Vijay, Gautam, Jeremy, Ashraf and me."

Feeling that his guest was still not satisfied, Nandan changed topics, "Madurai is such an interesting, historical city. You will discover several of Bharat's major attractions here."

"That will be great," R replied grudgingly. Nonetheless, he was pleased that he had finally learned something about those mysterious wooden elephants. "If Gautam Toolsi is more talkative, I might be able to uncover the secret of the messages. Of course, I will also ask Ashok what this is all about," he thought.

He then told his host about his plan to emigrate to America, and explained under which circumstances Ashok had asked him to undertake the deliveries. He mentioned that he would be making a final stop in Bodhgaya to deliver the last parcel to Gautam.

"Nandan, I know that you have lived several years in England and in Canada. How is life like in those rich, developed countries?"

"From the plan that you just shared with me, it seems that you are very keen to leave Bharat as soon as possible. However, you are right to want to find out more about what you may be getting into. Let me tell you about my own experiences in foreign lands. But first, a word of warning: what I have been through in England and Canada may be very different from what you will experience in America. In other words, don't rely on what I will tell you to decide whether you will emigrate and remain there like Ashok, or return after a few years like me ... or simply stay in India."

"All right, Nandan. I'll keep that in mind. Now, please tell me how it is over there." R struggled to suppress a smile. How preposterous Nandan's last option was! Staying *here*? Was he serious? What would he *do* here?

"Many wonder why I returned to the dusty and scorchingly hot streets of Madurai when I had made it to England and Canada. What happened? Wasn't life there heavenly compared to the miseries that most people endure daily in India?"

Nandan exhaled a long sigh, then shut his eyes, as if evoking an unpleasant subject. "I'll tell you later how life is there. First I would like to start by explaining why I returned. It's a long story, so please bear with me."

R nodded in silence, suddenly tense. He hoped that this was not going to be another unpleasant moment like those he had faced in Mumbai and Goa.

"When I left India as a qualified physician, I firmly believed that the *ayurved* practiced by my father had no 'scientific' basis, and, consequently, no medical value. I made fun of it openly, and that probably hurt his feelings ... although he will never admit it. I pursued my medical training, then practiced conventional western medicine in England. There, I understood many things. First, there is an increasing interest for traditional therapies and remedies in the West—especially in California, where you are planning to go. More and more people complain about being prescribed too many drugs, many of which have unpleasant side effects. While I was living in the West, North-Americans and Europeans were beginning to understand the importance of prevention through a balanced diet and a healthy lifestyle. As a result, natural remedies like garlic, ginger, ginkgo and many other spices and herbs were growing popular. In addition, *yog* clubs are still mushrooming in the West ... while here in Bharat, stricken with an inferiority complex since the days of British rule, we scoff at our learned *yogis*."

"Okay. So, is that what made you turn to *ayurved*?" R asked, impatient to skip this introductory conversation and find out what he could expect to see and enjoy in the 'developed world'.

"Yes. Eventually, I realized the value of that science. Yes, it is a science; a science based on centuries of observation and experiment—not just a couple of years of laboratory testing like many modern drugs."

"So, you practiced *ayurved* in England and Canada?" R prompted again. Clearly, this was working; Nandan would soon finish his story, then talk about more important things.

"I tried, but I wasn't an expert practitioner like my father, although I knew a lot, having heard him talk about it during my entire childhood. But eventually, I had to admit that things did not work out as I expected. The problem is that, in England and Canada, at least where I lived, people were not ready to accept that valuable wisdom can come out of a poverty-stricken country like India. I found that arrogance and jealousy were often significant barriers, and that *yog* and *ayurved* could only be taken seriously after they had first been re-branded locally. Indian-style *yog* practice and *ayurvedic* preventive medicine are frequently dismissed as 'esoteric' or 'mystical'; and their few local practitioners jeered at and called 'new-age hippies'."

Nandan paused to drink some water. Noticing R's puzzled expression, he clarified, "When you will be in North-America, you will come across various flavors of *yog* marketed to the well-heeled and to the wellness-conscious crowd. I was bewildered to hear about modified versions of *hath yog* branded as 'aerobic *yog*', 'muscular *yog*' ... and many other new flavors."

R smiled. "So, these new flavors are improvements of the basic *hath yog*?"

"Nonsense. Our *hath yog asans* were developed after hundreds of years of experimentation and the observation of their effects on people's wellness. Rishi Patanjali then compiled the work of our ancient *yogis* in the classic *Yog Sutr*. The current fad about *yog* in

the West, including all those funny variations, is driven only by commercial interests. How can anyone add flavors to an already perfected practice, and then claim that 'muscular *yog*' or 'strawberry-flavored *yog*' will improve the original *hath yog*? In fact, some of these weird combinations are akin to mixing oil and water: a pointless exercise at best!"

After he stopped laughing, R asked, "Why is that?"

"First, *hath yog* and *pranayam* should not be practiced in isolation from the other six steps of *raj yog*. Then, *hath yog*, on its own, offers a comprehensive range of poses that revitalizes the body from head to toe; there are even *asans* for eye muscles. These postures, if practiced under the guidance of a qualified and experienced guru, can contribute to wellness without any risk of injury or excessive wear and tear of the joints. Although *hath yog* focuses on careful muscle stretching and gentle exercising, under qualified guidance, *hath yogis* can learn to focus their consciousness inwards on internal organs, not just on their muscles. You see, R, many of these *asans* can help to stimulate internal organs such as the pancreas, the thyroid and other important glands, thus keeping the entire body at its peak. Those who understand that *hath yog* is not merely a collection of stretching poses can combine smart, internally focused *hath yog* with *pranayam* techniques to boost their state of wellness, and even cure diseases linked to internal organs."

Nandan paused for a drink of water, then carried on, "Also, guided by a knowledgeable guru, you can learn to control the link between the *annamay kosh*, your physical body, and the *pranamay kosh*, your mind and central nervous system. That is achievable through prolonged concentration during the practice of *asans* and *pranayam*. The abilities that you gradually uncover—powers that you never imagined you could possess—will amaze you!"

"My guru mentioned that too. Actually, one of my father's friends in Delhi claims that he learned to control his blood pressure ... just by concentrating."

Nandan smiled, "In the West, many patients and health care workers I met with believe that internal organs are just automatic 'machines' over which we have no control. However, we know that through *hath yog* and *pranayam*, one can learn to influence many of those 'automatic' physical functions like metabolism, heartbeat, eyesight, appetite, and so on. Such abilities can lead you to a better life, in which *you* are in control of your health, ... and therefore of your success and happiness in life. That is why I recommend that people do not practice just those two steps of *raj yog*. Go beyond *hath yog* and *pranayam*. There is so much more power to discover and acquire!"

R paused to digest his host's views. He had begun to understand the benefits of *hath yog* and *pranayam* a few years ago, but he was not sure that he was interested to probe deeper and look further—not at this stage anyway. He was too focused on his American dream for that. "Why didn't you just practice western medicine, Nandan? After all, you are a qualified and trained physician. You could have kept *ayurved* practice for yourself and your close ones."

"I thought about it. But then, as I kept comparing western, curative medicine with the holistic and preventative *ayurved*, the choice became unbearably clear. People should not live reckless lives then expect that curative medicine will perform miracles for them; they should practice *hath yog*, *pranayam* and *ayurved* to stay healthy. Western, curative medicine focuses on fixing health problems in isolation, when, in fact, our health depends on so many other factors, including our state of mind and our emotions. Traditional medicine, on the other hand, understands the contribution of those other factors to a patient's ability to heal and remain healthy."

R was beginning to guess that his host had faced mounting frustration in the two countries where he had lived, so he asked, "You were disappointed to see that medicine was a highly commercial, an excessively mechanistic activity over there?"

"That's right. But in addition to that, there were a lot of other factors that prompted me to return to Bharat, to my motherland. I'll tell you more about that later, but in summary, I'll just say that it was impossible for me to promote the practice of *ayurved* over there. I was not ready to disguise this Indian gem under a 'localized' and more acceptable brand just as those *yog* clubs do. And in addition to the arrogant and superior attitudes prevailing in those countries towards Indian discoveries, I also knew that I was on a collision course with the interests of large, well-entrenched pharmaceutical companies. Indeed, how can a preventive approach be tolerated by corporations that generate huge profits from curative drugs?"

He paused, looking out the window, then added, "I also realized how different we are. Here, in the streets below, you'll see and meet a lot of poor people ... but they'll all smile back at you. Over there, even the rich people don't smile ... unless there is something in it for them."

R persuaded Nandan that he did not need a nap after all. It was nearly 2 p.m. when they left the apartment to walk to the Muttus' wellness center.

As they climbed down the staircase, R remembered to ask his host one of his many unanswered questions, "Nandan, when Ashok came to visit you in Canada, did he bring his girlfriend along? How is she like?"

## CHAPTER 22

Nandan burst out laughing, "I gave you a few glimpses of life in 'rich, developed countries'. Isn't that what you are interested in?"

"Yes, and this also," R replied; but it was clear from Nandan's tone that he was not about to reveal anything about Ashok's girlfriend.

They cut across a small neighborhood park, walking under the scorching Madurai sunshine while discussing the relative merits of England and Canada. After just a few minutes, R wiped his sweaty forehead.

"Don't worry," Nandan said, smiling indulgently at his young guest's discomfort, "it's not much further away now."

"How is your health center called, Nandan?"

"Simply the Madurai Ayurved Center. Over here, no need to conceal the roots of this therapeutic approach in order to attract customers. That being said, for decades after independence, many of us—including myself—wrongly believed in the absolute supremacy of western curative medicine."

R turned his gaze towards his host, waiting for him to continue.

"Yes, just ten years ago, it was still commonplace for middle-class Indians to ridicule our ancestral practices, such as *jyotish* and *ayurved*. If you are a Bollywood fan, you may recall that in those days Indian movies frequently echoed this inferiority complex—by poking fun at *jyotishis* for example. These days, fortunately, I am relieved to see the timid beginnings of what I hope will be a surge in interest for our native holistic medicine, integrated with *vastu* and *jyotish*. I believe that the increasing disappointment experienced with some aspects of western culture—, which our upper and middle classes so readily adopted since independence—will lead many back to our ancestral values and treasures. People will come to their senses and understand that our age-old wisdom was right to claim that we are one with nature—one with the entire universe actually—and that it is therefore in our best interests to seek harmony in our lives, with our environment, with others. Yes, R; I am hopeful that we will start honoring our roots soon ... instead of scorning them."

"Well said, Nandan. But what about your life in England and in Canada? How did you adapt to the way of life there? How did you bridge the cultural gap? Was it difficult?"

"Like many of our fellow Indians who leave in search of a better life—material life, that is—I made a lot of effort to adapt to the local culture in those countries. Among many other differences with our own culture, I learned that modesty is not necessarily a virtue over there. On the contrary, one has to constantly brag about one's achievements—real or imaginary—to succeed ... by climbing over the heads of fellow beings. What a contrast with what I had been taught since early childhood in India. I had been raised to respect others, my elders, my teachers and my parents. There, the word 'respect' seems nearly taboo."

R looked at him in silence, taken aback. He had never given serious thought about possible cultural integration issues.

The physician smiled and went on, "In the beginning, when I behaved as I had been brought up to—that is, to show respect to others—people often smiled and sometimes commented 'It must be cultural'. Although their tone was not harsh, I understood that they had a lower opinion of me because of the way I behaved."

"Maybe they just meant that you had a different cultural upbringing than theirs," R lamely tried to justify.

"If it was just that! No, in fact, I now believe that it is a coded expression which means that our values and behavior seem strange—and obviously inferior—but they choose to be polite about it."

R now looked clearly shocked, but Nandan continued, "Demand for young employees with top education and skills forces them to be less openly critical of minorities than in the past, but their superiority complex and mistrust of other types of people is not likely to disappear soon, at least not based on my own experience. You'll notice, once you are in North America, that you may have to work twice as hard as your native colleagues to prove yourself in the eyes of your employers, gain their trust and—maybe—their respect. Because of your origins, employers will tend to underestimate you, at least until you demonstrate that you can do all that your CV states. However, they may not be as demanding with their local

employees. You see, not so long ago, through arrogance or ignorance or both, many were still convinced that Europe and North America were the only civilized parts of the world."

R looked at Nandan. His features were hard now. His eyes seemed lost in distant reminiscences, as if he was reliving painful memories.

"This is not very encouraging," R thought, sighing. Nandan's words had driven a chill into his heart, although he was not ready to admit it. After a few more steps and a moment's hesitation, the young would-be migrant asked, "Do you think everyone feels the same way? After all, Ashok does not seem unhappy there."

"Maybe you should confirm that by asking him," Nandan replied cryptically. "As for me, I had enough of always having to prove myself to everybody, everyday; at work, in the stores, in the streets, and in my neighborhood."

He paused and then added, "I knew for sure that the time had come for my fiancée and me to return to Bharat when it was suggested that we change our names to integrate better."

"Change your names?" R repeated, flabbergasted. He knew that Indian call center employees were sometimes asked to do that to sound 'local' to their foreign callers, but Nandan was a qualified physician!

"That's right. They went as far as suggesting English-sounding names that we could use."

"Who were 'they'? English or Canadian?"

Nandan smiled bitterly. "Neither. They were Indian immigrants. We met them during a party in England and chatted. At some point, we complained to them about our growing feeling of unease, at the reluctance we felt at having to recant so many of our beliefs and values in order to integrate ... and that was a moment I will never forget."

"What happened?"

"Sneering at us, they flippantly suggested that my fiancée Annalakshmi should change her name to Anna, and that I should call myself Dan instead of Nandan."

"Was it because they thought that the British were finding it difficult to pronounce your names?" R asked, anxious to find a rational explanation to Nandan's bitter experience.

"Well, about half of those I met in England and Canada were never able to learn how to pronounce our names correctly. For their sake, it would have been better if we had followed the advice of our highly adaptable compatriots."

"After several waves of non-European immigration over the last few decades, shouldn't they have learned to pronounce foreign-sounding names by now?"

"For so many Indians, it seems easy, because we grow up learning several languages. For example, I speak English, Tamil, Telugu and some Hindi. However, they only speak English. Medical research has shown that some parts of the human brain only develop when stimulated. So, it's not really their fault if, once adult, they have a hard time learning unusual, foreign sounds."

Nandan paused, and then sighed. "We left England and moved to Canada hoping to find a more open, tolerant society that would allow us to live our lives in the way we wished,—in our case, in accordance with our upbringing. ... We were very disappointed. That's why I decided to return to Bharat, to my motherland ... where I feel at home. R, the life I lived in the West simply did not match my expectations."

Upset that Nandan's real life experiences contrasted so much with his own idyllic dreams, R argued, "Nandan, I met with the Saksena family at Delhi's airport and they appeared to be welcoming and cheerful people, although they have probably lived in America for decades. They even invited me to visit them when I get there."

"You may well be disappointed if you expect Indians abroad to welcome you warmly. The Saksena family you talk about could be an exception. My own experience with compatriots abroad is quite the opposite. In Canada, the first time I saw an Indian face—a young man my age—sitting at the terrace of the hospital cafeteria with a group of other interns, my heart leapt with joy. After several years of living in foreign lands, I was finally going to say 'hello' to a fellow *daysee*<sup>199</sup>! As I moved smilingly towards him, he guessed my intention. All I wanted was to greet him, but I saw his features freeze with apprehension. Then, turning his back swiftly towards me, he began an impromptu conversation with the

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<sup>199</sup> Indian-born.



blonde girl next to him. I decided that it would be impolite to interrupt, so, regretfully, I turned away. My mind was clouded with nostalgia for my home country, so I did not realize that I had been given the cold shoulder. Much later, and after being rebuffed or ignored by Indians several times in similar situations, I finally accepted the truth."

"Which is?"

"That *daysees* abroad, or Indians born in those countries, prefer to avoid socializing with newcomers from India. I guess they desperately want to blend in—the new immigrant syndrome, I call it—, doing their best to look perfectly integrated, socializing with the locals only, avoiding being seen in the company of recent immigrants—which is what I was at the time. They do their utmost to adopt the ways of the majority to avoid being associated with a particular 'ghetto'. I can't blame them for adopting the melting pot approach; after all, that's what they should do, having chosen to leave their own country. I am just disappointed that they don't seem to have the courage, or the desire, to meet and greet fellow Indians in public." He chortled, "As if it would jeopardize or compromise their 'integrated' status if they did!"

"Maybe you were just unlucky to meet people like that."

"When it happens so many times, you start to draw conclusions—as I did. But I also believe that this weird attitude is also a consequence of the extraordinary fragmentation of Indian society—a fragmentation that we seem to export, or carry with us, to the countries we migrate to. These 'integrated Indians' probably wonder, 'Are these newcomers of the same caste as us? Do they come from the same region of India? Do they share our religious beliefs and customs? Do they even speak the same Indian language?'"

Nandan stopped abruptly, smiled, and waved broadly towards a building across the road. "So, I came back and invested everything I had, money, time, energy, in this."

R saw what he seemed so proud of. It was a new, two-storied, white building with a large, colorful sign in Tamil and English: *Madurai Ayurved Center*.

"Bravo. It looks very professional," R complimented.

Scurrying across the street to avoid being hit by a peddler on his bicycle, Nandan replied, "Yes. We have come a long way from those days when my father examined and treated his patients in the hut in which he was born, in a small village north of Madurai. In those days, he used to pick all the medicinal plants he needed in the forest. As I told you, all our savings went into this center. We had a vision, though. We wanted to build a modern wellness center in which young, 'modern' Indians as well as older ones—and even those of us who have traveled and lived abroad—would feel at ease."

R was impressed by the clinic's interior. In one of the consultation rooms, he stopped for a moment to contemplate a life-sized chart of the human body that showed all the *chakrs* and *nadis*. Nandan noticed and explained, "When *pran* flows freely through the body's thousands of *nadis*, the most important of which are the Ida, the Pingala and the Shushumn, we enjoy perfect health. As you can see, the Shushumn *nadi* is located along the spinal cord. As the *chakrs*, they are part of the *pranamay kosha* and they are very important for our well-being."

"You talk about 'wellness' and 'well-being', not of treating or curing. However, I have always read or heard about *ayurvedic* 'healing' or 'medicine'."

"That may be due to the influence of 'modern', curative medicine that focuses on repair instead of prevention. People usually prefer to enjoy life without restraint, then hope for a miracle fix when they get afflicted by a serious illness. *Our* approach has traditionally hinged on prevention. *Ayurved* means 'science of life'—a long and healthy life!"

R continued to read the chart. "You mentioned that the Shushumn *nadi* corresponds to the spinal cord. What do the *chakrs* correspond to?"

Nandan smiled—his signature ironic smile, this time—, then answered, "It's futile to attempt to match the concepts of *ayurved* with those of the western medical science that we learned at school. When I was in England, I read books in which the authors tried to 'translate' the concepts of *ayurved* into 'modern', clinical language. However, even if they can establish a few approximate matches between the *chakrs* and the endocrine glands, between the *nadis* and the nervous system, they are missing the wood for the trees. In their haste to analyze and therefore to separate components, they overlook the essential: that the most important concept of *ayurved* is integration, interdependence between the various systems of

the body. Moreover, many cannot bring themselves to accept that the *chakras* operate at the psychic layer, influencing the physical body."

"Western science is based on what can be proven; so, being able to measure these phenomena could make them more credible," R suggested.

"My father often says to those who doubt our traditional, age-old concepts that the wind is invisible, nonetheless, we feel it, and we see it move the leaves on trees. Similarly, there are so many things that we cannot see; should we deny their existence? If so, we would have to stop believing in so many 'modern' scientific theories about phenomena that cannot be seen or measured directly. *Ayurved* is based on centuries of observation of nature, especially the benefits of plants on the health of humans and animals."

He turned towards R, with an ironic smile on his thick, chocolate-brown lips. "No, R. It's so tempting to denigrate wisdom through jealousy. All you have to do is to say that those concepts cannot be measured. However, the positive impact of *ayurvedic* treatments on people's well-being is evident, here or elsewhere. But mockery has always been a very effective tactic to discourage the adoption of new ideas and practices. For example, those who perceive *yog* as a threat to their interests keep repeating that *hath yog asans* are unnatural; perverted even."

They stopped briefly in front of a large, well-lit room in which a group of people were practicing *hath yog* under the supervision of two coaches, a man and a woman. Then, moving on, they exited the building, entering an inner courtyard filled with plants. As they sat down on a white concrete bench, Nandan pointed to a young woman clad in an orange sari and a white blouse. She stood next to a bush, picking leaves with care.

"I'll introduce you to my fiancée Annalakshmi shortly. She specializes in medicinal plants. We are gathering and nurturing a wide range of rare species here to decrease our reliance on external suppliers. My father also works on the preservation of plants that have practically disappeared from our local ecosystem due to the clearing of neighboring forest lands."

"So this garden provides all the medicinal ingredients that you need for the *ayurvedic* preparations that you prescribe to your patients?" R asked, hesitating to use the terms 'drugs'.

"No, that would be impossible. There are thousands of ingredients. We will continue to purchase the common ones, like ginger, turmeric, garlic, cinnamon, cloves, and other spices in the local markets."

"Ginger and turmeric? They have medicinal properties? I would never have imagined that. My mother uses these daily in her kitchen for seasoning."

"R, in India, we don't use ingredients in food preparation without a good reason. Ginger is anti-inflammatory, turmeric is antiseptic, garlic is anticoagulant, and the chili pepper that accompanies nearly all our meals stimulates our metabolism and protects against cancer, which, as you know, is still relatively rare here—at least compared to the West."

During the next half hour, Nandan explained the benefits of several spices commonly used in Indian cooking. Then, noticing that Annalakshmi had finished her work, they went to meet her. The reserved, spectacled girl that Nandan had chosen as his future wife showed R around the entire garden, stopping here and there to explain the virtues of various trees, shrubs, herbs and roots. R felt that she masterfully complemented the lesson that Nandan had begun.

"For decades, the British sahibs tried to eradicate our ancient beliefs. They even tried to outlaw the practice of *ayurved*. Consequently, years after we got rid of them, we remained convinced that *ayurved* was just a collection of superstitious beliefs. Not anymore," Nandan proclaimed, turning a confident face towards Annalakshmi. "We are proud of our cultural heritage and our goal is to preserve and use it."

His fiancée gave a few last instructions to her helpers, then turned to the two men, "I take it that R will join us for dinner this evening?"

Nandan nodded, then added for R's sake, "*Ayurvedic* treatment being holistic, meals are a crucial aspect of treatment at our center. You will see—and taste—what our patients eat to improve their health. My father eats here every evening around six, along with all our patients and staff. He should be here any minute now," he said, glancing at his watch.

At six p.m. sharp, dinner was served in the center's largest hall to about fifty patients and a dozen staff members in addition to Nandan, Annalakshmi and Mr. Muttu. R noticed that some people wore saffron shawls.

"They are our *ayurvedic* healers," Nandan murmured in R's ear as Mr. Muttu pronounced a few Sanskrit hymns.

The old healer turned towards R with a smile when he finished. "As you may know, young man, through this hymn, I just wished everybody excellent health and prosperity—absolutely everybody; not just those present in this hall."

"Yes, my guru also taught me this *mantr* several years ago," R replied.

Everybody sat on the straw mats covering the floor. Here, there were no stainless steel plates as in R's home or at some restaurants. Instead, the food was being laid out on disposable—and biodegradable—banana leaves. The leaves were squeaky clean. R checked his; the water used to wash it was still dripping off.

Kitchen helpers walked carefully between the rows, each placing a large spoonful of food on the banana leaves. Carrying different vegetable dishes, rice or flat bread in small cauldrons, they finished serving the food within a few minutes. A salivating R then counted ten different items on his leaf.

Before he entered the hall, like all other guests, R had carefully washed both his hands at one of the two stone fountains, —each shaped like a lion's mouth—located on both sides of the hall entrance. Taking some fragrant, yellow-colored rice between his cupped fingers, he mixed it with some vegetable curry and then raised the handful of food to his mouth. "It's very tasty," he complimented after swallowing this first mouthful.

"You eat with your left hand?" Nandan was clearly shocked, but he spoke in a hushed voice to avoid attracting attention to his guest's breach of etiquette.

R smiled, "I am left handed. I always get asked that."

In the past, he would have felt embarrassed. Traditionally, the right hand is used for eating and the left for washing the other end of the digestive tract after each bowel movement. In his case, it was the opposite.

He also recalled what Doobay had said about sitting on the floor. "It's not because we want to put furniture makers out of business. Actually, it is to remind ourselves where our body comes from and where all our food is grown: Mother Earth. In the same way, R, although we have invented many kitchen and table utensils, we persist in eating with our hand. That is to show respect for nature, which provides our food. It reminds us that the *ann*<sup>200</sup> consumed will be used to repair and grow the *annamay kosha*, our physical body. Of course, hygiene is very important, so we wash our hands carefully before and after meals."

As demanded by tradition, the meal was taken in near-religious silence.

Later, as they made their way back to the apartment, R asked, "Nandan, could you tell me more about the *chakras*? It sounds like an interesting concept, although difficult to prove scientifically."

Nandan snorted, "It's a different way of looking at life forces. And if you want scientific proof, many imaging experiments have charted the electromagnetic radiation field around human bodies. We can't see those radiation patterns with the naked eye but they are there. It's the same for the *chakras*. We can't see them, but that does not mean they don't exist."

Mr. Muttu jumped in. "Young man, you should know that the purpose of *ayurved* is to contribute to our physical and emotional health, so that we are better able to achieve spiritual progress. In this way, *ayurved* complements *hatha yoga* and *pranayama* as well as other practices."

The road sloped upwards. The old healer stopped talking until they reached the crest, then added, "The seven *chakras* are our vital energy centers. Each of them has a different function. They are part of our psychic body. When *prana* flows freely through all our *chakras*, we radiate wellbeing and we stay healthy. We start to suffer physical and psychological ailments when one or more of our *chakras* gets blocked or partially closed. The three inferior *chakras*, the Muladhara, the Swadhisthana and the Manipura, control our vital and physical functions. The Anahata *chakra*, on the other hand, influences our emotional life, while the three superior *chakras*, the Vishuddha, the Ajna and the Sahasrara have a profound impact on our spiritual life."

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<sup>200</sup> Food.

Mr. Muttu then gave R a lengthy explanation of the characteristics of each of these *chakrs*. A few minutes later, he concluded thus, "For us, who practice *ayurvedic* healing, it is essential to know which physical and emotional illnesses arise from imbalances in our *chakrs* relative to the three *dosh*: *vata*, *pita* and *kapha*."

Nandan added, "Although I prefer not to explain *ayurved* in western scientific terms, you should know that the *chakrs* correspond to major nervous and endocrine centers. Our emotions are influenced by hormones, and therefore by the glands that produce these. If the Muladhar *chakr* is blocked, for example, that would explain why we feel tense and aggressive. Conversely, when *pran* flows freely through this *chakr*, we feel strong, confident and full of vitality. In general, an obstructed Anahat *chakr* leads to cynicism, doubt, bitterness and negativity. When this *chakr* is completely open, we feel joyful, compassionate and confident."

He paused, looked at R and then continued, "Western medical science is at the early stages of acknowledging the interactions between emotions and physical health. An *ayurvedic* healer, on the other hand, tries to understand the patient's background, lifestyle and emotional state before prescribing any treatment."

R could not hide his smile, "But Nandan, surgical techniques are highly advanced in North America."

"Yes, R; but surgery is about repair, not prevention. ... Talking about surgery, did you know that surgical instruments have been in use for thousands of years in India? Some of these instruments, which you will find only in museums now, were used during antiquity to repair soldiers' wounds, fix broken bones, sew back gashes, and even to carry out cranial surgery."

"That's a surprise. How do you explain that these facts are so poorly known?"

"It's due to what I called *selective amnesia*. You see, it's easier to pretend to suffer from this than to acknowledge India's contribution to so many aspects of modern, civilized life throughout the world. These surgical techniques and tools, described in detail in ancient texts, were exported to China and to the Middle East through commercial exchanges long ago. The concepts behind *chakrs* and the thousands of associated *nadis* through which vital energy flows influenced acupuncture. Our ancient martial arts, like wrestling and *lathi* fighting also made their way into the rest of Asia through early Buddhist monks."

Nandan's father intervened, changing the topic. "People are afraid of venturing beyond the limits of what they know, of what they are familiar and comfortable with. They are reluctant to step beyond the material world they can touch, see and feel, into the unknown of the reality. Our *poorans* tell us about the Danaw, the Asur and the Rakshas. They were ancient people who denied the existence of God, although they were materially advanced. These days too, a lot of people choose to deny that there is a spiritual dimension to life. However, western 'science' has not yet solved the riddle of life itself. That same 'science' suggests that all matter is in fact 'condensed' or 'solidified' energy:  $E=mc^2$ . So, all the shapes and sizes of matter that we see, feel and touch are in fact just one 'thing': *energy*. Then, what is that 'energy'? Where does it come from? ... Well, our ancient scriptures tell us about *purush* and *prakriti*, the reality that underlies the illusion."

R's eyes lit up. "'All is one'. That is also what my guru explained to me in Varanasi. Thank you, Mr. Muttu. I understand even better now."

Nandan smiled. "My father studied chemistry and physics at university before he dedicated his life to *ayurved*."

"Talking about science, R, do you know that Bharat also 'exported' many, many important discoveries in the field of mathematics and astronomy throughout the antique world? This also, we seldom hear about," Mr. Muttu revealed.

"'Selective amnesia' again," Nandan commented.

"Indians did not just invent the zero, R. In fact, a great number of mathematical theorems were already explained in the *Sulbhasutr*<sup>201</sup> well before Pythagoras was born."

The three men pursued their conversation for another hour. That night, R found his head brimming with new concepts as he lay down on his bed. Just before sleep shut his eyes, his last thought was for the message that he had conveyed to Nandan. Half asleep, he promised himself that he would try to find out more about it the next day.

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<sup>201</sup> Ancient Indian mathematical text.  
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## CHAPTER 23

The following morning, Nandan took R to visit one of Madurai's major attractions. Recalling his need to fulfill his promise to Yogish Doobay, R had asked his host if there were any Sanatan Dharm pilgrimage sites worth visiting in Madurai.

"If you are into religion, then I advise you to visit the Shri Meenakshi Temple. It draws up to ten thousand visitors a day, many of whom come from far away. We could do that this morning and then watch a display of *bharat natyam* in the afternoon. Tomorrow, we would then go to Rameshwaram. That's where, during *tretayog*, Ram built a bridge to cross into Lanka and free his wife Sita after defeating her captor, the evil king Ravan."

After a light but very spicy breakfast, composed of *dosa*, and coriander and coconut *chutni*, the two men set off. R's North-Indian taste buds were not yet accustomed to the highly spiced southern dishes and he was having trouble adjusting to the amount of chili pepper used. As a result, the young man was sweating by the time he stepped out the building.

It was hot and humid outside and that added to his discomfort. Five minutes later, embarrassed at having to stop in the shade of a tamarind tree for some relief, he blabbered, "This is strange. ... I am used to Delhi's annual heat waves."

"The climate here is tropical, and much more humid," Nandan ventured sympathetically.

"Nandan, to be honest, I am amazed at the vast quantities of chili pepper that you consume in spite of the hot weather. Eating makes you sweat ... and it's steaming hot outside!"

"True, but, on the other hand, it is a natural way to beat the heat: by sweating. When you sweat, the slightest movement of air cools you down fast. That's partly why our dishes are so much spicier than in northern India. The *chutni* you ate back at the apartment was too hot for you, but I am sure that you are feeling cooler now, right?"

R gaped; indeed, he was feeling much better. "It's probably for that reason that we always drink chai and milk boiling hot in summer as well. It makes us sweat and then we cool down faster!" he deduced.

Feeling sorry for his guest, Nandan quickly added, "Don't worry, I am not going to ask you to walk to the temple. We are just waiting for a taxi or an *autoriksha*."

Comfortably shielded from the scorching Madurai sun inside the vehicle, R snapped a few photos of local situations. Just after crossing the Victor Bridge, he took a picture of a bony, carefree-looking cow walking freely on the sidewalk, pedestrians moving quite naturally out of its way. Then, he felt that a farmer taking a cartload of chickens to the local market would make another excellent souvenir. He also took a picture of the humped bullock pulling the farmer's cart, its horns dyed red for good luck.

"Another good photo for Ashok and his American girlfriend," he thought as he pressed the button of his digital camera. However, the words rang hollow in his mind and heart. He was surprised that the thought of capturing such scenes depicting his country's acute poverty no longer brought him the same perverse satisfaction that he used to experience in the earlier stages of his journey. However, he could not spend more time analyzing this change, as Nandan pointed to a huge temple and announced, "This is it, R: the Shri Meenakshi Temple; one of Madurai's landmarks."

It was evident to R that he had to take a photo of this massive religious structure. The temple's twelve *gopurams*<sup>202</sup>, each at least 150 feet high, were covered with sculptures. He then looked around him in awe; the compound covered a very large area indeed.

Guessing his thoughts, Nandan explained, "It spans over six acres, and the site has been home to temples for the last two thousand years ... at least."

The two men walked towards the temple's main entrance. At the foot of the stone steps leading inside, a priest stopped Nandan with a firm sign of the hand. He quizzed the physician in Tamil, pointing to R. After a brief explanation, they were allowed in.

R asked, "What was that about? Any problem?"

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<sup>202</sup> Pyramid-shaped roof structure with a narrow base, covered with sculptures, characteristic of South Indian temples.  
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"No problem at all. He just wanted to confirm that you are a follower of Sanatan Dharm. Non-Hindus are not admitted inside the temple. He must have thought that you are a foreign tourist because of your sunglasses and camera."

"Why is it forbidden to non-Hindus?"

"Even here in the South, terrorist attacks and malicious profanation are possible. In addition, thieves are always looking for opportunities. You see, some of the idols in this temple are gold-plated, and there is still a strong demand from rich, foreign collectors. In the old days, many of the statues were made of solid gold and covered with precious jewels. But those were stolen during the Moslem and British invasions."

Nandan stopped on the last step. "Don't forget to remove your shoes, R."

"Sure, I always do. My guru explained the reason for this custom. It's simply to avoid carrying dirt from outside into a clean place where people come to worship."

"That's right. If we tread on a dog turd and then enter the temple with that glued to our shoes, the odor could seriously distract other worshippers," Nandan quipped irreverently.

R looked at him. Nandan had that same arrogant smile as on their first meeting at the university seven years ago. The physician turned *ayurvedic* healer was clearly not an adept of *bhakti yog*.

"My guru, Pundit Doobay explained why there is always a large tank of water next to most temples in southern Bharat. There, devotees rinse off the road's dust and dirt, as well as their sweat and body odor before entering the temple. After all, people go in there to concentrate on God, not to be distracted by foul smells emitted by those standing next to them."

"Very wise," Nandan replied blandly.

It was so magnificent inside the temple that R did not regret his sweaty trip there. Although it was still early, the building was already crowded. Noticing that several artisans ran micro-businesses between the temple's huge stone pillars, he took a picture of a tailor adjusting a coat for a waiting client. Then, he walked up to Nandan who was beckoning.

His host whispered, "One of the splendors of the Shri Meenakshi Temple is its thousand-pillar hall. You'd better take a photo now before the crowd gets too thick."

R was mesmerized by the sheer majesty of the immense hall, lined on both sides with several rows of sculpted stone pillars, each about 20 feet high. The place of worship was filling up fast with families and individuals who lined up to offer their prayers to the deities. At one end of the hall, devotees bowed in front of splendidly adorned idols, offering water, flowers, fruit, milk and honey. They also lit bundles of fragrant incense sticks. R was allergic to incense ash, but the huge praying hall was so big and airy that he did not feel inconvenienced at all.

As he took out his camera and started taking pictures—mainly of the magnificently sculpted pillars—one of the priests stared at him, frowning suspiciously. Sensing that it was not acceptable to take photos in this place of worship, the young traveler quickly pocketed his digital device. That proved to be a blessing in disguise, as it allowed him to soak in the serenity that permeated the hall. He was able to fully appreciate the architectural beauty of the site and to observe the devotees, as his guru had recommended.

After a few minutes, when R turned around to look for his guide and host, he found the latter leaning against one of the temple's stone pillars, his arms crossed, looking absentmindedly at the floor. The *ayurvedic* healer looked bored. "He is not very religious, just like me," R felt. Indeed, he had not come there to pray; he was just fulfilling his promise to Doobay.

"Thank you for having brought me here, Nandan," he said. "This temple is really fabulous."

"So, can we go now?" his host breathed out, shaken out of his daydreams by R's words.

"Right now, if you want."

After lunch, Nandan took R to a display of *bharat natyam*. It was at another temple, in the southern part of Madurai.

As they arrived there, R immediately took out his camera. In the courtyard, a monkey was climbing up a *pipal* tree, carrying a bunch of overripe bananas that it had probably taken from one of the temple's many places of worship. The female then settled on a branch

and distributed the bananas to two of its youngest offspring, while screeching at other adult monkeys.

Soon after, the young ones were raining pieces of banana peel on devotees who circled the tree, performing religious rituals. The men and women merely glanced up with strained smiles, the animals enjoying immunity within the temple grounds.

Observing the scene while trying not to laugh too loud, the two men approached a large stone platform located at the rear of the temple. There, in the cool shade, the *bharat natyam* séance had already started. There were four dancers, all young women, bedecked with ceremonial jewelry and wearing stunning, colorful costumes. R took several photos as they graciously moved their red-dyed hands and feet, miming a scene from the Ramayan—or some other *pooran* or *katha*<sup>203</sup>. Their instructor, a stern-faced, middle-aged man scrutinized their every move; “Like a mongoose follows the moves of a cobra, looking for a weakness ... before grabbing it by the neck,” R thought. Sitting at the foot of the platform, the dance master repeated a rhythmic song in a piecing, nasal voice, “Taa, thaa, thayy, yaa!”

“It feels like he is whipping them with that ... song of his,” R whispered to Nandan.

His host stifled a laugh as the dance guru flattened a few well oiled—but still rebellious—over-dyed black curls on his balding head. Fortunately, the severe-looking man appeared not to have heard R’s remark, focusing entirely on coaching his young disciples.

R turned his attention to the performers again. They were all wearing a complete *bharat natyam* dancer’s costume, which included heavy *ghunghrus* layered above their slender ankles. Their red and green, gold-embroidered saris were held in place at the waist by wide, golden belts. Their black hair, packed in tight buns, was sprinkled with yellow and white flowers that haloed their juvenile oval faces. Kohl highlighted their almond-shaped eyes, and enormous round *bindis* adorned their foreheads. Nose rings, large earrings and several rows of multicolored bracelets further enhanced their beauty as they performed for the small audience in front of the platform.

When the practice session ended, the dancers climbed down the stone steps one after the other, sweating profusely, but accepting their guru’s stern comments without showing any sign of weariness or discouragement. The session had clearly not met the dance master’s expectations. R guessed that from his harsh tone and the accordion-like wrinkles on his face.

Surprised at the satisfaction he felt at having taken several good photos, R followed Nandan in the street outside the temple. They started walking while keeping an eye on the road for a free taxi or *autoriksha*. Further down the road, they came across a row of small houses.

Suddenly, R stopped and pointed to the padded-earth walkway leading to one of the houses.

“Look at the spectacular chalk design on this path, Nandan! Do you think the owner would object if I took a picture of it?”

“I shouldn’t think so. Go ahead. You are right. It is a superb *kolam*<sup>204</sup>.”

Indeed, the splendidly drawn white, yellow, red and green patterns had clearly been drawn by a talented artist.

“I imagine that the breeze must have blown off some of it,” R remarked, pointing to missing parts of the design.

“Not necessarily. *Kolams* are made early in the morning, so birds or bugs must have eaten some of the rice. A *kolam* is not just a nice decoration; it is also an offering to the other creatures with which we share this planet. That’s one of the features of this tradition.”

“I now remember having heard that its main purpose is to attract prosperity and dissipate negativity, which is why they are made early in the morning.”

“That’s right. It must be pleasant to see a beautiful *kolam* when you leave for work. It puts the men in a good mood and encourages them to work harder to win their family’s daily *dosa*,” Nandan said with a cynical smile. He then added, with a serious look, “As we offer food to other creatures, we hope that we will never go hungry. As you know, that’s one of our fundamental beliefs: you must sow to reap.”

R looked at his host with some surprise. It was the first time that Nandan had mentioned the law of *karm* since they had met. Although the physician who had returned

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<sup>203</sup> Story.

<sup>204</sup> Drawings often made with colored rice grains or rice flour on the path leading to houses in Tamil Nadu.

from Britain and Canada was not religious in the *bhakti yog* sense, was he hiding deep spiritual beliefs?

He did not have time to ponder on that much longer. Suddenly a radio started blaring out the latest Tamil movie song. The noise came from one of the small houses. Although the song's lyrics were in Tamil, it was peppered with English expressions like "I love you" and "My darling". The music was clearly modern—very modern indeed; R could not distinguish any Indian instrument in the musical mix.

The two men exchanged amused glances. After watching a classical dance performance, and admiring an age-old traditional craft, the *kolam*, they had now encountered the other extreme of Indian culture: a pure product of the twenty-first century.

"You see, R, I thought that I had left the West behind me when I returned from Canada. But it seems that the West followed me here," Nandan joked.

R felt the bitterness underlying his host's remark. "People always believe that the grass is greener elsewhere; what we don't have is always more desirable than what we possess. As I intend to leave for America, I cannot criticize these people. Personally, I rarely watch Bollywood movies and I only accidentally listen to such songs," he blurted out, surprised at his own frankness.

Nandan did not answer; now in a clearly somber mood, he continued to walk alongside R. Later, when the music had died out, he said, "Like you, I am not a great fan of this type of music. There are fewer and fewer typically Indian cultural products on TV, on the radio and on the silver screen. It's still lucky that the dialogues of our South Indian movies are not written in Urdu like those of Bollywood. Why is it surprising then that we, in the South, reject Hindi as a national language? Everybody knows that real Hindi is dying and being replaced by Hindustani, that mix of Urdu and Hindi used in Bollywood movies, TV serials and modern songs. This is why we cling so fiercely to Tamil, our State's language. We know that it's the pure, original language of our ancestors."

R hung spellbound on his host's words; he had just uncovered another interesting aspect of Nandan!

The physician turned *ayurvedic* healer carried on, "You see, R, language is the vehicle of culture. In the South, we want to preserve our cultural identity, especially after having resisted past invasion attempts quite well. That's also why I am investing in *ayurved*. It's an important element of our age-old culture. I want to open an *ayurvedic* wellness center like the one you saw yesterday in each of the major cities of India. That will be my contribution to the preservation of our culture!"

Chasing a skinny stray dog with a kick in the air, Nandan added, "There is so much to do to lift this country out of the poverty trap, to help it regain the pride it deserves. In the times of Ram, Ashok<sup>205</sup> and the Chola Empire, our country was like a splendid ceremonial elephant, powerful and majestic. Today, after we survived the oppression of the Moguls and the British, this elephant is bleeding from a thousand cuts ... but is still struggling to rise again. I believe in my country and I want to help this wounded elephant to get up and walk again. That's why, like so many others, I decided to return home and invest every cent I had, every ounce of energy I possessed into this project that will contribute to promote *ayurved*."

R had felt increasingly embarrassed during Nandan's speech. He realized that in spite of the healer's intense feelings for his country and his culture, the latter had agreed to welcome a person whose goal was to leave for America at the very first opportunity: himself, R. Sharma!

Nandan then explained his theories about the apathetic attitude of his compatriots regarding their diluted and fast crumbling culture. "In times of peace, the caste system may have been beneficial for economic and social efficiency, but it caused the downfall of our civilization, as social fragmentation emerged as our greatest weakness during the invasions. The Moguls cunningly exploited our social divisions to divide us further ... and conquer. They decimated our *chattris*, and as the warrior caste fell throughout Bharat, the other castes, excluded from martial training, did little to defend the country. That is how hundreds of Hindu kingdoms were taken."

R objected, "However, the Rajput and the Maraths resisted valiantly ..."

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<sup>205</sup> A renowned Indian emperor whose conquests extended well into Afghanistan.  
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"I never said that our warriors were cowards. On the contrary, most of them were brave, but they were hopelessly divided. That's why we were conquered and dominated by minorities. It's not simply because the Moguls and the British had firearms and we didn't."

Nandan looked at him and added, "As the best and most courageous members of the *chatri* caste were annihilated over the last millennium, R, their genes also vanished from our population. This could explain, in part, the lack of political courage and leadership of our current politicians."

"So what do you think about India's ... sorry, I mean Bharat's current situation then?" R asked.

"Most of our politicians are from non-*chatri* social classes. It's not surprising that they spend all their time negotiating the terms of power-sharing rather than inspiring our youth and leading the nation. Therefore, we should not be surprised to see our country wallow in poverty, although a few pockets of prosperity are emerging here and there. Our population, weakened by extreme deprivation and cowed by terror over the last centuries, seems to have developed an inferiority complex. This is why, in Britain and Canada, when people said that Indians are fatalistic or defeatist, I could hardly argue against that. Over the last millennium, we made so many compromises in order to survive that, as a nation, we don't seem to have a backbone anymore."

"You are right, Nandan. There are so many problems here and nothing ever seems to change. Ashok left the country for America six years ago and now I am gearing up to follow his footsteps. It's sad, but I wonder whether our politicians can change things, even if they wanted to. Personally, I am pessimistic."

"Well, instead of just talking, they could inspire the population to work harder and lead the country towards prosperity. ... We need younger leaders, dynamic ones, who will know how to convince young people like you to stay and rebuild the country instead of leaving."

R reddened suddenly underneath his tan. He realized that he was not in the same league as Nandan; quite the opposite, actually. While he selfishly dreamed of solving his personal problems by running away to America, his host had chosen the harder, opposite path.

Embarrassed, he clumsily tried to change the subject, "About the defunct caste system, one of my friends in Delhi once said that the four main castes varied widely in their relative proportions. Historically, the *chattris* were about ten per cent of the Hindu population, and the majority was equally divided between the *sudrs* and the *vaishs*."

"That's nearly correct. But don't forget the *bramhans*. They were never more than five per cent, but they played an important part in the preservation of our culture."

Nandan then returned to politics, "Here, recently, an ageing politician was elected simply because he was once a popular actor, even though he has no ideas or solutions to offer. People just voted with their emotions; they did not even try to think! That's democracy for you; not only here, but in other countries around the world as well. People abdicate their power to a handful of politicians for several years and then pretend to be outraged when they find out that their chosen representatives did very little during their term in office. In such a system, why be surprised that nothing changes: the same scandals, the same abuses, the same corruption persist."

The two men continued their conversation in the taxi that took them back to the Muttus' apartment.

"Bharat's problems are extremely complex, R; more complex than any other country's because of our extreme social complexity. There are no simple solutions for us. Problems like caste injustices, the plight of child widows, extreme poverty, corruption and others cannot be tackled in isolation. Merely pointing fingers only assists our foreign critics in their endeavors to disparage us as a nation. We need holistic, made-in-India solutions. Solutions that come from the grassroots, from the people, not from politicians concerned about extending their term in office by a few months through all kinds of paralyzing compromises with their opponents." He paused, turned and looked at R in the eyes, "We have to change, R. We have to ask what we can do for our country, and stop looking for solutions from our so-called 'leaders'. We should all become leaders! That's the only hope for Bharat."

## CHAPTER 24

The next day, Nandan and his guest left early for Rameshwaram. R had spoken with Mr. Muttu the night before, and the old *ayurvedic* healer had then revealed many more aspects of his science. After that long conversation, R had retired to his room and called Mohini. For the first time, and much to his surprise, his girlfriend appeared edgy.

"When will you ever get back to Delhi? It's been ages since you left, R. ... I am beginning to wonder how I will be able to cope when you are in America."

Coming from the person who had inspired and sustained his emigration plan, this remark caught him by surprise. True, Mohini would have to wait for him to complete his master's degree in America and find a job before she could hope to join him over there; and that could mean two years or more of patience. But there was nothing he could do about it. If Mohini had completed her undergraduate studies, they might have been able to go to university together in America—depending on available funds, of course. But she was still a year away from completing her studies ... and was struggling academically.

"We'll talk about it when I get back," he said soothingly. Clearly, something was troubling her. What could it be? "Just a few more days, Mo. There is a last parcel to deliver to Gautam Toolsi in Bodhgaya, then I will be back in Delhi ... after a brief stopover in Varanasi to say goodbye to my guru; I don't think I'll meet him again before I leave for America."

His words were greeted with silence on the other side of the line, so he tried to cheer her up. "Mo, I bought you a few things along the way; I won't tell you more ... it's a surprise! I also took many photos: the palaces of Rajasthan, my film shooting stint in Mumbai, the beaches of Goa, Madurai's temples ...."

On the other side of the line there was a few seconds of silence followed by a sigh. Then Mohini murmured melancholically, "You should not have spent your brother's money on me, R. I will be happy when you find a job ... and when you buy me the wedding sari and the jewelry set that we admired before you set off on this journey. You remember, don't you?"

"... Sure. But, Mohini, what is it? Are you sick? What's wrong?" he asked, worried. Never before had she been so hard to cheer up. Over the last week, though, he had noticed her mood swings: one day she was cheerful, the other morose. And now she talked about finding a job—as if she meant here ... in India! Had Professor Varma finally been able to arrange for a job interview with one of his industry contacts? That would explain why Mohini was so despondent; she could be coping with the possibility that their American dream would hit the rocks soon.

She just replied that she was tired and sleepy, so they left it at that.

On his last morning in Madurai, R got up feeling queasy. He was definitely not used to so much spicy food. Last night's dinner had been hot, in typical South Indian style. The *sambar*<sup>206</sup>, in particular, had scorched his tongue and palate. Now, it was his stomach's turn to incur the after-effects of a meal that his hosts wanted him to remember. "Well, I certainly will. But not for the reasons they wanted."

In spite of his discomfort, he thanked Mr. Muttu again as he walked out of the apartment with Nandan. The latter had borrowed Annalakshmi's Maruti for their trip to Rameshwaram. Looking at the tiny car that was fast replacing the Premier as the most popular automobile in India—at least for those who could afford one—R shuddered, guessing that the hundred-mile journey would not be a comfortable one. When Nandan had offered to drive him there, R had replied 'Yes, thank you', envisioning a smooth ride in an Ambassador, like on the Jaipur to Pushkar leg of his journey. Now he bit his tongue. "I could easily have taken a bus to visit this ancient Sanatan Dharm pilgrimage site. But it's too late to backtrack now; Nandan would be offended. Let's be optimistic."

In fact, the trip proved to be very enlightening for the young traveler and would-be migrant. His conversation with Nandan was so captivating that he barely paid attention to the numerous bumps and the scarce legroom inside the sub-compact car. They spoke about many things: Nandan and Annalakshmi's wedding plans; how and where they had met; why they decided to return to India to contribute to its development; and, above all, the

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<sup>206</sup> Spicy vegetable soup.  
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experiences they had lived, and which eventually made them lose their illusions about living in the 'developed world'.

"We felt that we always had to prove ourselves. After several years of trying to 'adapt', we felt that we could no longer cope with the prejudices of the elderly and the preconceived ideas of the young."

"Luckily, Ashok does not seem to have faced the same issues in America, or he would have said so ..." R's thought ended abruptly as he remembered that his brother had tried to warn him about idealizing his American dream. "...the grass is not much greener here ... you are chasing a shadow," Ashok had written.

R pondered a while on this, "I hope that Ashok's cryptic warning is not based on the kind of bitter experiences that Nandan seems to have endured."

He felt the need to change topics, so he did just that, "Nandan, what can you tell me about Ashok's American girlfriend?"

His host's reaction was surprising. Nandan burst out laughing, then answered, "American? Who told you that?"

"I don't know. I just assumed ...."

"Well, I can tell you that they are happy together."

"So they are living together? Ashok often says 'we' instead of 'I'."

"Yes. They live together ... as man and wife—although they are not married."

"I am not surprised that he does not want to tell our parents about it. They would be shocked out of their minds."

Nandan paused to consider R's words, and then sighed. "Over there, no one finds it shocking anymore. Divorcing is so commonplace that people try to hedge their bets by living together for a few years before getting married. That saves everybody the expense of a marriage ceremony and the costs of a divorce."

R recalled Doobay's words about the use of *jyotish* to find out if potential couples were viable before embarking upon matrimony. That made so much more sense now.

"I assume that those 'trial couples' must refrain from having children until they are sure that they are made for each other ... right?"

Nandan hesitated, and then replied, "Actually, many of these couples have kids during their 'trial period'."

"So they not only have 'trial' unions, but they also have 'trial kids'? an incredulous R asked. "I hope I am not yet a 'trial uncle'."

"Not to my knowledge, although you'd better check the latest news on that with Ashok. ... Don't be surprised, R. I have personally seen several of my colleagues' children in their parents' weddings."

"Amazing! So what happens to these 'trial kids' if the 'trial union' fails."

"Well, on the bright side, by the time they decide that they are ready for kids, they have usually practiced a few years with a pet—usually a dog—just to make sure that they can share the work involved in caring for a live, dependant being. So there are fewer break ups at that stage."

Smiling, R pondered on that sociological fact for a while. He had now confirmed that Ashok had a girlfriend ... and that he was actually living with her! That was one less question off his long list.

Nandan then spoke about the reasons that led him to return to India. He felt that he would never fit into British or Canadian society. "Prejudices and barriers peppered my life with painful, humiliating incidents. You see, over there, I met with two types of people: those who do not hide their feelings and opinions, and those who pretend to welcome cultural and ethnic diversity. When they see you, the first avert their gaze or stare at the horizon right through you—as if you were transparent instead of a nice chocolate color. If they don't agree with your point of view, they'll simply—and publicly—ask to know where you come from ... or worse. The other type—those who pretend that they are open-minded—will invite you to their meetings and social gatherings, but there, you'll quickly understand that you are expected to know your place. They'll listen politely, but avoid making eye contact. You'll soon find out that your opinion does not really count and that you are only expected to show up for the sake of 'diversity'. And when they disagree with something you say, they'll look at each other knowingly, saying 'It's cultural'."

R knew that the physician's experience was limited to Britain and Canada, not to America—where he planned to emigrate. However, this was worth knowing. What if Ashok had lived experiences similar to Nandan's?

"On several occasions, I felt that people were uneasy in my presence. During a workshop, for example, one of the women in my group asked the facilitator if she could change groups ... because—I found out later—she 'felt uncomfortable'."

"Why? Were you ... staring at her, Nandan?"

The *ayurvedic* healer snorted. "Absolutely not! Besides, she was not even attractive. But I was gradually emerging as the most intelligent contributor in the group and I could feel that she had trouble adjusting to the fact that someone like me—a dark skinned man from a poor country—could actually outshine her. Although she spoke with the other members of our group, she barely talked to me, and avoided looking towards me."

"Is that so?" R's comment sounded hollow. "Nandan must be over-sensitive," he thought.

The physician added, "Once, during a training course, I almost fell off my chair."

"Really?" R sighed, dreading that Nandan's next story would be even more off-putting for a potential migrant like himself. "What is he going to say now?" he wondered, biting his lower lip.

"Once again, as I emerged as one of the most outstanding contributors, one of the participants—a frank person, I admit—said in front of everyone, 'Okay, Nandan! You *are* smart.' What shocked me was that she said it as if it was something unexpected, surprising. ... R, in both cases, I was certain that their reactions had something to do with my appearance or my country of origin. As similar events kept occurring, it became impossible for me to keep shrugging them off, or denying that they had happened."

As Nandan paused to lick his dried lips, R painfully digested these words in silence. His face felt flushed, and he started to sweat—out of apprehension. Eager for some relief, he opened the window completely and enjoyed the soothing breeze.

"No, it cannot be that hard to integrate in those societies. After all, Ashok has been living in America for the last six years. ... I am certain that this won't happen to me," he reassured himself, battling the doubts that had now crept into his mind.

It was as if the physician had read his mind. "You know—or maybe you don't—R, I spoke to Ashok before returning. He may not have told you this ... but he is not happy in Los Angeles—or in America for that matter. However, it was worse over here; he could not find a decent job. I remember how hard he searched for a position while we were still at university—in vain. The only offers he received were low-level, boring programming jobs in outsourcing firms; and we both know that your brother, with his exceptional abilities, deserves much better. I am happy that he won that scholarship and went to America. There, he works on cutting-edge technology and earns an excellent salary. But before I returned, he confided that he had faced many challenges; life had not been easy for him either. At one point, he had even decided to return to India to set up his own software development company. However, as he could not raise enough funds, he gave up. He stays in America, but I am not sure that his heart is entirely there, you know."

With his last few words, Nandan had recaptured R's straying attention. The young man had been visualizing the idyllic postcards that his elder brother had sent over the last six years; ... images that had convinced him that America was a great, a wonderful place.

Before R could respond, Nandan swerved abruptly to the left to avoid a mongoose crossing the road. The physician then continued with renewed passion, "On top of that, there was their superiority complex. In Britain and even in Canada, it seemed preposterous to believe that anything good could ever come out of India. In spite of the mushrooming *hath yog* clubs, people seemed reluctant to admit that they practiced it. Others just sneered at the idea that this strange practice could be more beneficial for wellness than western curative approaches."

Nandan deftly avoided a bus coming from the opposite direction as he overtook an overloaded, snail-paced truck. "Towards the end of my stay in the West, I was able to smile again."

He grinned, noticing R's surprised look. "No, don't worry, I did not turn masochistic. It was because I had eventually understood the reasons behind their weakness. You see, by making fun of our treasures, they were just showing the depth of their own ignorance, or

their shame at admitting that ignorance. The *rishis* of ancient India discovered so many great things and shared these freely with the rest of the world. So many discoveries in so many fields: mathematics, astronomy, medicine, literature, philosophy, astrology, military strategy, culinary arts, and more. Over several millennia, many nations of Asia, the Middle-East and even Europe dipped and double-dipped—with little or no gratitude—in that reservoir of wisdom, knowledge and civilization that ancient India was."

Nandan's words seemed to fade away in the distance as R's thoughts wandered to his emigration project. His parents had tried their best to discourage him. Initially, he felt that it was out of self-interest. He thought that they wanted him to remain by their side and lend them a firm hand in their old age ... just as they had held his tiny hand when he was learning to walk. "Maybe they *do* know better. After all, although they have never left their native land, they lived at least 25 years more than I did. During all that time, they may have come across many stories like Nandan's: stories of disenchanting migrants who returned to India, their dreams shattered."

He recalled one such story often told by his father. One of Mr. Sharma's colleagues had returned to India after living over 20 years in Britain. That man's arguments were similar to Nandan's. "There, I felt stifled, diminished, and incapable of expressing my thoughts and feelings. Here I am in my own country, with my own people, immersed in my own culture. ... And I feel free!" he used to repeat gleefully.

Then, there was Ashok, who had only shown him kindness as long as he could remember. When asked to help, his elder brother's first reaction had been negative. "Forget about emigrating to America ... the grass is not much greener here ... You are chasing a shadow," he had written. But why? Was the American dream only a shadow?

"No!" he exclaimed at the awful thought.

"What is it?" a startled Nandan asked.

"Nothing. I was just daydreaming."

His host burst out laughing. "Let me guess. You were replying to your mother who was pressing you to get married to a girl of her choice, right?"

"No, no. She would not do that ... she knows who I ..."

"I see what you mean," Nandan completed, noticing R's embarrassment. "Do you want to talk about it?"

R shared his concerns with Ashok's friend, explaining why his parents disapproved of his choice. The physician's words proved to be a soothing balm for his romantic woes.

"In the beginning, I hesitated a lot before admitting to my father that I had chosen a life partner on my own; worse: that we had actually met outside India. When I finally brought myself to do that, it was as if his world had turned upside down. He is a traditionalist, you see. But eventually, he got over this 'scandal' and accepted that I had taken responsibility for my own happiness, for my own life."

R gazed at him quizzically, "Are you saying that there is hope for me and Mohini?"

"Much more than that; be optimistic, R, come on! Times are changing and traditions also change. Bharat has never been a country stuck in the past. We have always embraced and integrated change within our socio-cultural fabric. In fact, our civilization has survived this long—much longer than any other—thanks to its openness and its adaptability."

"Other civilizations have ancient roots too," R objected for the sake of discussion, although he was already convinced.

"Maybe, but they were interrupted, and then had to start all over again. The ancient civilizations of Egypt, Babylon, China, Greece, Rome and others were destroyed at some point in their history, either through invasions or simply by their own people, who adopted new religions or ideologies. While they went through revolutionary changes, we, on the other hand, kept evolving steadily since *Vedic* times, embracing change instead of fighting it or letting it destroy us. The adaptability and resilience developed over thousands of years allowed the Indian civilization to survive the invasions of the last millennium without crumbling down ... completely."

"However, the wounds endured during this period cost us the leadership of the ancient world's most advanced nations."

"True. Our material progress was halted by the invasions, and we regressed in many ways."

Their conversation continued as the tiny Maruti whirled along the bumpy roads of southern India. Nandan seemed to know the itinerary by heart, as if he had driven this way before. Suddenly, R grabbed his seat to steady himself as the *ayurvedic* healer abruptly drove onto an unpaved road. The vehicle halted in a cloud of dust next to a small, rickety shack.

"I am thirsty, R. What about a drink?"

R glanced outside. The term 'restaurant' was much too flattering to describe a dozen wooden poles that held up a makeshift tin roof over an open kitchen and a sitting area.

Seeing R inspect a rusty metal chair before sitting down made Nandan grin. "It took me months to re-adapt to the local decor after having lived nearly six years in Britain and Canada. What amazes me, R, is that although you have never left India, you are behaving just as I did upon my return."

"I just don't want to dirty my clothes," R defended. "Getting them washed has been a real challenge throughout this voyage."

The only drink available was Dimco, a local brand of lemonade that was much too sweet for R's taste buds. All the same, it felt refreshing after such a long drive in a tiny Maruti with no air-conditioning.

Nandan pointed discreetly to the eatery owner's five children, playing on the soil outside. "People are convinced that India is overpopulated. In those parts of the rich, developed world where I lived, many snicker at Indians' alleged obsession with sex. They sneeringly point to the *Kam Sutr* and to some of the more intricate *hath yog asans* to justify their 'explanation' about the size of our population. Ignorance, jealousy, hypocrisy! In fact, R, there are so many of us simply because our civilization began millennia before others did."

"I am not sure I understand," R said with a puzzled look, waving a few flies away from his bottle of Dimco.

The physician explained, "Our earliest cities, like Mohenjo Daro, were built with covered public sewers. This important element of urban planning kept the population healthy, and prevented, I am sure, numerous outbreaks of deadly diseases that still plagued many other parts of the world until a few centuries ago. Our early understanding of the benefits of hygiene contributed to a high and steady population growth—higher than in other parts of the world. If you calculate, you will understand why we are now so numerous!"

"Sounds plausible to me."

Nandan sniffed sensuously at the aroma of *dosa* rising from the owner's *taway*<sup>207</sup>. He insisted that R join him in trying at least one. "You can't travel all across India without tasting the local specialties," he remonstrated. "In restaurants, the food is neutered to suit the palates of tourists. It is in popular, local eateries like this one that you can taste the real India. The trick is to eat only thoroughly cooked food; no tap water, no salads. Come on, try it! Don't worry, you won't die. Besides, I am a qualified medical practitioner; remember?" he scoffed.

But R was now wary of 'local specialties' ... like the *bhaylpuri* he had eaten with such gusto in Mumbai. He still remembered the intense belly pains he had endured later in the toilet of the train to Goa. After that incident, he had sworn to eat only in high-class restaurants, or at his hosts' homes. However, he gave in, embarrassed by Nandan's smile and his mocking gaze, in which he thought he could read 'coward'.

"The coriander *chutni* is very tasty," Nandan commented, smacking his lips in appreciation. Here, take some. You probably don't make this very often in the North."

"It seems that the menu here is 'vegetarian only'," R commented.

"Absolutely. If the owner is vegetarian, he certainly won't prepare any meat or fish dishes ... even if we are surrounded by game-filled forests and the ocean is only half an hour away," Nandan replied, pointing to coconut and palm trees on the horizon.

"I noticed that you cooked only vegetarian meals while I stayed at your apartment, Nandan. Is it because you know that I am vegetarian?"

"We are vegetarian too. I thought I had told you that. My family has always been vegetarian, but in Britain and Canada, I ate everything ... in the beginning. That was during my rebellious period; a silly, puerile phase in which I felt happy and relieved to escape India and its constraining customs. However, about a year before I decided to return to Madurai, when I realized the value of *ayurved*, of *yog* and of our ancient philosophy, I began to practice

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<sup>207</sup> Large, round iron plate used for cooking flat breads and pancakes.  
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the foundation of *raj yog*—which is *uhinsa*, non-violence—and that is when I gave up non-vegetarian food.”

Between two mouthfuls of potato curry wrapped in a crispy *dosa*, Nandan laughed. R looked up at him without a word, knowing that the physician would explain the cause of his mirth.

“I just remembered how, in the beginning of my ‘conversion’, I faced the puzzled glances of my colleagues, especially when we sat at the same hospital cafeteria table for lunch or dinner. When I told them that I no longer wanted to cause the suffering and death of innocent animals, and that non-violence would contribute to my spiritual development, they looked at each other in bewildered silence—probably concerned about my mental health.”

Suddenly, Nandan focused on a distant point, and yelled, “Talking of animals, R, look over there!”

R turned his eyes towards the nearby green hills. A few hundred feet away, three elephants, driven by their mahouts, ambled to the edge of the dense jungle. There, in just a few minutes, the powerful and obedient animals promptly and nimbly felled a few trees, which they pulled to the edge of the road. According to the eatery owner, the man-elephant team was tasked with opening a new road through the hills. Of course, R did not miss this opportunity to photograph what he felt was a typical example of the underdevelopment of rural southern India. “When will they start to use caterpillars?” he wondered.

“Can you see how fast they work, R? They’ll clear the way quickly for the road-building crew. And all this without any pollution, using a ‘sustainable development’ approach that is adapted to the local terrain, while preserving an indigenous animal species: the elephant. Caterpillars would have a hard time maneuvering in those hills. In Britain or Canada, engineers would laugh at this ‘primitive’ approach, but paradoxically, they would also affirm that they are in favor of reducing pollution!”

R nodded sideways distractedly. He was busy observing a family of tourists. The mother, father and two kids walked hesitantly towards the elephants after leaving their rented Premier on the side of the road. A moment later, he took another photo as one of the smiling mahouts hauled the two kids on the back of the gentlest of the three elephants.

The two men resumed their drive soon afterwards. As they crossed the Indira Gandhi Bridge, which links the island of Rameshwaram to the subcontinent, R inhaled the warm and humid sea breeze blowing across the Gulf of Mannar. After a three-hour trip, he was eager to get out and stretch his legs on the beach. But Nandan continued to drive for another ten minutes, avoiding the center of the island, skirting the Indian Ocean along a narrow coastal road.

Finally, on the Dhanushkodi beach, at the extreme south of the island, a thrilled R bent down and scooped up a handful of sand. He felt the same shiver run down his spine as in Dwarka, when he had walked along the shore, close to where Krishna had built his island kingdom. Thousands of years before that, Ram, a previous incarnation of Vishnu, trod on this sand. His thoughts turned to Yogish Doobay, imagining the old sage’s smile. He carefully placed some of the precious sand in his pocket ... for his guru.

The young man then climbed on one of the many black rocks scattered on the beach. Lifting his hand to shield his eyes from the sun’s dazzling rays, R peered deep into the horizon, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Sri Lankan coastline. Nandan watched him from a distance for a while, then joined him on the rock. Filling his lungs with the fresh and salty sea breeze, the *ayurvedic* healer swept the horizon with a broad wave of his arm. “Long ago, under the Chola Empire, Sanatan Dharm spread through the whole of Malaysia, Indonesia and other parts of South-East Asia, carried by explorers from Tamil Nadu. They established the Srivijay kingdom on the island of Sumatra. Nowadays, only the island of Bali bears testimony to their brave odyssey. It’s the only part of Indonesia to have escaped conversion, defying Islamic scimitars. I traveled through parts of Indonesia once, R. Many of their names and words have Sanskrit roots.”

About an hour later, sated with the sights, sounds and smells of Rameshwaram, and filled with an eerie feeling of having ‘touched’ history, R shook Nandan’s hand as the physician departed.

"My friend, it's time for me to go now. It's a long journey back home and it will be dark soon; I don't want to damage Annalakshmi's small car in those potholes."

"I really don't know how to thank you for your warm welcome, Nandan. I ... I learned so much from you and your father during my stay here."

"Really? I am so glad to hear that. Say hello to Ashok for me next time you talk to him. And best of luck with your projects ... whatever they end up being."

That reminded R that he should email his elder brother soon. Strangely captivated by all that had happened in Madurai, he had not found time to do so. At the next opportunity, he would definitely report on his meeting with Nandan, and he would ask Ashok about the elephant-shaped sandalwood paperweights and their concealed messages.



**Part 6**  
**Revelation in Bodhgaya**

## CHAPTER 25

R's itinerary from Rameshwaram to Bodhgaya, which took him through three states of southeast India, hugged the coastlines of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Orissa.

On many beaches of eastern Tamil Nadu, the scars left by the 2004 tsunami were still visible. R remembered the TV images from that disaster very well. At the time, absorbed by the intense preparation required for his final exams, he could not join a group of friends—mostly university students—who left Delhi immediately, loaded with basic supplies. Young, energetic, and idealistic, they rushed to the help of their fellow citizens—fishers mostly—whose loved ones and meager possessions had been swept away by monster waves.

At the time, the young man did not understand why the government stubbornly rejected any assistance from foreign countries and multinational, charitable organizations. His father's explanation was enlightening, "It's a question of national sovereignty. We cannot allow foreign troops in when our own country is littered with internal conflicts, some of which are financed by hostile nations. In addition, a law was recently passed in Tamil Nadu to outlaw religious conversion. For several years, Hindu organizations had been complaining about the rise of proselytism over there. You see, it seems that some people interpret Sanatan Dharm's tolerance as a sign of weakness. In such a delicate political context, the government is indeed wise to shut the country's doors to large, religious organizations that would only be too happy to convert as many Hindus as they can under the pretense of helping tsunami victims with a few rags and food rations. The state and federal governments do not have the necessary resources to monitor those organizations if they are allowed to spread their wings within Tamil Nadu."

R traveled night and day, eager to complete his journey. He only made a long stop once, having found an Internet café from which he sent an email to his elder brother, giving news of his meeting with Nandan ... and asking what the messages were about. Two days after bidding farewell to Nandan Muttu at Rameshwaram, and after crossing nearly two thousand miles, the young traveler finally reached Bodhgaya, in the central State of Bihar.

The day before, R had spoken to Gautam Toolsi over the phone.

"I am so sorry that I will not be able to welcome you at the train station tomorrow, R, but I will be busy in the early part of the afternoon. You see, the state minister of Education will visit the school's construction site along with his officials—including my boss, the chief engineer. It will be a major event; the media will be present too. As the site manager, I have to be here. I am sure that you can find your way. Ask for directions. Bodhgaya is a small town and its people are friendly. They have to be, you know, it's a major Buddhist pilgrimage site and thousands of religious tourists visit it daily," the civil engineer had said.

"No problem, Gautam. At what time will the event end?"

"Around two in the afternoon. They should all be gone by two thirty. Come and see me directly at the site office."

Arriving in Bodhgaya at one thirty, R strolled about in the town center. Then, at the agreed time, he set off to meet the last of the five men to whom Ashok had sent the mysterious wooden elephants.

Gautam had not changed much; the engineer still had the same great looks and warm smile. "Like a Bollywood star," R had thought when they met in Delhi. However, Toolsi was shy; too shy to behave like one of those pretentious, testosterone-charged characters that Indian cinema fans adore.

Both hands stretched out in welcome, Gautam advanced, smiling. After the customary exchange of polite greetings, he took R by the shoulder—as an elder brother would. "Like Ashok used to," the young traveler recalled with a pinch of sadness.

"Come. The officials just left. Everything went well, you know. I was so nervous. Thankfully, it's very hot today, so they probably thought that I was sweating because of the heat. ... And I was able to speak to my boss about future public construction projects in Bodhgaya." He let out a nervous laugh. "I am so relieved it's over ... I am sure you can tell."

Gautam guided R through an exceptionally tidy construction site, explaining that his gang had cleaned the compound hours before the officials arrived.

"The town's current secondary school has only a dozen classrooms. However, Bodhgaya is expanding, thanks to the influx of Buddhist tourists from all over the world.

They don't spend much, but their activities still benefit the local economy. The authorities procrastinated for years before they decided to build a new school. You see, it would not have been possible to expand the current structure. It was poorly built and could crumble down anytime. ... Corruption," Gautam explained, ending with a wink.

R wondered why a bright engineer like Gautam had chosen to work in such a remote location. After all, he had studied in Delhi and could have found a job with one of the large Indian conglomerates. Bodhgaya's only claim to fame was that prince Siddhart had preached there long ago. The one who would later be called the Buddha used to sit in the shade of a majestic *bodhi* tree, giving the town its name.

"Why Bodhgaya, Gautam?" the ever-curious young traveler asked.

"Yes, I know. Maybe Ashok told you about the offer I received from Dada Construction after graduating. It is the largest building firm in India. But I did not want to be just another cog in their machinery. In addition, there were rumors that their outstanding success was mainly due to the systematic corruption of public officials. I did not want to be part of anything dirty, R. The way I see it, I can earn a decent living and stay clean too, you know."

"I am with you one hundred percent, Gautam. This country is rotten to the core. That's why I am planning to follow Ashok's example; I will leave for America too."

The engineer stared at him with a peeved expression, then said, "I would not use the term 'rotten'. I prefer to say that we have not completely adopted the free market system ... yet. Because of our traditional preference for social and economic efficiency, we tend to reject competition and to prefer monopolies. That creates a few lucky—or corrupt—winners ... and many losers."

Gautam looked at R again, adding, "And it would be naïve to believe that corruption does not exist elsewhere, especially in developed countries. It just takes different guises. 'Networking', for example, is a term used to describe a business tactic for gaining unfair advantage over your competitors. Be friends with your clients and they'll overlook your shortcomings. Buy them—and their partners—dinner and drinks in expensive restaurants, and treat them to golf or 'business meetings' in exotic locations. ... The media in those countries regularly disclose scandals involving business people, politicians and government officials. No, R. It is not much worse in our country. Sure, there is a long, tough road ahead if we want to give every Indian a decent lifestyle, but we can do it!"

Gautam stopped to give way to a worker carrying a heavy load of bricks. He then added, "I came here to help, R. In this part of Bihar, like other poverty-stricken, rural areas, so many development projects are postponed as people patiently await funds ... and qualified, skilled professionals. There is little prestige to be gained in this kind of work, nor is there much money to be made. However, if we keep on procrastinating, we will simply endure many more decades of rural underdevelopment. And villages are where the majority of our population still lives ... while the lucky few enjoy a fast improving, near-western lifestyle in the cities."

He paused, then smiled. "Actually, I have another reason for staying here. ... You see, I am Buddhist."

R politely tried not to look surprised. "I understand why you like it here. Bodhgaya is a major Buddhist pilgrimage site."

"That's right ... but there's more. And that's why I inquired with my boss about future construction projects that would allow me to stay here a little longer ..."

Impatient at the engineer's shyness to explain what else kept him in the small town—and not really caring, anyway,—R interrupted, sighing, "I am sure that it must be great to combine work and religion, Gautam."

The engineer hesitated, then blurted out his secret, "No, it's not that. Ashok knows, so I want you to know too." Waving away an imaginary fly, he continued, "I ... I think that I found the girl ... the woman I would like to marry, here in Bodhgaya. That's the real reason."

"That's great news," R exhaled with a forced smile, wondering, "How can a handsome man like Gautam be so shy?"

"Actually, it's a complicated situation. In our highly compartmentalized society, social differences still matter more than a man's honorable feelings for a woman. In addition, she endured a tragic situation in the past; tragic enough to put her off marriage ... it seems. I am still trying to convince her to change her mind. And I don't give up easily."

"It does seem complicated, but nothing is impossible. Cheer up," R sighed, thinking of his own parents' reservations about his 'friendship' with Mohini and Nandan's recent words of encouragement.

"Our paths cross every now and then. She teaches classical music in this school, you see. Recently, I expressed my feelings to her and eventually plucked up the courage to propose. That was quite a day. She made fun of me. ... She laughed at 'the idea of her and me'. Since then,—that was just a few days ago—we just exchange polite greetings. But I will try again. Maybe after school today."

"It might be a good idea to avoid speaking to her in front of her students and colleagues. Maybe she feels embarrassed," R recommended, looking wiser than his years.

Gautam burst out laughing and slapped his guest's shoulder. "I am no teenager R, although my pitiable love story appears to suggest that. I will wait until she walks past the open-air market. Sometimes she stops there to buy vegetables or fruits before heading home."

They reached Gautam site office. Although the large shed was located under a tree, its two small fans made little impact on the temperature inside. As he made his way toward a table caving under a mound of construction plans, papers and books, Gautam ordered an office boy to fetch them two cold Dimcos.

A few minutes later, as R gulped down the excessively sweet drink, he noticed a large cockroach crawling on the wall close to Gautam. To the young man's astonishment—he would have squashed the horrible bug on the spot—his host delicately caught the insect between his fingers and released it through the window.

Suppressing a shiver of disgust, R asked, "I know that Jainism forbids any form of violence against animals, which is why its followers take great care not to walk inadvertently even on ants, ... but you are Buddhist."

"That's correct. However, I share their views about *uhinsa*: all forms of life deserve respect. While Jains adhere strictly to this principle, we prefer a middle path. We just do our best to avoid harming our fellow beings, including animals. However, we know that we have to face the consequences of our actions someday. Our ultimate goal is to attain *nirvana* eventually. ... Some will attain that goal earlier, others later."

R then remembered the parcel. He took it out of his 'Los Angeles' backpack and handed it over to Gautam, simply saying, "Ashok sent this for you."

Sitting back, he stared at the engineer's face as the latter hastily opened the brown paper wrapping. His host's features went through a gradual transformation; first, a smile as the elephant-shaped paperweight was revealed; then, his gaze seemed to go blank as if lost in distant memories; finally, another smile—a mysterious one—which appeared gradually as Gautam read the message contained in the hollow sandalwood object.

Ashok had not yet responded to his email, so R tried his luck with the engineer. "Good news, Gautam?" His tone openly conveyed curiosity. "I don't have much to lose now," he thought.

His host looked up at him, intrigued at first, then disbelieving. "Don't tell me!" he exclaimed, stifling his laughter. "You haven't guessed?"

"No. I don't know anything about these ... 'messages' that I am carrying all across India." R's voice trembled with frustration, but he contained his feelings and then continued. "I am curious to know what this is all about, or at least what Ashok wrote in this rolled-up sheet of paper that he sent you ... and why that message was concealed inside a hollow elephant. ... However, if it is a secret ... I'll understand."

Gautam's chair creaked as he gave way to his mirth. Eventually, wiping his eyes, Ashok's friend said, "R, as you have carried these paperweights all over India to people whom you barely know, it is now time to enlighten you. But first, these elephant-shaped paperweights have a great story; a story that I will now narrate to you."

The engineer looked again at the fragrant, gem-studded, delicately hand-painted elephant, and then said, "When we were attending university in Delhi, Ashok, Vijay, Nandan, Jeremy, Ashraf and myself, we began taking walks at night in the narrow streets of the old Delhi. We were bored, young and—we believed—adventurous. We were thrilled at the idea of discovering the real Delhi, not the 'official' one. Don't worry," he hastily added, noticing the concerned look on R's face. "We did nothing illegal. We were just middle-class young men in search of some 'adventure' to spice up our dull student lives. And we found one! One night,

as we walked along a dark alley in the old city, we came face to face with the harsh realities of life in the nation's capital ... and the experience we lived explains your journey."

That fateful night, as the six students turned around a street corner, they discovered a man lying down, his face on the grimy Delhi pavement. The spinning wheels of his peddler's tricycle revealed that the 'fall' had just occurred. Handcrafted folk souvenirs scattered all over the pavement confirmed that the man, like so many others, earned a living by selling his wares to the capital's tourists.

Nandan, then a physician in the making, was the first to rush to the scene. After giving the moaning peddler some first aid, he turned to his friends, "It's not as bad as it seems. He is not seriously injured, although his nose is bleeding and he has a few cuts and bruises."

Vijay commented with his rumbling, authoritative voice, "You see what happens when you ride your vehicle at night without any headlights, my good man? You break your face!"

The man raised himself feebly off the ground with Nandan's help. He was thin, and his white mustache and hair revealed that he was at least in his fifties—although poverty and suffering could have aged him prematurely. He opened trembling lips and murmured through the blood still oozing from his nose, "I did not fall. They hit me. ... I could not fight back. ... They stole all the money that I made today."

Still held up by Nandan, he stood up and added, "Today was only my second day. I borrowed money to start this small business. ... An umpteenth attempt to fight poverty and feed my family. I must have committed many horrible crimes in my past lives to deserve such harsh challenges so late in this life. I really don't know what I will tell my wife. She sold her last ring to help me start this business. ... Maybe ... I should just throw myself in the Yamuna ... but even that may not work: I am too good a swimmer."

He thanked Nandan, then started picking up his scattered merchandise. The young men rushed to help him, touched by his pathetic story. They had gone there looking for 'adventure' ... and this event made them realize that real human dramas actually took place in those dark, narrow alleys where so many people struggled to survive. As they gathered the unbroken souvenirs, they looked guiltily at each other. It was then that Ashok had a brilliant idea. An idea that he shared immediately with his friends.

"What was it?" R interrupted impatiently.

"Your brother suggested that we should help that man. All his money had been stolen and he was talking of committing suicide. Of course, we agreed, and we gathered all the coins and notes we had on us. Then, we bought the costliest items in the old peddler's stock."

" ... The sandalwood elephants!"

"You guessed right. We shared the thirty paperweights equally between us. Ashok then had another idea—a very idealistic one. He proposed that we enter into a pact: we would promise to help each other always, just like we helped a total stranger that night. When in need, we would send a message to the others using the hollow paperweights."

Reacting to the amused and slightly cynical grin that R was clearly struggling to suppress, Gautam added, "Don't laugh. We were really idealistic in our university days; we were young, full of dreams and hopes. 'Real life' had not yet turned us cynical or insensitive. As none of us really needed five elephant-shaped paperweights, we welcomed the pact in part to justify the money we spent."

"Did that help the peddler?"

"He looked relieved when we bought the elephants. He had gone through a brief moment of despair, but he was tough. A few days later, Ashraf saw him working in one of the touristy spots of Delhi."

R then understood the emotions felt by some of Ashok's friends when they saw the elephants again. These objects were laden with memories of a poignant situation that those men had lived years ago. With the exception of Baldeo Singh, they must have recalled that incident and—perhaps—felt nostalgic about their lost candor, now that life's many hurdles and challenges had shaped them into the men they were. "So, the objects I saw in Baldeo Singh's safe were indeed Vijay's five elephants," he guessed.

Gautam had not finished with his revelations. He snapped his fingers to claim the younger man's full attention. "You are probably curious to know why Ashok needed our help, since he sent us the elephants. Listen, then. In this message, Ashok is asking me, as he probably asked the others, to offer you my hospitality for a few days and help you discover a

few aspects of Bharat Mata. He does not want you to leave for America despising your country of birth like he did ... because he regretted it later. He hopes that this journey across India will help you understand and appreciate your country better ... before you leave it." The engineer paused and looked at his guest. "That, R, is the secret of those messages ... the secret of your journey!"

Gautam paused to let R digest the stunning revelation. It was a speechless young man who sat in front of his host, a warming bottle of Dimco in his hand, his gaze unbelieving.

Gautam continued, "Ashok knew that he could count on us, his university friends, to do what he could not do from Los Angeles: hold your hand along this journey and reveal to you some of the hidden wonders ... and shocking challenges of this once-great country."

R finally seemed to emerge from his stupor. As Gautam spoke, thoughts raced through the young man's mind. "At first, I thought Ashok just wanted me to deliver a few gifts to his friends, a custom for Indians living abroad. I did not think anything of it until the secrecy surrounding the messages stirred my curiosity. Now I understand the mysterious attitude of his friends. I also understand why Baldeo Singh felt bound by his son's pact. That's why he refused to talk about the 'person' named in the message. Because ... I am that person! Unknown to me, Ashok asked all of them the same favor: to host and guide me for a few days. And all that time, I attributed their hospitality to tradition. Worse, I started imagining all kinds of things about those secret messages. I thought that they were about something illegal ... or about politics."

Gautam was trying to pry something else from inside the hollow elephant. Finally giving up, he tipped the object upside down on the table. A rolled-up sheet of paper fell out. Reading the first few lines, he handed it to R. "This last message is for you."

The sheet of notepaper was covered in Ashok's tiny, precise handwriting.

*"Dear R. I hope that your trip to this point was a safe one. I wanted this journey to be one of discovery; for you to discover your country, your roots, your culture, all that would make you proud of Bharat—even if you decide to leave our country ... like I did.*

*I often criticized the passive and selfish mentality of my fellow Indians. I used to rant about the rich and the middle classes; those who bury their heads in the sand to avoid facing—and solving—the blatant poverty endured by the majority of our compatriots. I used to complain about politicians who talk a lot and do next to nothing, happy to wallow in self-serving status quo. I said a lot of things, but I now realize that by turning my back on my country, flying to America and enjoying my life here in Los Angeles, I am no better.*

*Here, I buried myself in my work, and tried hard not to think of all that I had left behind, relieved that our parents were so upset by my sudden departure that they stopped writing and talking to me. I gradually forgot about the challenges you face there in India, at least until you asked me to help you with emigrating to America.*

*Then, I started to worry. Would you make the same mistake as I did? Would you run away to supposedly greener pastures instead of facing our harsher realities? I started to dread that you would leave India with disdain in your heart, just as I did.*

*I also regretted that I did not spend enough time listening to our guru, Yogish Doobay. He was always ready to share his wisdom with us. That's why I organized this journey of discovery for you, enlisting the help of our guru and my university friends. I hope that it has helped you to know yourself better by discovering your heritage and coming face to face with our country's challenges.*

*There are still many months ahead before you obtain your student visa and university begins. So, if you want to explore Bharat a little more, go ahead, don't hesitate; I'll pay for all your travel expenses. Just keep sending me photos and emails along the way. Through your eyes, I can discover what I left behind.*

*Thank you for having accepted to undertake this journey, R. You did me a great favor."*

R bent down, cupping his face between hands that still held his brother's letter. Astounded, he now understood that it was not because Ashok did not trust the Indian postal system that he had asked him to undertake this 'delivery trip'. "In fact, these parcels contained a much more precious gift than these elephants. They wrapped my brother's love, his kind thoughts and good intentions. He planned this entire journey to help me to see things from different perspectives."

The two men parted ways a short while later, the engineer insisting that his 'guest' return the next day.

"Now that I have told you everything, please allow me to keep my word. The others were true to the pact we made, and now it's my turn. I would like to guide you through Bodhgaya and the surrounding areas, up to Gaya and Nalanda. These are historic sites, filled with positive vibrations."

As he walked away, R tried to control the thoughts and emotions that simmered inside him. He had finally obtained the answer to his most important question. However, he was having trouble coping with what it implied. Fifteen minutes later, he therefore heaved a sigh of relief as he stopped in front of the house where his maternal grandmother lived with her youngest daughter.

Still sprightly for her age, the seventy-year-old Mrs. Mishra was gathering fallen mango leaves in her front yard, next to the small, white stone altar dedicated to Hanuman<sup>208</sup>, the family's *ishtdev*. Seeing her warmed R's heart and dispelled—momentarily, at least—the shock brought about by the revelation.

Allowing pleasant memories to flood his heart and mind, he recalled the *sandyas*<sup>209</sup> in which he had taken part as a kid staying at his grandparents'. Palms joined, he would stand close to the two red *jhundis*<sup>210</sup> flying high on their wooden poles as his grandfather recited the Hanuman Chalisa<sup>211</sup>. It seemed to him that he could still smell the sandalwood *agarbati*, and see the fragrant, orange and yellow marigolds that his grandmother offered to the family's favorite deity.

As he used to do when he was a kid, he crept up behind her and covered her eyes with his palms.

"Moonna! I know it's you," she shrieked with joy, dropping her broom.

Her voice had changed a lot since they had last met; that was just before he joined university. It now seemed raucous and dried up with age. R looked at her; she had clearly aged a lot since he had last seen her.

Then, as in all formal situations—or emotional moments—, she covered her head with the white *anchal* of her widow's sari. Her formerly round, smooth and smiling face was now lined with wrinkles—marks of pain and age. R knew that the last ten years had definitely not been the best in her life.

After the traditional salutations and a mutual exchange of news about their near relatives, R apologized, "If you had a telephone, *Nani*<sup>212</sup>, I would have called to let you know that I would arrive today."

"Telephone?" she pooh-poohed. "They are so unreliable. That's what our neighbors say, anyway. Actually, your mother used a trusted and tried method. She sent news through our neighbor's daughter, who came last week from Delhi for her younger sister's wedding. What a strange idea Ashok had to send you on an errand throughout India carrying parcels for those friends of his. It must have been dreadful." She held his face between her hands as she used to when he was a child. "You look weak," she pitied. "Don't worry, you will soon flesh out if you stay a few days with your *nani* and your *maas*<sup>213</sup>. We'll cook you some hearty Bihari food."

They were still standing in the front yard. Embarrassed by this public display of affection, R promptly changed topics. "Is there is a wedding at the neighbors, *Nani*?" he asked, pointing discreetly at the people assembled in the narrow, festooned street, dressed in their best festive clothes and carrying presents.

It was an unnecessary question; clearly, a wedding was taking place in the house opposite. Smiling broadly, the splendidly dressed mother and father of the bride stood on the threshold of their modest but well-decorated residence, the loud music drowning their words of welcome.

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<sup>208</sup> Popular Hindu deity in northern India. One of the central figures of the Ramayan.

<sup>209</sup> Evening prayer.

<sup>210</sup> Flags.

<sup>211</sup> Story of Hanuman.

<sup>212</sup> Maternal grandmother.

<sup>213</sup> Aunt (mother's sister).

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To enter the courtyard, guests walked under a curtain of mango leaves hanging from a string dyed with *haldi* paste. R knew that it was a reminder to leave bad feelings outside and to join the wedding ceremony with the sincere intention of blessing the new couple.

His grandmother smiled sadly. "They are marrying their daughter ...."

R was surprised that she was not yet dressed to attend the ceremony. "I am lucky to find you at home, *Nani*. I expect you will be getting ready to leave for the wedding soon?"

His grandmother bowed her head shamefully, hiding her mouth behind her *anchal*. "No, Moonna. ... They did not invite us." Then, grasping his elbow, she drew him gently towards the house.

Once inside, R sat down with a nostalgic sigh on a rickety old rattan chair. When he came to visit his grandparents as a child, it used to be one of the chairs 'reserved' for visitors.

And his grandfather had many visitors. They came from all corners of Bodhgaya and even from neighboring villages for some wise words of advice from the learned teacher that Homraj Mishra was. "*Nana*<sup>214</sup> was a kind and helpful man, always ready to guide others with comforting words and practical advice in life's worst moments," he recalled nostalgically.

He gazed around the living room. As in his childhood memories, the walls were decorated with Mithila-style paintings, drawn and hand-painted by his grandmother over several decades. Like so many other married women of Bihar, she had adorned the walls of her house with scenes from the Ramayan, the *poorans* and the *itihas*. Over time, though, the artwork had faded, and as the family had no son, there never was a daughter-in-law to perpetuate this folkloric activity.

His grandmother's words then sank in. Startled, he sat up straight, "Not invited? But why?" he asked indignantly. "You are their neighbors from across the street!"

"They were still talking to us until a few weeks ago, Moonna. That was just before they started inviting people to the wedding. Then, they began to avoid us. ... I understand them, you know. They must have listened to those who told them to keep away from a family with such a tragic *karm* as ours. They probably believe that our presence would jinx their daughter's marriage. As if bad *karm* is contagious!"

"But it's been ten years since Radha *maasi's* wedding ... did not take place."

"However, she never got married after that fateful day," Mrs. Mishra sighed. Her gaze lost in distant and bitter memories, she added, "Everybody was there and everything was ready. Radha was radiant in her red and gold wedding sari. The whole neighborhood, all our relatives and friends, many of your grandfather's colleagues and students sat around the *mandap*. I'll never forget that moment when her fiancé's father approached your *nana* and asked him to double the dowry. He said that he wanted to send his son to England to study for an MBA, and that the extra money would guarantee our daughter 'a dream-like life'."

"And you refused, of course? It's okay to help a young couple get started in life, but surrendering to blackmail is wrong."

"At that moment, with the wedding ceremony on hold, and all eyes turned towards those two, I would have given everything I had to satisfy that demand."

She paused, then said bitterly, "You know, Moonna, I am so relieved that my elder daughters got married many years earlier, in those days when people had modest ambitions and less expensive dreams. But Radha was the youngest, and by the time she was ready to get married, that 'migration fever' had infected so many people. Everyone seemed to have a cousin or a brother who had left for America, England or Dubai." She paused to erase a tear with her *anchal* and then said, "Your grandfather and myself talked about it time and time again after the event, and we always concluded that it was because of our *karm* that we had to endure that humiliation and the ensuing suffering."

Embarrassed, R felt blood rush underneath the layer of melanin that gave his cheeks their splendid bronze look. After all, he was one of those who dreamed of leaving India. Overcoming his discomfort, he asked, "So, because you decided not to give in, the groom's father left the wedding ceremony, taking his son with him?"

"Yes. I felt that my heart would stop beating when I guessed what was happening. From where I was, I saw your grandfather turn back with his turban in his hands—a clear sign of dishonor. Radha,—poor girl—who was admiring her fiancé on his splendid white horse, froze as the young man's father grabbed the reins and turned the animal around,

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<sup>214</sup> Maternal grandfather.  
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signaling that the wedding was cancelled. The hurt never left her eyes since that day, R. She lost her innocence, not through marriage, but through treachery. Now, classical music is the only thing she is passionate about."

There was a brief moment of sorrow-filled silence, then R asked, "How did *Nana* die? Mother never told me."

His grandmother erased another tear with her white *anchal* and replied, "He never really recovered from that blow. He was respected all around Bodhgaya, as you know. After that event, he knew that everybody would be gossiping. He crumbled down under the shock and the subsequent shame. His blood pressure kept rising and his diabetes grew much worse. He became absentminded. He rarely ventured out, but when he did, he often ended up in the fields outside town. Fortunately for him, this horrible period of his life ended when, one day, as he sat down in the shade of a *pipal* tree, a cobra bit him ... and he was freed."

She had spoken in a sad and tired tone, as if she had cried most of her tears a long time ago, and then accepted that it was better for her husband to have escaped an unbearable existence.

In that solemn moment, the loud and cheery Bollywood song blaring out of the neighbors' rented loudspeakers suddenly felt very inappropriate. R got up and swiftly shut the windows, restoring a respectful calm to the little house.

His guru's words echoed in his mind, "An accomplished *yogi* who takes part wholeheartedly in the divine illusion remains serene in all circumstances, joyful or trying. On the other hand, those who cannot pierce the thick veil of *Maya* celebrate when they encounter good fortune, then lament when tragedy strikes."

For a fleeting moment, R wondered how he rated as a *yogi*. Then he said, "These people have such poor taste. Instead of traditional wedding music with Indian instruments, they are playing those dumb Bollywood songs."

She smiled at him sadly, conscious of his discomfort.

R remembered the group of local musicians that his grandparents had hired for Radha's cancelled wedding—their white *dhotis*, yellow silk shawls, red and gold turbans, and those funny, flat-soled shoes with curving ends, ornamented with little mirrors and studded gems. There were six of them in that wedding band. The first two musicians blew plaintive-sounding *shehnais*, the unavoidable Indian trumpet that announces traditional weddings. Two younger men who followed a few steps behind their elders thumped lustily on their *dholkis*, and the two teenagers coming last clashed their *jhals* in unison, smiling cheerfully. Following tradition, they only stopped playing when the bridegroom's procession finally appeared with its own band of musicians.

Turning his gaze inside the living room, R noticed a Saraswati *veena* resting on a thick red and tan rug.

"Who plays it?" he asked, guessing the answer.

"Radha, of course. She won it at a national contest. She took part in it when she was still a student of classical music. Her guru and the other *shishyus* were dumbfounded. Now, she teaches classical instrumental and vocal music," Mrs. Mishra replied proudly.

"Yes, I remember now that she used to practice daily ... waking me up early every morning whenever I stayed here during school vacations and ..."

"Rarely, too rarely!" his grandmother interrupted, waving a wizened finger in reproach.

"And where does aunt Radha teach?"

"In the secondary school nearby. I am so happy that she is able to immerse herself fully in her passion. Music certainly saved her from despair. Your grandfather succumbed to the pressure of shame, but she is strong; she survived. I just wish that she would get married. She is thirty-five now, you know."

"Mom often says that everything would have been different if that man had married her, dowry or no dowry." Then, remembering Doobay's discourses, he added, "But such painful moments in our lives are the result of our past actions, of our negative tendencies."

"That's right Moonna. It is pointless to lament. The law of *karm* is unfailingly just. If we look forward to enjoying the fruits of our good deeds, we must also accept pain and sadness, the fruits of our past misdeeds. I know that. My father, who was a pundit, ensured that all his children—not just the boys—got the education we deserved," she said, revealing two perfect rows of polished white teeth as she smiled.

"The result of her past good deeds; in this case, excellent dental hygiene," R thought, stifling a smile at the thought.

Mrs. Mishra's face suddenly turned serious. Lowering her gaze, she said, "I was relieved when Radha found a job ... just in time. How long could I keep pretending that we were thinking of moving. The neighbors kept asking me why I was selling off our furniture."

Shocked by her words, R glanced around the living room. Nothing seemed to be missing there.

Noticing his look, she explained, "I kept the living room furniture, but I sold nearly everything else except for one closet and two beds."

"You ... you have money problems, *Nani*?" an anxious R stammered.

"Not anymore, Moonna. I told you this so that you would not be surprised later. The house is ours, but after your grandfather's death, without his pension, it became increasingly difficult to pay back the debts that we had contracted for Radha's wedding. We first sold off all our jewelry, of course; then the furniture. ... You will have to sleep on the roof; we kept an old bed up there."

It was R's turn to lower his eyes in shame. Enjoying relative comfort in his parents' apartment in New Delhi, he never suspected that his grandmother and aunt were enduring such hardships in Bodhgaya. He now felt a pinch of regret, remembering all the inconsiderate expenses he had made along the way.

"Had I known ... but what could I have done anyway? I was a student until recently; and I am currently unemployed. ... That is why so many people still live in extended families. Those who work contribute to the running of the household. Pooled resources allow all family members to enjoy a higher standard of living than in a cellular family unit. ... An extended family would have supported *Nani* and aunt Radha through those hardships."

"I thought that Mother sent you some money regularly, *Nani*?" R inquired gently.

She smiled, amused. Adjusting her *anchal*, which had slipped off her head, she asked, "Did your father say so?"

R nodded.

"I regret to contradict my son-in-law, Moonna, but we never enjoyed a *paisay* from your *ku*<sup>215</sup>. It is against our traditions, and your grandfather would never have tolerated it. No, we don't receive any money from anybody; besides, we would not accept any. From time to time, a few of your grandfather's ex-students visit me to pay their respects. Of course—and that's traditional too—they never come empty handed. I don't refuse their offerings of fruits or vegetables. If I say 'No, thanks'—out of propriety—they invariably insist, explaining that they could never offer any *gurudakshina* to your grandfather while he was still alive, being too poor then. However, Radha gets angry when I accept their modest gifts."

She turned her gaze towards the door and smiled, "You will live a hundred years, Radha. We were just talking of you."

The concerned face of the woman who stood on the doorstep lit up with a bright smile when she saw her nephew. "R," she said in her delightful, vocal music teacher's voice, "what a pleasant surprise. How are you? Was your trip fruitful? Did you meet with Ashok's friend here in Bodhgaya?"

"Yes, *Maasi*. It was a long and tiring journey all across the country, but I accomplished what I promised Ashok; all the parcels that he sent from America are now in safe hands."

She frowned a little, still smiling, "These must have been very precious gifts indeed if Ashok felt the need to ask you to deliver them in person. His friends must be very dear to him."

Her words felt like a question; a question that Radha was too polite to ask. Having just understood the goal of the journey planned by his elder brother—and still feeling shaken—, R preferred to change topics.

"It was an enlightening trip, *Maasi*, and, of course I took plenty of photos. I'll show you these in a moment."

He then handed her the small parcel that his mother had slipped in his hand just before he left their apartment in New Delhi. He had also bought them some *puja samagri* on the way. As Radha unwrapped the package, R showed the photos to his grandmother. At her

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<sup>215</sup> Family line.  
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age and without glasses, it was impossible for her to distinguish anything on the camera's small screen. Nonetheless, she pretended to appreciate.

"You took great pictures, R. Ashok did well to send you on this trip. You must have discovered so many things about our country."

Her words left him speechless. Throughout this journey, he had puzzled over the mystery of the elephants and the messages ... and his grandmother had so easily guessed its true purpose!

He could not reflect at length on that, as Radha started pressing her forehead with both hands.

"What is it, *Bayti*<sup>216</sup>? A headache? It must be the heat. Come; let me massage your head with some coconut oil. That always works."

"No thanks, Mother. I have a headache, but it's because of that ... engineer. He proposed again today. I thought I had been clear enough last time. He can't be from a good family or he would have given up."

A startled R stifled a gasp. He had just guessed who Gautam had fallen in love with. ... It was his aunt Radha!

He looked at her. His mother's youngest sister had a few gray hairs on her temples. Her failed marriage attempt, her father's demise and their subsequent financial woes must have had a profound impact on her. Wisely, she had taken refuge in her profession, struggling with the wound inflicted by a carefree suitor when she was still so young and trusting. Yet, at thirty-five, she had managed to retain much of her beauty.

The rest of the evening was merrier. R narrated several of the most amusing episodes of his journey to his two relatives. Both women laughed and chatted, telling him about members of his extended family that he never even knew existed. Later, ignoring his protests, they also listened in on his conversation with Mohini, covering their mouths to stifle their giggles.

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<sup>216</sup> Daughter.

## CHAPTER 26

The morning sun's rays awoke a reluctant R. His grandmother having sold off all her excess furniture, he had slept on an old wood and straw bed on the roof. The nocturnal temperature was a relief from the previous day's oppressive heat, but fighting off the mosquitoes had him tossing and turning all night.

His mood brightened up suddenly when he peeked down at his grandmother. She was washing her mouth in the traditional way at the outside tap, rubbing her teeth vigorously with a *datuan*, a disposable soft wood stick.

Sensing his gaze, she looked up at him, "You should try it instead of laughing at me Moonna; it's more hygienic than those toothbrushes you city people use for weeks ... or months," she muttered, piqued.

"No, thanks. I am a citizen of the twenty-first century."

"Moonna," she said in that honeyed, sarcastic tone she was known for—but which she seldom used with him—"the *datuan* has been in use for thousands of years. And as for the date, we are in 5017 of *kaliyoog*, not in the 'twenty-first century' as you say."

R smiled again. His grandmother had lost none of her verbal vitality. In the family, her ability to critique and her sense of repartee were legendary. Her comments frequently irked and shocked the more traditional—and hypocritical—among their family members. Her elder daughters and their husbands avoided her as far as possible, but R was one of the few who loved her free-speaking ways.

He did not argue with her: she was right. He was a product of the great city, whose inhabitants so readily—and so subserviently—bowed to modernity. On the other hand, here, in the 'real' Bharat, people still felt free to live in accordance with age-old customs and beliefs.

As she did every morning, his grandmother then—uninhibitedly—cleaned her tongue with a flat, metal tongue-scraper. Radha, now at her mother's side, gargled noisily after having polished her teeth with a small piece of charcoal. She also stared up at him. "What is it, R? You don't remember having seen me polish my teeth during your previous visits?"

"It ... the charcoal seems to darken them, *Maasi*."

"At first perhaps, but it does not stain my teeth, and charcoal is non-toxic and mildly abrasive. It does not contain any cancer-causing agents. Look at how my teeth are white and shiny now."

"Over here, you are still so close to nature."

"And rightly so. Why should we blindly adopt those toothpastes? We don't know how long they have been tested. How do we know if they are as safe and effective as our traditional products?"

Remembering Nandan Muttu and his *ayurvedic* wellness center, R nodded humbly. It was clear that people in this part of the country did not need another Nandan returning from America to preach the virtues of their own heritage to them ... because they were not culturally uprooted yet.

Her head tilted towards the back, Radha then poured some water into her nose. The liquid seemed to go in through one of her nostrils and come out of the other. "What are you doing?" an alarmed R exclaimed. He knew how much his sinuses hurt when he breathed in some water accidentally! Why was Radha doing that on purpose?

"Don't worry," she reassured him after wiping her face dry. "It's just a *nayti*, a daily ritual cleansing of my nose and sinuses recommended by my guru. It helps to keep my voice in perfect working condition—which is essential in my job." She smiled at his astounded expression. He was a real city dweller, this nephew of hers!

During breakfast, as they enjoyed piping hot *aloo*<sup>217</sup> *pharatha* and eggplant *chutni*, their conversation took a more serious tone.

"R, I visit my friend Padma every Saturday. She teaches classical dancing at her home, and I teach her students some vocal music and *veena*. Could you please come along today? I am afraid that this engineer will follow me and try to talk to me again. If he sees you, he may get discouraged and give up."

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<sup>217</sup> Potato.

"I'll be delighted, *Maasi*," a suddenly anxious R replied. What would he do and say if Gautam tried to approach Radha in his presence? He did not know the engineer that well, but Toolsi seemed a decent man; the kind of man who could offer his aunt the happiness that eluded her years ago.

Squatting on a low footstool, Mrs. Mishra ate in silence, next to a small kerosene stove. Large iron cauldrons and clay pots surrounded her, useless now that her family was reduced to two persons only. She sat a dozen feet away from R and Radha, ready to serve them more food if needed. At first, the young man felt embarrassed that his own grandmother treated him like this—as a guest, not as a family member. He remembered that she also adhered to this custom whenever his father visited. She would then scrupulously follow every single tradition, eager to preserve—he guessed—the esteem of her son-in-law.

His grandmother had looked away in silence when Radha mentioned her unwelcome suitor. That was surprising; he had expected her to express indignation at the way in which a lecherous individual relentlessly stalked her daughter. Instead, after a furtive and sad look at Radha, she had turned her gaze to the food in her stainless steel plate. "She is probably concerned about *Maasi's* fate after her death," R guessed. "At this stage, she could be ready to welcome any decent suitor for her daughter."

He felt a sudden urge to wander into this minefield. After all, this situation was making his grandmother sad, and Gautam was a nice man. "Radha deserves a companion in life. Why is she punishing herself like that?"

"*Maasi* ... can I ask why you do not wish to consider this man's proposal?"

The piece of *pharatha* did not make it to his grandmother's mouth—at least not immediately. Her hand frozen in mid-air, Mrs. Mishra looked apprehensively at her daughter and R.

A few quiet seconds elapsed. Radha then answered, her voice cold ... lifeless, "He is a Buddhist ... and we are Hindu."

But R knew that was not the real reason. Radha had never been highly religious, and she would not support such social taboos—being the victim of an outlawed social tradition—the dowry—that had shattered her wedding dreams.

R's mother often expressed concern about her younger sister's increasingly feminist views. "If she continues to despise men, as those ... women do, she will never find a husband," Mrs. Sharma would whine.

R insisted. All he wanted was to persuade her to change her mind and turn her life into a success. He therefore talked to her about how the world was turning into a global village in which taboos about inter-faith marriages were fast becoming outdated notions. He also argued that 'we should not shut ourselves in ghettos and miss out on all the great things available in other cultures and religions' ... and so on.

"Those who blossom and live their lives fully are those who feel free to dip into the pool of philosophical and cultural treasures of the whole world, not those who hide behind the walls erected by their own clan. Opening up to the rest of the world and sharing the common wealth of humanity cannot be detrimental to anybody. Admiring other rivers does not force us to leave the one we are traveling upon."

But it was all in vain. Radha refused to be drawn into the debate. She abruptly put an end to his incursion into her private life, "Bravo, my nephew. What an eloquent speech. However, let me be clear: I am simply not interested in marriage, not now, not ever!"

From the corner of his eye, R noticed his grandmother's resigned look. "She probably gave up trying a long time ago," he concluded.

Half an hour later, he walked side by side with Radha along the dusty streets of Bodhgaya. His aunt seemed in a better mood; her gaze was bright and dreamy, and she was smiling. R could feel the impatience and joy contained in her sprightly step. She was clearly eager to arrive at her friend's house. There, her passion for classical music would probably engulf her. "And she will escape her reality ... or rather her bitter role in this illusion—as Doobay would put it—for an hour or two. A role which she is making worse by refusing to forget the slight she has suffered, by refusing to understand that not all men are like her callous suitor and his mercantile father."

He tried to break the silence, "*Maasi* ..."

"Please don't try to preach to me again, R." Her tone was firm, although she spoke with a smile. "My father never tried when he was alive ... although he was a teacher by profession. He respected my right to live my life as I wished. My mother and my sisters stopped too—after many fruitless attempts to convince me to get married."

She turned her beautiful face towards him and looked into his eyes, "I will stay single, my nephew, and I will never regret it. There are so many wonderful and enjoyable things to do in life ... music for example. At school, my students love my class. At Padma's house, I share my passion for classical music and singing with some young women who have never had a chance to learn these art forms. I am not alone, you know. Padma is a childless widow, and instead of trying to find a husband, she spends all her time teaching the seven classical dance styles to her students."

"Seven? In Varanasi, I watched a display of *kathak*, and in Madurai, a practice session of *bharat natyam*. I also heard about *kathakali*, Kerala's specialty. So, there are four other styles?"

"*Kathak* is North-Indian. Initially, it conveyed some important teachings of our *poorans* and *itihaas*. It was a form of spiritual as well as artistic expression; a form of *yog*, of union with the divine. After the Moslem conquest of India, the Mogul sultans perverted it, turning it into a form of entertainment meant to satisfy their sexual fantasies. On the other hand, *bharat natyam*, the typical style of South India, maintained its purity thanks to low Moslem penetration. As for *kathakali*, I also love its spectacular masks and costumes."

She paused as they both stopped to give way to an old white ox with long, bent horns and a flaccid hump. The bony animal was pulling a dirty, wobbly cart. Its owner, walking alongside the animal, pulled on its harness and struck it repeatedly with a stick while shouting terse instructions.

After they crossed the road, skipping between several potholes, Radha concluded, "Padma also teaches *kutchipuddi*, *odissi*, *manipuri* and *mohini attam*. These classical dance styles evolved in other regions of ancient India. She's the expert, so I'll ask her to tell you more ... if she finds the time."

But the two teachers and their students were busy for most of the two hours spent at Padma's house. R found a quiet corner in the main room and tried to look as inconspicuous as possible. The three young women who were there to study music and dance appeared unmarried, peeking repeatedly at him during their short breaks, stifling giggles in their palms. He noticed that they wore neither the *bindi* nor the *sindoor*, unmistakable symbols of Hindu married women in Bihar.

Radha guided two of the students in their vocal music practice, while the third learned a new dance routine from Padma. His aunt's students voiced their best ascending and descending *sa ray ga ma pa dha ni sa* for a few minutes, then practiced a *raag*<sup>218</sup>, accompanied by notes from their teacher's *veena*. Radha changed her *taal*<sup>219</sup> frequently, forcing them to follow suit.

At the end, R's aunt gave a *veena* recital. Seated on soft, embroidered cushions, one leg folded under her, the other foot resting on the rug to keep her steady, she caressed the strings of the favorite instrument of Saraswati, the goddess of music, arts, eloquence and knowledge.

Listening to the magical sounds that she produced, R felt carried away to another world; a pleasant, perfect world, in which everything was pure harmony.

"The music you played with the *veena* is so different from that of modern movie songs, *Maasi*. I understand your passion for classical music better now. Those melodies are still reverberating in my heart," he exclaimed enthusiastically as soon as the door of Padma's house closed behind them.

Radha smiled. "Thank you. All good musicians play with their heart. Proper technique is only the foundation of good music. You see, Indian classical music allows performers to personalize *raags*, and artists can therefore mix in their emotions when playing. This is how many classical melodies kept improving over the centuries."

"You mean that those melodies were not composed by a single person, but by several successive composers?"

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<sup>218</sup> Melody.

<sup>219</sup> Rhythm.

"That's right. Performers have always been encouraged to improve the *raags*—except in the *karnatic* tradition of southern India, which maintains a closer link with the spiritual roots of classical music."

"*Maasi*, you use the *veena*, but in most classical music recitals, we only hear the *sitar* and the *tabla*."

"And that is so sad. People end up believing that we only have a few musical instruments. In fact, I know of sixty ... at least."

"Sixty different musical instruments?"

"Yes. About fifteen string instruments, including the *santoor*, which has eighty-seven strings; twenty percussion instruments, among which is the *tabla*; and several types of trumpets and flutes. And yes, there are also many folkloric, 'special effect' instruments as well."

R and Radha continued their conversation about classical music and musical instruments until they reached the Mishras' house. There, they were pleasantly greeted by a tasty lunch prepared by R's grandmother: rice, *dal*, stir-fried *bhindi* seasoned with onions and spices, accompanied by mango *anchar* and *dahi*<sup>220</sup>.

An hour later, avoiding the scorching Bihar sun by walking in the shade of trees lining the streets of Bodhgaya, R reached the meeting place agreed with Gautam. The engineer greeted him with his usual smile and an affectionate slap on the shoulder.

"Ready to discover Bodhgaya and the surrounding region? Good, let's go, then!" he exclaimed, inviting his guest to climb into a rusty old jeep.

After a very bumpy—and thankfully brief—ride, they reached the Mahabodhi Temple complex. There, a mesmerized R photographed the towering, 80-foot statue of Buddha and the saffron-clad monks who were chanting prayers under the huge *bodhi* tree nearby.

A group of tourists stopped next to R and Gautam, and started to videotape and photograph the monks. R overheard their guide, "This is probably one of the most sacred Buddhist temples in the world. This giant statue and the temple were built on the same site where Emperor Ashok erected a temple after he converted to Buddhism about two thousand, three hundred years ago. The massive *bodhi* tree that you see over there is a descendant of the original tree under which the Buddha sat and meditated. Sanghamitta, Ashok's daughter, took one of its saplings to Sri Lanka, where she joined the growing Buddhist community. When the original tree died here, a sapling of its Sri Lankan descendant was brought back, and it grew to give this majestic tree."

Bodhgaya not being a large town, R and Gautam quickly glanced at the main attractions and then decided to set off for Gaya and Nalanda. Just before they left town, however, Gautam stopped in front of a food stall, inviting his guest to try a local specialty.

"I would love to savor a few of these syrupy *khaja* before we set off on this long trip, R. Come on, have at least one. It's just some fried, flaky pastry dipped in cardamom-flavored syrup. Not recommended if you are on a diet, though," he joked.

R had not told Gautam that he had visited Bodhgaya many times in his childhood—and that his grandmother always prepared *khajas* for him. He did not want the engineer to ask about his family ... and then guess that Radha was the woman he was in love with. "I don't want to get involved in this, considering how Radha feels. Gautam is a nice person and I would hate to see him hurt."

In spite of his painful experience with 'sidewalk snacks' in Mumbai, he accepted, just to please his host. However, he took great care to eat only the last two *khajas*, just after the merchant scooped them out of the bubbling oil and soaked them in syrup.

"No fly landed on these," he thought, sighing with relief.

His host, however, enjoyed the sweet treats without restraint, swallowing at least five *khaja* by the time R finished his two. The engineer smiled with childish delight as he licked the syrup off his fingers.

The trip to Gaya, located about ten miles to the north, was a chance for R to ask Gautam about Buddhism. However, he had to yell, as the jeep's windows were wide open and the old vehicle's engine noise was deafening.

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<sup>220</sup> Milk curd.

After several miles of dusty road, Gautam suddenly veered onto a dirt road leading to the Falgoo River and stopped the car abruptly. Wincing, he grabbed a bottle of water and rushed out of the jeep, heading for the nearest bush ... obviously to satisfy a pressing call of nature. Suppressing a smile, his young guest made his way to the river with his camera.

Discreetly, he snapped a few shots of village women washing their linen in the river. Standing knee deep in flowing water, they swung around regularly to whip the wetted clothes onto large rocks that lined the riverbank.

He then noticed a small group sitting in the shade of a large tree. Their saffron robes and shaved heads revealed that they were Buddhist monks. As Gautam had not reappeared, R walked towards them. He had never spoken to a Buddhist monk before and was keen to find out what he could about their way of life. "After all, Doobay wants me to keep my eyes and ears open and to test the knowledge he imparted."

The young monks—they seemed to be aged between twelve and eighteen—smiled serenely as they saluted him, palms joined, their shaved heads bowed. He returned their greeting, "Namastay. My name is R. Sharma, from Delhi."

One after the other, they bowed again as they introduced themselves. R then told them about his voyage, the places he had visited and where he was heading. In return, they shared their recent travel experiences with him.

"We were honored and happy to visit Bodhgaya. Now, we are on our way to visit Nalanda before returning to our monastery in Nepal," the eldest-looking among the monks explained.

"Nalanda? What a coincidence. I am going there too. I want to visit the site where the most famous of our ancient universities once stood."

"It is indeed a historic site. Nalanda University was established over twenty-five centuries ago. When the learned Xuan Zang visited it one thousand three hundred years before our time, this center of learning was at its peak with thousands of students and monks."

"Impressive. It must be a large site to visit."

"It is, but it is in ruins now. The whole university complex was razed by Afghan hordes and never rebuilt ... and all the books in the library were burned."

"That's terrible. I hope there is a museum."

"There is one."

"That will be a welcome change from all those temples in Bodhgaya."

The young monks smiled. The eldest replied on behalf of the group. "We did not find Bodhgaya boring at all. In fact, it was a great privilege for us to pray in temples built by Buddhist communities from all over the world."

One of the youngest monks added enthusiastically, "There are temples and monasteries from Tibet, Thailand, Japan, Sri Lanka and many other countries. We visited them all!"

"I envy you," R heard himself reply. "You travel and visit interesting places all around the country ...." He then stopped, suddenly realizing what he had just admitted.

Until then, he had avoided thinking about his journey's recently unveiled secret: that Ashok had planned it so that he could learn more about his country and his heritage. However, his latest remark was so spontaneous that he could not doubt its sincerity. He had just admitted something important ... that *he* enjoyed traveling through India!

The eldest monk smiled indulgently. "We also have a few obligations. You see, we need to offer our services to the communities and neighborhoods that we visit, and we have to discuss our experiences with our gurus when we return to the monastery. In addition, we live on donations of simple food that we receive along our *tirthayatra*."

R felt embarrassed. His journey had clearly not been a pilgrimage like that of those young monks; and the only 'service' he thought he had been performing was to deliver Ashok's parcels. However, the packages did not contain gifts; they were messages from his elder brother to his friends asking them to help R discover his country and heritage. As a result, *he* was now in *their* debt. He owed them the time and efforts they had invested to honor a pact made several years ago. Even Colonel Singh had kept his deceased son's word, although he had never met Ashok personally.



Zippering up his pants, Gautam emerged from the bushes, his business apparently concluded. R saluted the monks, wishing them a pleasant trip and walked towards his host. The engineer suddenly held his belly with both hands, his features contorted with pain.

"You are not feeling well?"

"It must have been those *khaja* ... but ... no. You ate some too and you are okay. ... It must be something else."

After Gautam shook off his pain, R told him about his talk with the young Buddhist monks. "They told me that they have to perform good deeds along the way and that they live on alms."

"That's right. They vow to live in simplicity, just like *bramhans*, the Hindu priests. In fact, it's harder for the latter because they get married and support families, who also have to live in poverty."

"Who defines that 'poverty', though?" R wondered aloud skeptically.

"Being Hindu, you should know. You see, in rural areas where people still follow many age-old customs, a *bramhan* and his family live very simply, in a small hut often adjoining the village temple. They are not allowed to possess land or cattle—except for one cow that they milk to feed the family. That helps a lot, as *bramhans* are vegetarians and milk products are the only animal protein they are allowed. As the village priest, a *bramhan* cannot earn income through any material activity. He and his family therefore survive solely on the *dakshina* offered by devotees who need his support for various religious rituals such as weddings, births and major prayers. *Bramhans* do not set fees for their services; devotees just offer whatever they can afford. Most often, *dakshina* is in kind, not cash: uncooked rice or *dal*, wheat flour, fruits and vegetables, sometimes some new fabric."

R then remembered what his father had once said. It was a long time ago, and as a child, he had not paid much attention then. Mr. Sharma had explained why he and his brother decided to leave their village in Uttar Pradesh about twenty years earlier.

"We lived in a small house close to the village temple. Your grandfather was a learned priest who also taught the village children to read and write. As teenagers, we—your uncle Suresh and I—witnessed the propaganda of some 'progressists'. They kept repeating that the village would emerge out of poverty only when all villagers would stop listening to the advice of *bramhans*. Gradually, people stopped attending the temple and sending their children to school. Your grandfather refused to abandon the villagers, but your uncle and I knew that we had no future in the village anymore; so we left. Suresh settled in Varanasi and I came to Delhi. In those days, a wave of socialist ideology was spreading in our country—supported, according to some, by the Chinese communist government. That wave took full advantage of popular despair as India struggled to make famines a thing of the past. It even found its way in that period's movies; *bramhans* were portrayed as parasites and those who listened to them were ridiculed. The credulous—and there were many of them—who listened to these 'prophets of progress' found out several decades later that getting rid of *bramhans* did not lead them to prosperity. But by then, it was too late. Many *bramhan* families had left and the villagers lost a precious link with their spiritual and cultural heritage. ... This vacuum was quickly filled, however, by Bollywood junk, politicians and evangelists.

R's eyes turned to the straw roofs of the nearby village. A few hundred feet from the riverbank, several huts were indeed visible.

Noticing, Gautam asked, "Would you like to visit the village? It will be quite an experience. I assure you that you will not see anything like this back in Delhi."

"I'd like that. I haven't set foot in a village for years."

"Well, a lot has changed. These days, villages have access to some services. In this one, for example, I know that they have a concrete community hall with a black and white T.V! After a day of hard labor, nearly everybody assembles there in the evening to watch the songs and dances of popular Bollywood stars."

Walking along a narrow dirt path, Gautam and R soon reached the village. At first, there seemed to be no one in sight. Then, they noticed a group of about a hundred people squatting quietly in the main square. The men formed a circle around five persons sitting on chairs. Older women stood in the shade of nearby trees, but there were few young women and children. "They are probably at home," R guessed.

"It's a *panchayat*, a traditional village council, in which conflicts between villagers are resolved peacefully by selected representatives. They are the ones sitting in the center, listening to the two opposing parties," Gautam whispered.

"You mean that they can hear cases, pass judgments and impose sentences? Without going to the police or the courts?" a surprised R asked.

"The villagers give authority to the *panchayat*, which is composed of representatives from each of the main social classes. The council decides upon community issues such as the sharing of village resources and new infrastructure. It's an institution that dates back thousands of years before the Mogul reign. They are still popular in rural areas because the various levels of formal government don't always have the resources needed to provide effective police, justice and local administration services—especially in Bihar, which is one of the poorest states of India."

"So it's a democratic form of community-based administration, then?"

"That's right. *Panchayat* meetings are public, as you can see. They debate in front of all, not behind closed doors. That way, the population understands why decisions are taken for the common good, and they can even participate."

"And what do you think is the issue being discussed in this meeting, Gautam?" R asked in a low voice.

Although they had taken care to stand at a safe distance and speak in a hushed tone, a few villagers had noticed their presence and were now staring at them uneasily.

"They are probably wondering if we are representatives of the authorities about to interfere in their matters," Gautam said. "Let us leave now, R. Obviously those two men are in some sort of conflict and came to the *panchayat* for a fair ruling."

Revolted by the suffocating odor of fresh cow dung, R was pleased to turn back and head for the jeep, flailing his arms to keep away swarms of flies.

"Why on earth do they keep cattle so close to their huts?"

"It was always like that, R. It's easier to milk the cows when they live in a hut close by, especially during the rainy season. In addition, only a decade ago, there were reports of tigers roaming the forests around here. At night, those predators would come looking for food. Villagers were better able to defend their cattle when they lived close by. And do you know that they still plaster their hut floors with cow dung? You see, cow dung is an antiseptic and it repels flies—but only if cattle feed is plant-based as it is here ... unlike in North America where it is mixed with waste meat products and hormones."

"Really. And that mound of dried cow dung over there," R asked. "What do they do with it? It seems too dry for use as manure."

"That? It's for burning, of course. Dried cow dung is an excellent kitchen fuel. And it's renewable as well."

R smirked. "Now I understand even better why we consider the cow sacred. If we killed them for their meat, we would miss out on so many other benefits," he commented in a half jocular, half serious tone.

"Especially in our villages, where people still live in harmony with nature, do not pollute, do not throw away plastic bags everywhere ...," Gautam replied with a sigh.

R guessed that the engineer liked the rural lifestyle. He therefore avoided making any more sarcastic comments about the area.

Near the jeep, they met a few peasants on their way back to the village. The men bowed low, smiling. Out of courtesy, or because he knew them, Gautam stopped to exchange a few words. Standing a short distance away, R observed them distractedly. "Laborers," he concluded from the muddy tools they carried. Their torn clothes, showing sun-scorched and wrinkled skin, testified to the many hardships they faced to extract a living from the soil.

Suddenly, R noticed that one of the men had three pens—one black, one blue and one red—in his shirt pocket. The man's torn shirt was old and dirty, proof that he had been working in the fields; so, what was he doing with those pens? Obviously, they were not of much use for tilling the soil.

As they climbed on board the jeep, a grinning R said, "Gautam, I found it strange—and funny—that one of the peasants you were talking to had three pens in his pocket. I wonder what he uses them for in the fields?"

Gautam gave him a peeved look. "Over here, where so many people are illiterate, pens are a status symbol, R. This man has probably been to school and therefore knows how to read and write, unlike so many around here."

The jeep's engine sputtered then roared into action. However, after only a few dozen feet, the vehicle stopped, its brakes squeaking. R turned towards Gautam. His host and guide was writhing with pain, holding his belly with both hands. The engineer gasped, "... R ... this colic is too painful ... and the diarrhea .... I don't think I will be able to take you to Nalanda and Gaya after all. Sorry."

"That's okay. Relax. Let me drive you to Bodhgaya. You should see a doctor and rest."

"Oh yes, there is one doctor I know. She is nice-looking ... and unmarried. But I don't want her to see me like this. It would be too humiliating."

"Another girl? What happened to the teacher?" R asked, curious.

"She ... she rejected me again. But she is the one I really like. Yes, please drive me to my hotel. I'll tell you which way to go when we get to Bodhgaya."

He then gave R a curious stare, "By the way, where did *you* sleep last night?"

"Me? ... At ... a university friend's home. He is from Bodhgaya," R said to avoid talking about Radha.

Gautam's gaze was laden with disbelief, "Really? What a coincidence! You travel to Bodhgaya—a small town of a few tens of thousands of people—to meet your brother's university friend ... and *you* also happen to have a university friend living here."

Twisting the steering wheel to avoid running over a monkey that was crossing the road, R changed topics, "Gautam, did you visit all of the Buddhist monasteries in Bodhgaya?"

"Is that what you were talking about with the monks? No, I did not. For me, temples and monasteries are for spiritual fulfillment, not tourism."

Then, frowning, he insisted, "What is your friend's name? I have been here nearly a year now. Maybe I know him."

"No. ... I doubt it. He ... just returned to Bodhgaya a few weeks ago." Changing topics again, R said, "Those *panchayats* ... I thought they had been abolished."

"Not at all. It's actually more convenient for the national and state governments if villagers administer their own issues. They hope that our rural people will rediscover the spirit of respectful cooperation that prevailed long ago, when people from all social classes, from all the castes in the village understood that they were interdependent; that they were associates, not opponents. You see, the Indian village was always an autonomous entity, independent of who ruled in the city. This is partly why many of our traditions survived successive invasions. In the old days, people from all castes helped each other when in need. Each caste, each trade and profession was represented by at least one family in the village. And the *panchayat* was their democratic, village-level assembly."

"You mentioned democracy. In an American magazine,—I think it was *Hourglass* or *Infomonth*—they referred to India as 'the largest democracy on earth'. What do you think of that?"

"I am in favor of an Indian-style democracy that is adapted to our culture; like the one we saw back there," Gautam said, pointing his thumb towards the village they had left far behind. "I don't think the type of parliamentary democracy that we 'inherited' from the British works for us. There are just too many interest groups to satisfy. Successive governments spend so much time negotiating alliances to stay in power that they cannot focus on accomplishing anything of substance for the country."

R chuckled. "Maybe we should return to a monarchic system, then. Many seem nostalgic of those times, considering their dynastic determination to keep electing members of the same family, generation after generation, regardless of ability."

"Why not?" Gautam sounded scornful. "Under Hindu and Buddhist kings, monarchy was rarely synonymous with dictatorship. The only tyrannical monarchs we had were Mogul. They always behaved as the foreign conquerors that they were. The British too; they were here only to exploit our country's vast resources. Our rajas, on the other hand, listened to their ministers and advisors, and received their subjects in public audiences—following the example of Ram. Besides, we still speak of Ramraj as an example of a perfect reign."

R looked at the engineer. "You speak of Ram ... yet you are a Buddhist."

"I am speaking as an Indian. The history of this country and the lives of its great men and women are my heritage too."

Gautam spoke at length about contemporary politics. Later, in conclusion, he asked, "Do you know why our politicians never seem able to solve our country's major problems: underdevelopment, poverty, terrorist threats from within, military threats from across our borders?"

Glancing at R, who did not venture to answer, he continued, "If there was no 'night', would we know what 'day' is? Would we appreciate a sunny day if there was never any rain? Everything is relative, including the importance of politicians and their perceived ability to bring about changes for the better. It would be self-defeating for politicians to find long term solutions to the problems of our society. If they did, we would no longer need them."

"I never thought of it that way," a baffled R replied. "But it makes sense."

Their conversation continued until they reached Bodhgaya, where R bade farewell to the engineer, wishing him well with his matrimonial project. He then spent another excellent evening with his two maternal relatives, listening to melodious songs that Radha sung, accompanied by notes from her *veena*. He felt tempted to take advantage of the pleasant atmosphere to tell them why he wanted to follow Ashok's footsteps and emigrate to America ... but he could not bring himself to do so.

That night, as he dialed Mohini's number from the roof, he could not understand why he had hesitated. After all, they were close relatives and deserved to be informed. However, he knew that his mother would tell them eventually. He realized that his hesitation had nothing to do with Radha's unfortunate experience, which his grandmother blamed squarely on 'emigration fever'. It was something else. But what?

"Am I beginning to like my Bharat in spite of its countless weaknesses?" he mused. "... Do I still want to leave for America?"

The following morning, after a hearty Indian breakfast, R said goodbye to his grandmother. Both of them felt sad at the thought that they might never see each other again. "She is resilient, but no one knows when the time will come for her to leave for another life, for another role within the illusion," R wondered.

As she wiped her tears, Mrs. Mishra blessed the cherished grandson who stood in front of her, his palms joined in salutation. "*Ashirvad. Mangalmay ho*<sup>221</sup>," she wished him in a trembling voice.

Radha was stronger ... and she surprised him as he walked with her to the door.

"Don't forget us when you reach Los Angeles, R. Find some time to write. Don't be surprised. Your mother told us about your plans already. ... I wish you all the luck possible."

As he walked away, R wished that she would find the courage to forget her painful past and move on, maybe holding Gautam's hand. Then, he recalled what Doobay had once said, "Our path crosses those of others for a while. They play their roles as our parents, our children and our friends in this divine *lila*; this giant stage on which we perform our roles ... before moving on to the next life."

He was eager to meet with Yogish Doobay again after completing this surprising journey. He felt confident that his guru would help him understand—and accept—how he felt, and how he should feel, about his country, and about his future.

The young traveler took a decrepit-looking taxi to Gaya; there, he would catch the next available train to Varanasi. Along the way, he opened his six little notepads, and read the thoughts that had occurred to him along this enlightening journey through his country of birth. He also turned on his digital camera and glanced at all the photos he had taken.

Soon, he would reply to Ashok's letter. "I will let him know that I met with Gautam and delivered the final parcel. I also want to thank him for his gift: an enriching journey of discovery. I learned so much about India ... no, Bharat! My feelings for our native land have definitely changed. I admit it! During these past three weeks, I have learned a lot about who I am. ... However, I am not sure who I *want* to be. Perhaps *Gurudji* can help me with that."

He read his travel notes once again, then started writing down a summary of his *tirthyatra*, the spiritual side of his journey. Pundit Yogish Doobay would want his disciple to explain what he had observed and learned during the trip. As his pen scratched the paper,

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<sup>221</sup> I bless you. Prosper and be happy.  
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matching the knowledge transmitted by his guru to the events and experiences that had struck him most, he realized to what extent his perspective on life had changed.

However, if he was not the same R who had started the journey in Delhi, what about his emigration project? And his feelings for Mohini? His metamorphosis definitely brought new questions. ... Questions that he would need to answer soon.

## **Part 8**

### **A New Beginning in Varanasi**

## CHAPTER 27

The relatively short train journey from Gaya to Varanasi allowed R to reflect on his metamorphosis. It was clear that the experiences he had lived, coupled with the wisdom imparted by his guru, had made quite an impact on him. He no longer felt contempt for his country of birth. But who had he turned into? Who was he now?

So engrossed was R in his introspection that he did not notice a thief's hand sliding stealthily into his 'Los Angeles' backpack. Fortunately for the young traveler, the hand only found his dirty linen, and withdrew promptly when the train slowed down to enter Sasaram station, mid-way to Varanasi. In his eagerness to complete his journey, he had decided not to wait for a train with an available first-class seat, jumping instead onto the first one. However, in this second-class compartment, passengers were as tightly packed as *agarbati* sticks in their wrapping.

The stop was a godsend to R. He shifted promptly to a better seat next to the window as soon as four noisy and sniffing kids left, clutching their mother's sari. Placing his backpack onto his knees to better support his notepad, he continued writing the observations and conclusions he wished to discuss with Yogish Doobay. He also drafted the email he would send to Ashok.

Thanking his brother, he wrote, "Dear Ashok, I would never have accepted to undertake this journey if you had told me the real reason behind it. I would like you to know that you were successful. My attitude towards Bharat Mata has indeed changed a lot! However, the problems faced by our country have not changed that much; at least not since you left. The same lack of opportunities, the same poverty, corruption, injustice, and social tensions prevail. Before the last three weeks, I used to think only of my own problems. Like so many of our compatriots, I was only concerned about my own survival, my own well-being—regardless of what others went through. Leaving this 'rotten' country seemed the only—the best—solution. I made this my *mantr* and reinforced it with repugnance for anything Indian. Like so many others, I began to dream of what I expected to find in America. However, along this journey, I met people who, for one reason or the other, are proud of this country. I would therefore like to thank you, brother, for having helped me change. Now, even if I decide to leave Bharat to look for a better life elsewhere, I know why I can be proud of my native land."

It was nearly noon when R stopped writing. The train was entering Varanasi Junction Station. He planned to stay only one night in the holy city by the Ganges. "I'll meet with *Gurudji* this afternoon. Then, tomorrow, I'll leave for Delhi." He was eager to get back home. There, he and Mohini would talk about their plans for the future ... in the light of his transformation.

Not wanting to disturb Suresh and Urmila again, he stayed at the Maharajah Hotel. Once in his room, he slumped onto the bed and, holding his backpack, he stared blankly at the American flag and the 'Los Angeles' inscription.

"Do I still want to emigrate to America? What will Mohini say if I change my mind? Over the past few months, we built our American dream together; we nurtured and cherished it as a symbol of our love, of our future together. We gradually linked all our long-term goals to that dream. We hoped that I would find a job in America soon after completing my Master's degree, then return to marry Mohini and take her along. ... However, if I decide to stay in Bharat, how will I earn a living? Will Mohini and I be able to build a life together here?"

He threw the backpack on the bed grumpily. "I'll think about what to tell Mohini after I decide what I want to do. But first, I need to meet and talk with *Gurudji*."

Later, after a light lunch, he walked to Doobay's house. His guru greeted him with a raised right hand in the traditional gesture of blessing, "*Buddhi prapt ho*<sup>222</sup>," the old sage wished him solemnly.

R felt a warm wave ripple through him as he bowed in salutation. He could not have hoped for a more appropriate blessing to mark the end of his *tirthyatra*. It signaled the conclusion of a spiritual quest that he had accepted to undertake alongside the other journey made at Ashok's request.

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<sup>222</sup> Be blessed with intelligence.  
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He knew that Yogish Doobay had probably blessed hundreds of disciples after their *tirthyatra*. Then, the guru had probably asked them about their pilgrimage, about what they had observed and how they had used their newly received knowledge along the way. The disciples, on their part, undoubtedly did their best to demonstrate that they had mastered the essence of his teachings.

After washing his face, hands and feet with water poured by the pundit's wife—who was just as pleased as her husband to see him—R entered the *bramhan* couple's modest home. Upon his host's invitation, he sat on a brand new chair.

"You bought new chairs. They look great," he commented, a little puzzled. He had known them for over a decade but he had never seen new furniture in their house before.

"Our future son-in-law also looks great ... assuming that his parents accept Gaetri as their daughter-in-law. They were here this morning; they came with their son to meet with us," Mrs. Doobay babbled, her eyes bright with excitement. "He is an engineer and he works for the telephone company. ... A stable and well-paid job."

From the corner of his eye, R noticed that Doobay's smile was fading gradually as his wife spoke. Raising a wizened hand to his balding head, the old sage flattened his long, white hair backwards.

He felt close enough to the family, so he asked, "Any problem, *Gurudji*?"

"... Yes ... maybe. Gaetri accepted to meet our guests just to respect our wishes. However, when they left, she reminded us that marriage is not what she wants right now."

"She should realize that her father is not getting any younger ... and I am just an old woman. And that brother of hers! He practically never writes. The last thing we got from him was a spooky greeting card for that American festival called 'Hello-win' ... or something like that. I told her that she should not depend on him to help her when we're gone," the pundit's wife whined as she massaged her forearms fretfully.

"I don't think that she expects anything from Avinash; she is too intelligent for that. No, she wants to complete her studies in Sanskrit. I can relate to that. Having said that, this boy would be a near ideal match for her—from a *gyotish* point of view—, and he has a stable job. However, Gaetri knows that she won't be able to attend university after she gets married," Doobay added, concluding with a sigh.

Interrupting the awkward silence, his wife got up and returned shortly with a cup of chai and a bowl of *luddoos* for R. "We served *luddoos* to our guests this morning."

After enjoying two of these irresistible sweet treats and a cardamom-flavored chai, the young man spent the next hour narrating his *tirthyatra* to the Doobays, interrupted from time to time by his guru's questions.

"*Gurudji*, along the way, I saw many examples of the devastation caused to our cultural and religious heritage during Mogul occupation. So many ancient monuments destroyed, so many great temples razed to the ground ... replaced mostly by unused mosques, painful reminders of the bloodbaths that preceded their erection. I wonder who in India enjoys seeing those. What do they commemorate, apart from bitter memories?"

He felt surprised at how calmly he had said that. At the start of his journey, looking at those monuments used to upset him. However, Doobay did not answer; he merely smiled serenely.

R then continued, "Some people believe that since Bharat is now free from the domination of foreign tyrants, these arrogant monuments, once built to weaken the morale of a defeated nation, should be destroyed. The Berlin wall, the 'wall of shame' was pulled down, wasn't it?"

The old sage sighed and said, "Alas, R. You still have some more progress to make, it seems."

A startled R asked, "... What do you mean?"

"Instead of feeling offended by these symbols of material power, you should understand that it is in our interest to preserve them."

The young man struggled to understand these cryptic words, then gave up, "*Gurudji*, a moment ago, I was pleased to note that I am no longer upset at those dark days of our history ... but I must admit that I cannot understand why such monuments are worth preserving."

"Those mosques, and the tombs of those foreign conquerors, erected on the ruins of our razed temples and historic sites will always remind us of the seven centuries of



oppression that we endured from Moslem invaders. Each time we see those buildings, we will remember the intolerance and viciousness of their builders. Above all, R, they will remind us that our civilization has survived for millennia without relying on material symbols, although the invaders were silly enough to believe that they could weaken our faith through vandalism. Instead, we proved that our culture and religion are very resilient."

Doobay paused, smiled mischievously, and concluded, "Sanatan Dharm means the *eternal* spiritual path, R, remember? Accordingly, it should not surprise you that we have been able to absorb so many shocks over the past *yoogs*. During *satyoog*, the *Danaw* launched attacks at Bharat; during *tretayoog*, the *Rakshas* did, then in *dwaparyoog* the *Asur* did too. Finally, in *kaliyoog*, the Moguls and the British were successful. In spite of all these assaults over so many millennia, we resisted, adapted, evolved and survived. Today, we can proudly state that ours is the world's most ancient *continuous* civilization. No, R. We should not destroy those few old mosques and Mogul tombs; they are much more valuable as they stand now."

"*Gurudji*, I found that many of our own people don't believe in the concept of *yoogs* anymore."

"Ignorance! Sanatan Dharm describes time as one dimension of this illusory universe. Within the *lila*, time is cyclical. Some scientists speak of the 'Big Bang' when the universe started; a universe that is supposed to expand, peak out, then contract back into nothingness. Long ago, our *rishis* revealed that the creation, existence and dissolution of the universe are cyclical. At the start of a day of Bramha, a new universe begins. It grows and develops, and at the end of the day—which is very long in our time—the universe is destroyed. Then, after one night of Bramha, the process of creation, existence and dissolution starts over. A day of Bramha includes four *yoogs*. *Satyoog*, the longest, is followed in decreasing order of duration by *tretayoog*, *dwaparyoog* and *kaliyoog*. As I may have told you, *satyoog* is the golden age in which people are nearly perfect and in which virtue reigns supreme. Gradually, evil grows through *tretayoog* and *dwaparyoog*, culminating in *kaliyoog*. During this last *yoog*—the current one—, as we get closer to the night of Bramha, an overpopulated universe, burdened by increasing evil and violence, slides towards dissolution ... and renewal." He raised his palm to silence R's predictable objection. "It does not matter if many people don't share this view; if they believe that we are actually progressing and that life is getting better and better. Their erroneous views are based on an analysis of only the last few centuries of human history. In fact, each *yoog* extends over tens of thousands of years. Yes, civilized humanity has been around much longer than many care to admit—whatever their reasons may be. You see, R, this progression from ideal to worst, from *satyoog* to *kaliyoog*, is another aspect of the divine *lila*. It is just an incentive for the actors that we are to keep striving for spiritual progress."

"If I understand correctly, *Gurudji*, each successive *yoog* brings about increasingly arduous obstacles to our continuing spiritual quest. Our challenge is to overcome all obstacles and to continue our progression, life after life ... or give up and be the puppets of *Maya*."

Their conversation continued for another hour. Then R asked, "*Gurudji*, what about non-violence? I met people who, like Gautam Toolsi, seem to master the concept, but many wonder whether *uhinsa* led us to become too passive—submissive even."

"R, *uhinsa* is meant to help our spiritual progression by training us to avoid violence in thought, word and deed. Note that I said 'avoid'. If a tiger attacks you, R, you will not just stand there and allow it to rip you apart and eat you. You should defend yourself, killing it if necessary. In the Bhagwat Geet, when Arjun hesitated to combat his rival cousins, the wicked Kauravs, Shri Krishna reminded him that it was his duty to stand up to evil. In recent times, our Rajput and Marath *chatris* did not hesitate to fight and kill as many Moguls as they could; *uhinsa* did not stop them."

"I understand better, *Gurudji*. The non-violence principle should not lead us to close our ears and eyes and walk past while evil is being perpetrated. In fact, *uhinsa* is meant to help us improve spiritually and to become stronger, more confident actors in the *lila*."

"I am pleased with you, R. Your grasp of the essential concepts of Sanatan Dharm is outstanding. You just need to ensure that you practice what you have learned."

R continued his narration, "In Goa, I met and spoke with foreigners ... and Indians too. I was not surprised to find out that they were bewildered by our myriads of gods and

goddesses; by the multitude of rituals that they could not comprehend; and by the apparent contradiction between the simple faith of the masses and the advanced philosophy and spirituality of the Upanishads,” R said. “Then, in Madurai, I had a thought-provoking meeting with an Indian who had returned to Bharat—although he probably earned tons of money as a physician in Europe and North America. He explained why he could not carry on living in those parts of the world.”

They continued discussing, and much later, Doobay commented, “It is clear that your recent experiences have had a profound impact on you, R. I can read it on your features. I observed you well before you set off on this *yatra*. You are definitely no longer the same young man who bade us goodbye, in a hurry to complete your deliveries and get ready to leave for America.”

“Yes *Gurudji*. All along this journey, I met and exchanged views with many. Among those were followers of Sanatan Dharm, as well as people from other religious backgrounds. In addition, I visited many regions of our country and I was able to observe that we indeed feel free to seek union with the divine in a variety of ways, following the path that suits us best. I saw that many follow *bhakti yog*, but I also met followers of *karm yog* and *raj yog*.”

“What else did you discover or confirm?”

“I now understand better how our tradition of spiritual freedom explains our exemplary tolerance. As a result, we don’t preach the superiority of our path to others, nor do we encourage intolerance. Sanatan Dharm leads its followers to love all of creation, to wish for the success and prosperity of all. That’s why we never invaded other countries with a sacred text in one hand and a sword in the other. We never started any religious wars, never massacred civilian populations in the name of religion or to steal their wealth, nor did we enslave other nations. As Sanatan Dharm never supported religious conversion, Bharat became a safe haven for all the great religions of the world. On the material plane, I saw a nation that keeps smiling and maintains its sacred tradition of hospitality even in these harsh economic times.”

“Why do you think it’s like this?” Doobay asked.

“As I said, I met with Buddhists too. They also know that we are born and reborn countless times to perfect ourselves spiritually. I now believe that it is this belief that allows us to stay detached, steadfast in our knowledge that our current life is not the only opportunity to progress spiritually ... or to have fun. That leads us to have a more sedate approach to life and its numerous challenges, to be less dogmatic or greedy.”

As he paused to sip some cold tea, Doobay smiled and commented, “In the Bhagwat Geet, Shri Krishna recommends that we refrain from imposing spiritual knowledge on those who are not yearning for it. You see, when people are ready to seek spiritual enlightenment, they appreciate much more what they discover. Knowing that we will have many opportunities for spiritual progress in future lives, we do not seek to impose our religious beliefs or rituals on others to save them from a hypothetical catastrophe at the end of a single life. You see, R, Sanatan Dharm is like a gigantic tree. The countless leaves of this tree are its followers. They are supported by branches—each representing Sanatan Dharm’s numerous paths. However, all those branches lead to the same *yog*, to the same ‘union with all’ ... to *moksh!*”

Dusk crept upon Varanasi. It was time for *sandhya*, the evening prayer. Through the open window, R caught a glimpse of Gaetri and her mother praying outside, first in front of a *toolsi*<sup>223</sup> plant, then in front of their Hanuman altar. “I saw so many other Indians performing the same prayer at this time of the day throughout this trip,” he recalled.

Doobay said, “You have seen how we bow to the omnipresent God everyday through the *toolsi* plant; through the sun, the wind, water, the Earth; through the cows; through stone statues; through our elders and teachers. As you now understand, we do not bow in salutation to these because we are terrified of the forces of nature or because we do not understand how everything fits together. Our ancient, profound understanding of universal laws proves that we are not primitive people. When you will be in America, you will not see such acts of reverence. Over there, most people are not even familiar with a fundamental notion of Sanatan Dharm: our ‘oneness with all’ ... which we discussed during your last visit. Our goal is to remain always conscious that that we are one with everything else. We try to

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<sup>223</sup> Basil. A symbolical plant through which Hindus offer their salutations to the omnipresent divinity.  
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do that through various paths leading to *yog*. The role of *Maya*, the illusion, is to keep us from grasping that underlying reality."

Doobay waved his bearded chin towards the street where a few tourists strolled about, their camcorders on standby, ready to record exotic scenes. "These foreigners who smile so smugly while snapping photos of devotees bowing to plants, to the sun, or to the river probably believe that we have not yet understood that the destiny of humanity is to rule this planet. Their arrogance and their ignorance, boosted by their economic and technological advancement, make it hard for them to lift the heavy veil of *Maya*. Instead, they wallow in the murky confines of the illusion, unable to perceive the divinity within which we exist; incapable of seeing the all-pervading reality that encompasses the illusory world ... and which includes our selves and the roles we play. They look, but they fail to see that we are part of a divine *lila*."

The old sage paused, then added, "R, understanding the reality does not mean that we should reject the illusion. We should realize that the illusion is within the reality, and so, they are one. Everything we see, touch, feel, hear, and smell forms part of God: the sun, water, air, the earth, stone idols, ourselves ... everything. Therefore, we should participate fully in the illusion, in the *lila*, detached and serene ... whatever happens. But then, all this can be too deep, too challenging to grasp if we allow arrogance and ignorance to cloud our true vision." He looked at R and smiled, "You remember, I am sure, that this knowledge is one of the pillars of *gyan yog* and one of the steps of *raj yog*, both of which we discussed during your last visit."

The conversation between the spiritual guide and his disciple continued until dinner, prepared by Mrs. Doobay—this time helped by Gaetri.

"She needs to learn how to care for a household. Soon, we hope, she will be married. I don't want her in-laws to complain that she did not learn the basic skills of housekeeping at her parents' house," the pundit's wife said, looking emphatically at R to solicit his support.

The young man smiled to show that he understood her concern, but avoided saying anything that might upset Gaetri further. The poor girl ate in silence, her eyes lowered. R could guess from the Doobays' body language that the family was going to have an intense discussion on the virtues of marriage as soon as he left. "Poor Gaetri," he thought. "She told me about her dream to teach Sanskrit in a *gurukul*. Instead of leading her towards the freedom to live that dream, her *karm* seems to drag her towards the role of a traditional homemaker. She may have to interrupt her studies, in spite of her enthusiasm for a language that she considers divine."

R glanced at the young woman from time to time, thinking of his aunt. "At least Radha is enjoying her freedom and she is doing something that she is passionate about. In spite of that, she still feels pressure from society, from her mother and her sisters ... and from Gautam, who cannot understand why a beautiful woman like her prefers to be single." R wondered how Gaetri's story would unfold.

He thanked his hosts and left shortly after dinner, going back straight to the hotel. From his room, he called his parents to reassure them that he was okay, and he told them that he would be back in Delhi the next day.

He then called Mohini.

"I'll prepare a finger-licking meal for you and Dad when you visit us, Hero. ... I am so impatient to see what you are bringing me."

He felt relieved that she was in such buoyant spirits. It would make an eventual conversation about their plans less challenging ... unless her mood swung to the other extreme before then.

"I should spend the first evening with my parents, Mo. As much as I look forward to seeing you, it will have to wait one more day. I will also bring the photos I took during the journey." He paused, then added in an unexpected burst of enthusiasm, "You will be surprised; Bharat is such an amazing country!"

At the other end of the line, Mohini held her breath, then asked in a changed, serious tone, "R, I need to know. Did this trip through India change your plans to leave for America?"

R hesitated, then replied, "Let's keep the serious things for when we meet in Delhi, Mo. ... Which Bollywood movies are screening these days? You remember that I was recruited as an extra in one of those movies, don't you? Soon, you could see me on the silver screen!"

The tactic appeared to work. " ... You ... scoundrel. You know very well that it's exam time and my friends are all studying hard. ... I mean, I am too. And you have been away for weeks. Without you here, how do you expect me to go to the movies?"

## CHAPTER 28

On the last morning of his journey, R checked out of the hotel early and bought a fruit basket for Mrs. Doobay.

Before heading for his guru's house, he stopped at an Internet café. There, he printed the best photos from his camera's memory—photos of pilgrimage sites for the most. He knew that Yogish Doobay would enjoy seeing pictures of Dwarka and other sacred places.

His last meeting with his guru was, appropriately, a solemn occasion. After showing the photos and offering the handful of sand that he picked up from the beach at Rameshwaram, R shared his feelings with Doobay, "I feel much more serene now, *Gurudji*. Before this journey, I was full of negative thoughts and emotions. My close ones found it harder and harder to cheer me up. Frustration prevented me from living my life fully. I obsessed about finding a job; I believed that would change everything for me. Then, gradually, as I lived all kinds of experiences during this journey, I changed. Guided by your teachings, I became more and more able to understand life, including from other people's perspectives."

"R, unsatisfied desires and uncontrolled thoughts lead to negative emotions. Regular meditation will help you master your thoughts and control your desires. With a lot of practice, you will eventually find your real self. Feel that you are one with the underlying reality ... which includes the entire creation. Feel that you are one with *purush* as well as with *prakriti*. Don't just think it; *feel* it too!"

Doobay paused to ensure that he had R's attention, then continued, "To succeed, we have to control the endless flow of thoughts, to master the tumultuous emotions that take us from one extreme to the other, and find the peace and serenity that allows us to know—and to feel—that we are indeed one ... with all. That is the essence of what Sankaracharyuh reminded us of: "*Uh-hum bramhasmi*", which means 'we are one with all'. You see, we are inseparable from God, in which the entire creation is contained; the creator and the creation are *one*. Realizing this is crucial to attaining the state of total union, of perfect *yog*, of *moksh*. As I told you, even western science confirms what our *rishis* found out thousands of years ago: that tangible matter is in fact intangible energy, that the illusion conceals the underlying reality!"

Doobay smiled, then concluded, "I am glad that this *tirthyatra* served to enhance your *vidya*, R. This is the goal that both a guru and his disciple seek to attain. Your journey, albeit a short one, has allowed you to test some of the concepts that you learned from me. You applied them in a 'real life' context ... although, strictly speaking, you now know that 'real life' is just an illusion, a stage ... the *lila*. You still have a lot to learn, but you have learned a lot, and changed a lot. That was also what Ashok wished."

Gaetri then entered. Along with her came a whiff of serenity that dispelled the solemnity of their discussion. Her hands encumbered by a wooden platter, the beautiful young woman responded with a smile to R's *namastay*, modestly lowering her eyes. The two men, one at the dusk and the other at the dawn of adult life, paused to enjoy a few hot *pakor*as and some ginger-flavored chai, served by the pundit's daughter.

"Now that you see so many things differently, I know that you will leverage your *karm* appropriately to attain your goals in this life ... even if you need some more time to define what your goals are," Doobay said.

Once more, R was startled by his guru's perceptiveness. Then, he remembered that spiritual masters acquire exceptional powers: the ability to read minds, see the past ... and possible futures. "What do you mean by that *Gurudji*? How can I leverage my *karm*?" he asked, hopeful.

"Karm is *potential*. It's up to you to decide how you want to shape your life—within the boundaries of your personal *karmic* potential. My advice to you is: don't reject the illusion. Take part in this *lila* fully, enthusiastically, but stay detached; make sure that you always understand the difference between illusion and reality. In the illusion, some days you win, some days you lose; today you may laugh, but tomorrow you could cry; twenty years ago you were a toddler, and in forty years you will be an old man. However, in the underlying reality, you are always the same, always one with all, eternal, changeless, all-powerful. While playing your role in the *lila*, your *karm* can be your ally ... if you can leverage it properly. If *Maya* challenges you or places an obstacle in your path, instead of cursing your destiny,

thank your *karm* for this opportunity to overcome adversity and grow stronger. On a practical plane, if you concentrate hard enough on a goal—one that is within the bounds of your karmic potential—, a goal like *moksh*, or even a material goal, and by taking steps towards it, you will be surprised at how easily you can turn your desires into reality."

R did not ask his guru to clarify these last enigmatic words. Instead, his thoughts strayed towards an important conclusion. Looking into Doobay's eyes, he said, "*Gurudji*, as I told you, I don't feel the same anymore. I have definitely changed. I ... I don't despise my country of birth any longer. In fact, I believe that I have started to understand it better and to appreciate it."

"Very good," was Doobay's concise comment. He sensed that the young man had more to say—things that were hard to admit, maybe.

"I discovered so many reasons to be proud of my heritage. I now realize that I knew many of these reasons before I started this journey of discovery, *Gurudji*," R articulated, his throat tense with emotion.

The young man paused to regain control of himself, then continued, "I also realize that I had deliberately chosen to ignore what I already knew ... because I needed to justify my desire to leave Bharat. I ... I was convinced that American grass is greener. However, I am no longer so sure of that. After meeting with Nandan in Madurai, I now understand better the comments Ashok made a few months ago when I told him that I wanted to emigrate. He warned me not to expect too much. He suggested that I might be deluding myself if I thought that everything was perfect in America. Now, I realize that I was going to make a serious mistake by leaving Bharat just to secure a better material life. By doing so, by being unprepared, by despising my country and my culture and then leaving, I would have uprooted myself and drifted away like so many seem to once they reach those rich, western countries. I could have enjoyed a higher standard of living, but I might not have found a better quality of life. I could have satisfied my material desires, but I might not have found contentment and serenity."

Looking up at Doobay, he concluded, "*Punditdji*, I am so grateful to you for having enlightened me, for having helped me open my 'real' eyes and discover the difference between my dream and the real treasures of Bharat Mata. Thank you."

The young traveler stopped, relieved to have said what he had in his heart. Doobay smiled indulgently. The old sage's features showed clearly how glad he was to have succeeded as R's guru. He had seen so many disciples over his lifetime, 'real' students who had spent their childhood and teens at his *gurukul*, painstakingly learning all that he could teach them. Although R. Sharma had only been a 'part-time' disciple, who only came occasionally to his doorstep in search of some useful knowledge and wisdom, Doobay rejoiced at how much the young man had been able to learn. Indeed, R must have spent about thirty days with him over the years—much less than his 'real' students. However, it was clear that what he had imparted to the son of Mr. and Mrs. Sharma would have a considerable influence on the course of the young man's life.

"R, the person whom you called '*Punditdji*' is a role that I played in the *lila*; one of the many roles that I have played in past lives and that I will play in future lives. Like you, my disciple, in reality, I am the infinite, eternal *One*."

R nodded reflectively, and then said, "Our country faces many challenges and obstacles. Among these, some appear insurmountable. During my voyage,—and from a much closer range than I cared for—I came across the manifestations of these challenges. This journey also allowed me to discover and admire some of the splendors of our great, our ancient civilization. I wish that I could learn more—a lot more—about our glorious past. For example, about all the discoveries that we shared so generously with the rest of the world when our civilization was at its peak and when other nations still struggled to emerge from the Stone Age."

He paused and added, "I would also like to find more reasons to be proud of today's Bharat. I know that we are a world leader in outsourced IT services, but what else do we do very well? If I knew my country better, if I could be prouder of its accomplishments, I might never think of leaving it."

"The wounded elephant that our country is may one day recover enough to rise again, R. But that will require a lot of effort ... from all of us."

"*Gurudji*, I am tempted to go on another journey. Ashok offered to help me if I choose to do so. This time, I would like to find out more about our current accomplishments, and discover what is being done to help the 'wounded elephant' rise again. I know that we contributed a lot to the philosophical and spiritual development of humanity, but that is not enough for me. I really need to be proud of today's Bharat."

Doobay sighed, "Why not. However, I can only guide you on the spiritual plane. So, it will be totally up to you to discover other aspects of modern Bharat. In case you decide not to leave the country in search for greener pastures like Ashok and Avinash, there is much to do over here to build on the ruins of the prosperous Bharat of long ago."

He stared long at R, then continued, "Keep one thing in mind, though. Many *rishis*, many sages have strived, generation after generation, to polish the gems of our civilization; gems like *raj yog*, *ayurved*, *vastu*, *jyotish* and many more. You can be proud of their discoveries and accomplishments, R, because they are part of your heritage—they belong to you. You don't have to prove anything to anyone. You can just live your life, taking full advantage of all these treasures. With this, however, a word of warning: don't attach too much importance to material realizations, past or present, because they are all within the realm of *Maya*. Don't lose sight of the underlying reality ... now that you have realized it."

R nodded, "I understand that. I would just like to see our country rise again, *Gurudji* ... even if I know that it's part of the *lila* ... and therefore illusory."

Doobay smiled mysteriously and lowered his head as he smoothed his long white beard. When he looked up at R again, his expression was serious. "R, I am now going to ask you for my final *gurudakshina*," he declared.

It suddenly felt very solemn indeed in the pundit's house, as R sat up straight, paying respectful attention to his guru.

"R, as my *gurudakshina*, I would like you to promote the image of Bharat, whether you decide to stay here, or leave and settle in America. You could set up a website—yes, don't smile; I know what that is—or you could write articles for magazines ... or a book. You could become a reporter ... or even a politician—don't cringe; I mean a righteous one, like the Mahatma. It's up to you. Don't forget that the law of *karm* allows you to build your own path—within the range of possibilities contained in your *karmic* account. By doing so, R, you could also—in part, at least—pay back your debt to your country of birth ... by helping it to rise again."

The young man felt an eerie wave of energy and courage flow into his whole being as he listened to Doobay. He felt so proud that the old sage thought him worthy of such a mission. "Yes, this will certainly give my life the purpose I was searching for on the way back to Varanasi." He looked at his guru, then, joining both his palms in salutation and bowing reverently, he solemnly affirmed, "*Gurudji*, I will do what you ask with great pleasure."

Later, as he left the little house, he turned and saluted Doobay once again; a thankful acknowledgement to the person who had given him a new perspective on life, a new purpose. The bitter, cynical and impatient R, who had met with his guru a few weeks ago, no longer existed. Now, his heart brimmed with confidence, courage and serenity as he set off.

The pundit and his wife stood on their doorstep, their palms raised in blessing. As he turned his gaze to the right, R caught a glimpse of Gaetri inside the house. Partly hidden by a curtain, she was smiling too. It was a benevolent smile; the smile of a friend, happy to see how much he had evolved.

R smiled back, but a capricious whiff of tepid breeze moved the curtain, hiding the young woman from his sight. Had she seen his smile? He was not sure.

"How paradoxical," he mused. "Gaetri wanted to learn and disseminate the treasures that her father talks about, and yet, she may have to abandon that dream under pressure from her own parents, and get married soon. On the other hand, just a few weeks ago, I despised this country. But today, her own father entrusted me with a mission similar to the one she craves. The influences of our respective *karms*, I imagine."

The trip from Varanasi to Delhi was the final stretch of his journey, a surprising journey during which he began to discover his country, his heritage and, above all ... himself. As he alighted from the train in the country's capital, he felt serene, foreseeing many opportunities to fulfill his promise to Yogish Doobay. He smiled, savoring the feeling that this

journey had enriched him so much. Indeed, he was returning to his parents and to Mohini rich! Rich not in dollars or rupees, but in serenity, in confidence.

"This illusion is really just a great *lila*, an immense stage on which we play different roles during countless lives. As performers, we should strive to play the best possible role. The ultimate reality is that we are one; 'one with all'. That has always been and will always be. ... I will now enjoy playing my role in the *lila*."

**THE END**



## GLOSSARY

Acharyuh	Learned sage
Agama	Theological text
Agarbati	Indian incense—various fragrances including the popular sandalwood
Aloo	Potato
Anchal	Veil covering the top and sides of a woman's head, protecting its wearer from the sun, dust and wind, as well as unwelcome stares
Anchar	Fruit (unripe) pickle (mango, lime, etc.) preserved in oil and spices
Asan	A hath yog posture
Ashirvad	Blessings
Ashirvad. Mangalmay ho	I bless you. Prosper and be happy
Ashok	A renowned Indian emperor whose conquests extended well into Afghanistan
Atithi dayvo bhavah	Indian (Sanskrit) maxim asserting: 'Treat your guests with the same consideration that you would give God'
Ayurved	The holistic and preventative Indian wellness system
Babu	Young Sir
Baraat	Wedding procession accompanying the bridegroom
Baysan	Chick pea flour
Baytay	Son
Bayti	Daughter
Bhagwat Geet	Major Hindu religious text
Bhagwat pooran	Ancient Hindu sacred text describing the life of Krishna as an incarnation of Vishnu
Bhai	Brother
Bhajan	Devotional song
Bhajia	Fried tidbits made with chick pea flour, onion and herbs
Bhakt	Devotee
Bhakti	Spiritual path preferred by the emotionally inclined, characterized by devotion to a divine manifestation (e.g. Krishna, Ram, etc.), the repetition of mantras and prayers, and the chanting of devotional songs
Bharat	Traditional name of India
Bharatiy	Inhabitants of Bharat
Bharatwasion	Citizens of Bharat
Bhaylpuri	Fried, wheat-based flatbread, served rolled-up around a filling of chutni, chopped onion, lemon juice and other ingredients
Bhim	The second, physically strongest of the five Pandav princes, the main characters of the Mahabharat
Bichiya	Toe ring
Bihar and Uttar Pradesh	Northern and central Indian states, among the most heavily populated
Biryani	Popular dish made with rice, perfumed with various spices and mixed with cooked vegetables and meat
Bollywood	The Indian version of Hollywood, located near Mumbai (Bombay)
Bramhachari	Under Hindu tradition, the first stage of life is characterized by childhood, studies, and preparation for adulthood
Bramhan	Hindu priest and/or teacher. Accumulating wealth is

Bungla	Forbidden to members of this social class
Chaat	Bungalow. Small villa usually close to the sea
Chachi	Spicy snacks
Chakrs	Paternal aunt
Champal	Energy centers located within the astral body
Chatri	Traditional, flat, leather sandals
Chi, chi, chi	Caste of warriors and public administrators
Chotay	Exclamation of disgust
Chutni	Young one
Coolie	Spicy sauce made from fresh herbs, nuts, vegetables or fruits.
Dadaji	Porter
Dahej	Grandfather (paternal). Sometimes also used as a nickname for elderly men
Dahi	Dowry
Daku	Milk curd
Dalits	Bandits who hide in the hills and attack travelers for loot or ransom
Danaw, Asur, and Rakshas	Tribal people
Darshan	Names of rival nations mentioned in ancient Indian scriptures
Daysi	Philosophical text
Devanagari	Indian-born
Dharm shastr	North Indian alphabet
Dhobi	Ancient law text (e.g. Manu smriti (Laws of Manu))
Dholki	Laundryman
Dholuck	Type of Indian drum
Dhoti	Long drum
Dhyan	Traditional North-Indian pants made up of a single piece of cloth wrapped around both legs
Dibba	Meditation
Didi	Food container usually made of metal, with a tight lid secured by metal straps
Divali	Elder sister
Diya	Annual festival celebrating prosperity, goodwill between neighbors, and the supremacy of good over evil (symbolized by light against darkness)
Dookan	Small flame made by lighting an oil soaked wick
Dosa	Shop. Usually a grocery
Dwaparyoog	Pancake made with rice flour, ground urad dal and yogurt
	Third of the four yoogs (eras) that make up a day of Bramha (One day and one night of Bramha make up one complete cycle of creation and dissolution. At the end of the night, another day starts, and the cycle perpetuates.)
	Dwaparyoog, which ended around the time when Krishna died, lasted several millennia and preceded the actual Kaliyoog.
Ganesh puja	A prayer to Ganesh marks the start of all Hindu religious ceremonies
Ghat	Stone steps on the bank of a waterway
Ghee	Clarified butter used in food preparation
Ghungru	Classical dance accessory made up of several rows of small bells attached above dancers' ankles. The sound produced emphasizes each leg movement

Gopuram	Pyramid-shaped roof structure with a narrow base, covered with sculptures, characteristic of South Indian temples
Grihast	Under Hindu tradition, this second stage of life is characterized by adulthood, self-reliance, marriage and family life
Gujarati	Main language of the State of Gujarat
Gunga	Ganges
Gurkha	Nepalese or Tibetan men often employed as guards by wealthy Indians
Gurudakshina	Fee payable by the disciple to the guru upon completion of the studies
Haldi	Turmeric
Hanuman	Popular Hindu deity in northern India. One of the central figures of the Ramayan
Hanuman Chalisa	Story of Hanuman
Hastinapur	Capital of a major northern Indian kingdom in ancient times
Haveli	Villa
Hawan koond	Clay pyre built with propitiating rituals. Contains the sacred fire (Agni) that acts as a messenger to the gods, conveying prayers through offerings of rice, ghee, and jaggeri (unrefined sugar)
Hawan	Pyre used for religious purposes during major Hindu prayers
Hindustan	Name given to India by the Moslem invaders
Hindustani	Mix of Urdu (language made up of Persian and Arabic, brought to India by Moslem invaders) and Hindi
Imli	Tamarind fruit preserve. Added to sauces and chutnis
Ishtdev	Preferred deity
Itihas	Ancient historical text
Jeera	Cumin
Jhal	Indian-style cymbals
Jhundi	Flag
Johari Bazaar	Jewelers' market
Jooti	Lavishly embroidered, traditional Indian-style shoes
Jyotishi	Indian astrologer using the sidereal zodiac
Kaliyoog	The fourth era according to the Hindu concept of time and evolution of life
Kartik Purnima	The day of the full moon during the month of Kartik
Katha	Story
Kathak	Classical northern Indian dance style, miming scenes from sacred Hindu scriptures
Kathakali	Classical dance form in which the performers wear brightly colored, spectacular costumes and masks to enact popular scenes adapted from the poorans, the Mahabharat and the Ramayan
Katori	Stainless steel bowl/gobelet
Kavis	Poetry
Kolam	Drawing often made with colored rice grains or rice flour on the path leading to houses in Tamil Nadu
Kuhrayla	Also known as bittermelon (or bittergourd), this bitter-tasting vegetable is considered to have anti-diabetic properties

Kul	Family line
Kumkum	Red dye, also called sindoor, symbolizing Hindu women's married status
Kuraiv	Indian style wok
Kurta-pajama	Long-sleeved, buttonless tunic over loose-fitting pants
Lakshmi	Goddess of prosperity and well being
Lassi	Buttermilk based cold drink, sweetened with fruit juices, or drunk plain in the salted version
Lathi	Long, wooden stick used by police to control riots
Lila	Play staged by God at the scale of the entire universe
Lota	Round, vase-like utensil
Lothal	An ancient Indian city
Maasi	Aunt (mother's sister)
Magadh	Major, ancient central Indian kingdom
Maha Shivratri	Religious festival in honor of Shiv
Mahabharat	Ancient Indian epic
Maharaj	Great King
Malishwalla	Itinerant masseur
Manush	Ancient name of the inhabitants of Bharat
Marath	Original inhabitants of the State of Maharashtra
Marathi	Regional language spoken mostly in the State of Maharashtra
Masala	Combination of (ground) spices
Mawa	Candy made by reducing sweetened milk to pudding consistency and flavoring with cardamom
Methi	Fenugreek
Mitha paan	Sweet version of the paan mouth freshner
Moong dal	Type of dal, giving a thick, yellow soup when cooked
Moonna	Affectionate nickname often given by women to their (extended) family's younger boys
Muglai	Mongolian/Mogul
Muttur-paneer	Peas and soft, white cheese
Naan	Flat bread, leavened with yogurt
Nadis	Channels allowing the flow of pran (life force) through the astral body
Nakshatr	Sign of the lunar Indian zodiac
Namaskar	Formal salutation
Namastay	Respectful greeting
Nana	Maternal grandfather
Nani	Maternal grandmother
Nataks	Drama
Naxalites	Local term for communists
NRI	Non-resident Indian
Odni	Silk scarf used to cover a woman's head, neck and shoulders
Paan	Chewing gum-equivalent, chewed to clean the mouth and teeth especially after meals taken outside the home; made with a mixture of spices with antiseptic properties, and wrapped in an aromatic leaf
Pagri	Turban
Pakorras	Vegetables fried in chick-pea flour batter
Panchtantr	An ancient collection of short interwoven tales, meant to impart basic wisdom to children. Originally narrated to three young princes by their guru, as part of their

	education
Parsi	Natives of ancient Persia, Zoroastrian by religion
Patang	Kite
Payal	Anklets made up of a single layer of tiny silver bells
Phooli	Nose ring or bead
Pita	Type of person with characteristics such as: irritability, tendency to criticize, meticulousness, discipline, etc.
Poorans	Encyclopedias of Indian culture and religion in narrative format
Prakriti	Specific nature of a person under <i>ayurved</i>
Prakriti	The material aspect of the Ultimate
Pran	Life force
Pranamay kosha	The first part of the astral body, composed of thousands of nadis (channels) through which pran (vital energy) flows. The other two parts of the astral body are the manamay kosha (thoughts, emotions) and the vigyanamay kosha (decision making)
Pranayam	Yogic breathing techniques
Premier	One of the most popular of the few brands of automobiles produced in India, based on a European model of the 1960s
Prithvi Ma	Mother Earth
Puja samagri	Ingredients needed for Hindu prayers
Pujari	Officiating priest
Pundit	Title of a Hindu priest
Purush	The spiritual aspect of the Ultimate
Raag	Melody
Ramraj	The reign of Ram
Rasgulla	Sweet treat. A 'dough and dried milk' ball, fried and soaked in cardamom-flavored syrup
Rashi	Sign of the Indian zodiac (based on the sidereal zodiac) which uses the position of the planets in relation to the stars (instead of the sun)
Rickshawalla	Driver of a two-passenger tricycle taxi
Rishi	Sage. Learned religious person in ancient times
Roti	Flat, unleavened bread (like pharatha or chapati)
Rupee	Indian currency. 1 rupee = 100 paisa
Sadhus	Elderly men who have renounced the world and spend all their time in their spiritual quest, surviving on alms
Salwar Kamiz	Women's attire of Afghan origin, consisting of a long tunic worn over baggy pants, and a scarf covering the head and shoulders.
Sambar	Spicy vegetable soup
Samosa	Triangular fried or baked pastry with a spicy vegetable filling
Sandya	Evening prayer
Seth	Rich merchant
Shastr	Treatise
Shehnai	Type of Indian trumpet used mainly in weddings
Sherwani	Formal, Indian-style suit with a narrow, straight collar
Shishyuh	Disciple
Shoobhyatra	May this journey be beneficial to you
Shri	Title of respect
Shruti	Ancient Hindu religious text

Sindhu	The 'Indus' river, now located in Pakistan
Sindoor	Red colored line drawn along the parting of a Hindu married woman's hair down to her forehead
Sita	The wife of King Ram
Sonph	Fennel or aniseed
Sudr	Manual worker
Sulbhasutr	Ancient Indian mathematical text
Taal	Rhythm
Tabla	Small Indian drum
Tamas	One of the three goonns (states of being). The <i>tamsik</i> state is linked to decay, ill health, ignorance, procrastination, etc. The <i>rajsik</i> state is characterized by passion, energy, heat, bravery, etc. and the <i>satvik</i> state regroups qualities such as purity, wellness, spiritual awareness, knowledge, etc.
Tandav	Shiv's cosmic dance, which precedes the destruction of the universe prior to a new beginning
Tanpura	Stringed musical instrument similar to a sitar
Taway	Large, round iron plate used for cooking flat breads and pancakes
Telegu	Hindu ethnic group living mostly in south-east India, and whose language is Telegu
Thali	Stainless steel plate
Tirthyatra	Pilgrimage to Hindu sacred sites
Toolsi	Basil. A symbolical plant through which Hindus offer their salutations to the omnipresent divinity
Topi	Indian style hat, cylindrical and short, with no rim
Tretayoog	The second yoog (era) which preceded dwaparyoog
Tridosh	The exact proportion of the three dosh (types)—vata, pita, kapha—used to characterize a person under <i>ayurved</i>
Vaish	Caste of farmers and merchants
Vastu	Ancient Indian science of architecture for wellness and prosperity, based on aligning living areas with the natural order, shapes, colors, and personal characteristics to create the best conditions for living and working
Vata	Type of person with characteristics such as: enthusiasm, imagination, dynamism, predilection for change, etc.
Vayu	The gaseous state / element of air. Vayu and the other four elements under <i>vastu</i> [akash (space), jal (liquid), prithvi (solid) and agni (energy)] represent natural influences and forces to be taken into account when planning living areas for optimal benefit
Vedic mantrs	Sanskrit religious hymns from the Veds (sacred Hindu texts)
Veds	Sanatan Dharm's most ancient scriptures, the four Veds are: the Rig Ved, the Sam Ved, the Yajur Ved and the Atharv Ved
Veena	Musical chorded instrument similar to the sitar, with fewer chords
Vegetarian thali	A complete meal on a plate, with various cooked vegetable dishes served with several types of rice or flat breads
Yatra	Journey