



MOUNTAIN DREAMS

Fall In Love with the Simplest Parts of Life

— BHAVNA MATHUR —



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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
MY FATHER
SH. ANIL MATHUR
AND MY MOTHER
LATE SMT. KUMUDINI MATHUR



Acknowledgements

This book reflects my journey through life with all its glories and struggles. Grace of the Almighty, blessings of my parents and support of my family have nurtured my creativity, bringing out '**Mountain Dreams**'.

Travel gives us exposure to different lifestyles, cultures and environments. India, our Motherland, with all her colors and diversity, has shaped our sensibilities and understanding of the world.

We learn and live out what life offers but also get a chance to make sense of how our approach to leading a more natural life can be. With new threats posing risks for us, it is time for humanity to take responsibility for themselves.

'**Mountain Dreams**' explores the blend of tradition and modernity and how we can take the best from both.

My husband **Chetan Mathur** has been a constant source of support. My sons **Vardaan and Vidhaan** have endearingly motivated me through my writing journey.

It is time we sincerely tuned in to the soft call that nature sends us, to connect with her and live mindfully.



About the Author



A nature lover, **Bhavna Mathur** is inspired by the quiet pride and strength of simple mountain folk. Through her work, she reminds readers that by humming a song in the midst of despair, speaking one's truth, and working hard, one can sail through even the toughest challenges.

As a daughter, wife, mother, teacher, and author, Bhavna believes in the power of sacred manifestation for the benefit of humanity. She believes that thoughts, sincere efforts, trusting the process, and leaving the unknown to itself can together make life's journey quietly transformative.

The author of *The Goodness Charm* and *The Fragrant Healing Earth*, Bhavna observes in *Mountain Dreams* that through effortless action and remaining aligned with one's purpose, we can contribute to making the world a better place.

Bhavna Mathur



Preface

Inspiring words from our parents and grandparents light gentle lamps of inner well-being in us. I learnt from my father to continue to give new directions, new inspiration and new energy to my goals and achieve them by working hard. From my late mother, I learnt to make calmness my strength. 'Let things be effortless. Use resources judiciously and see how your efforts bring you results with discipline' were the key messages. My husband **Chetan Mathur** and sons **Vardaan and Vidhaan** have been a constant encouragement, guiding me to the best life can offer.

Admire the blooming flower. Express gratitude to the Almighty for everything and appreciate the journey is what I have to share with the readers, through this story. Our own scars and imperfections are symbols of strength and growth.

Knowledge is a door no one else can lock. Human spirit will reach for light. Hard soil can grow the deepest roots. Adversity nourishes a toughness we may never know we possess. The beauty of hope is that it keeps growing.

Forests are communities rooted in co-operation. Trees shade their saplings to help them grow steadily, strong and resilient. Trees keep long-dead stumps alive by feeding them through their roots. Trees nurture, protect and look after one another across generations. Trees warn each other of danger.

Blossoms teach patience. Each flower with the simple elegance of petals is a quiet magic, holding a little piece of joy. Cultural practices which venerate nature while allowing people to live in harmony with it sparkle of the warmth of togetherness in their hearts. In times of global climate crisis, it is time we took responsibility for conserving natural resources and built resilient, self-reliant food systems by blending traditional wisdom with innovative techniques.

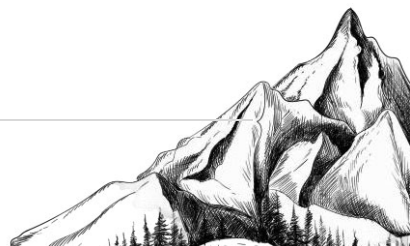


Contents

Chapter 1: Chakrani's World	1
Chapter 2: Six Mountain Divas	15
Chapter 3: Girls And Their Grandmothers.....	24
Chapter 4: Tara- Blessed and Charming.....	34
Chapter 5: University Admission And Faculty Guidance	43
Chapter 6: Moksh And Surya- Homebound And Raring to Go ..	54
Chapter 7: Charting The Path To Education	60
Chapter 8: Trees Are Life.....	67
Chapter 9: Young Buds.....	72
Chapter 10: Spiritual Sisters	77
Chapter 11: Holy Pilgrimages.....	84
Chapter 12: Devotion And Grace.....	89
Chapter 13: Making A Difference.....	91
Chapter 14: Food Festival and Village Fair.....	94
Chapter 15: To Himachal and Back	105
Chapter 16: Students Gear Up For The Festival and Fair.....	114
Chapter 17: Ujala Town: Nurturing Success	123
Chapter 18: Performances Galore.....	129
Chapter 19: United We Stand.....	134
Chapter 20: Lively, Interactive Fair.....	138
Chapter 21: Sisters', Brothers' And Friends' Aspirations.....	152
Chapter 22: Enchanting Interactions.....	164



Chapter 23: Train Ride from The Mountains	180
Chapter 24: Getting Ready - A Cosmopolitan Fair	184
Chapter 25: New Delhi: Himalayan City Festival	192
Chapter 26: Cherry Experiences New Delhi	205
Chapter 27: Cherry Blooms in India.....	219
Chapter 28: New Delhi Sight-Seeing	222
Chapter 29: Farewell! Hill Folk: Visit New Delhi Again.....	225
Chapter 30: Friends Have Fun	227
Chapter 31: Cherry Bids Goodbye To Heavenly Himachal.....	236
Chapter 32: Cherry Travels Back To Japan.....	238
Chapter 33: Precious Time with Mothers	242
Chapter 34: Cherry Meets Her Grandparents	246
Chapter 35: Tara Goes To Japan.....	257
Chapter 36: Nature Matters	265
Chapter 37: Shopping And More.....	272
Chapter 38: Baby Blue Eyes Flowers Seaside Park Tour	275
Chapter 39: Tara Returns to India.....	284
Chapter 40: Dazzling Divas Shining Bright.....	291



Chapter 1

Chakrani's World

“Dreams are magic and with magic, we can conquer the world!”

The 18-year-old Mountain girl Chakrani worshipped Ma Tara Devi (Mother Goddess Tara Devi) and knew that Mother Goddess in every form always protected her and her village.

She had imbibed the values of knowing that life tests your ability to know what you desire and your belief in yourself. By observing how her parents, relatives and families of friends faced obstacles and challenges with patience and planning, she had learnt to use natural resources judiciously.

“Frequent rains and hailstones are damaging our crops. I had to spread nets, walking past thick weeds. I would have to ask a daily wager to remove the weeds tomorrow”, Kishori told her husband Sanskar, on the phone.

“Alright. I wanted to tell you that I will wait for hailstone showers to subside before leaving from office”, Sanskar informed. Rapidly changing weather was making it tougher for hill folk to carry out day-to-day tasks, but a beautiful mindset helped them navigate through storms they encountered.



Kishori caressed leaves and believed in reciprocity of plants telling everyone that when we loved them, they responded by being more luxuriant.

As an acute observer, she observed early flowering of Hibiscus flowers and many crops. Her friends who lived along the Plains and owned fields, reported earlier than normal harvests for certain crops. She made cottage cheese and butter at home and used Hibiscus flowers (also called *Rhododendron*- state flower of Himachal Pradesh) to make flavorful seasonings, rich in flavonoids, antioxidants and minerals.

She cultivated Garlic, Radish, Coriander, Mustard, Potato, Corn, 'Hara saag' (local variety of green leafy vegetable). 'Bichu booti' or Nettle leaves were consumed as a vegetable and were thorny but reduced inflammation and meant to give heat to the body in winters.

Every three days, she deftly plucked Malta oranges and lemons from trees she grew in her farm, next to her house in Kali Valley.

Nestled in the mountain slopes of Himachal Pradesh, a state in India flanked by the Himalaya mountain ranges, Kali valley was blessed with breathtaking beauty. State capital Shimla was popular with tourists all through the year.

'Malkhwani' baskets in which fruits were kept were strung by her skilled mother who lived in a neighboring town.

"Guavas are sweet if pecked by birds, my mother would say. I got 'Kudaal' and 'Daraati' (farming tools) repaired by the ironsmith", Kishori told Chakrani. "Ah. Nani (maternal grandmother) would sing a song while grinding grain, I remember. That's good, Ma. I will tell the farm workers about the tools when they come next week", Chakrani conceded, setting her hair into two neat plaits.



Chakrani traced how her mother would climb trees to pluck fruits, despite thorns on tree trunks. Branches were closer in smaller fruit trees. Even till last year she was agile enough to climb but found it difficult now. For use in harsh winters, she stored cow dung piles, firewood and hay.

When dense fog enveloped winter mornings, Kishori placed stored fodder and grass stalks to cushion the damp shed of livestock, successfully multitasking, nurturing her garden, cutting grass and collecting firewood, even as temperature increased.

Smoke in the air had risen to the extent that she coughed incessantly even as summer hit them. “Ma, (‘Ma’ term used to address one’s mother) forest fires and stubble burning cause this deadly air pollution”, Chakrani complained.

“I had to sit indoors through winter, dear. It became impossible to sit outdoors, forget climbing trees or using a weed rake. Air carried with it more than just the chill of winter. Smoke from smoldering cow dung cakes added to it.”

Taking the conversation forward, Kishori added, “You hold the future in your hands. Small changes add up, so do your best dear.”

“Ma, even as I bow before God’s will, I have a clear mind. I promise you that rather than get befuddled by miseries, I will apply multi-pronged approaches to solve problems and collaborate with others”, Chakrani committed, chopping vegetables to make a dry vegetable dish.

“All the best”, Kishori exclaimed, blessing her only child who always held the best of intentions for one and all.

The land of quiet lakes and shallow streams, bees and flower gardens beckoned their relatives from other cities. Glaciers bursting with stones and soil, often leading to life-threatening risks, was common.



Cedar, Birch and Oak trees stood tall, spreading across varying altitudes in the mountain region. The lure of the mountains was enough for city-dwellers to visit and take in breathtaking beauty and mystery.

She had pranced around Peach, Apple, Walnut and Plum Orchards all her life, like a mischievous tomboy.

Over the years, she had learnt to embrace the wild, untamed essence while balancing the art of kind nurturing of those older and younger to her.

Simple things charmingly added up for these simple, hardworking villagers.

Kindness of women offering buttermilk jostled with stoic courage of elderly in unforgiving terrains, made the enigmatic hills unique.

‘Pahadi Rajma dal’ (kidney beans grown in hilly areas), local vegetables and preparations made from a variety of millets lent diversity to local cuisines further differentiated across regions within the Himalayan state whose state tree was the mighty ‘Deodar’.

Every scar of migrant workers from neighboring states, working day and night, told a story of survival. Every tear spoke of strength and every smile of landless laborers she had seen struggling to earn a wage reflected the joy that came from overcoming adversity.

Her best friend was Rudrani, who lived in Jwala village, right next to her village, from where apple orchards began. The two friends had similar interests and sensibilities and a shared purpose of being kind and doing good for others.

“Baba, let us pay the College tuition fees and hostel fees today evening”, Chakrani suggested, bowing to touch her father and mother’s feet, soon after completing their regular morning ritual of offering oblations to Sun God.



“Sure, my dear”, her father acknowledged, sprinkling holy water around the house.

“I can see you blossoming into a young, committed Social Entrepreneur after completing the course. We shall confirm your admission in the afternoon today”, Sanskar, her father, an Agricultural Scientist who worked in an organization which developed high-yielding seeds and climate-resilient crop varieties, held forth.

He was a proponent of diets rich in high-quality millets. He walked one kilometer one way, to his workplace, a Government Research Agency situated in Harigarh Block, ten kilometers from Shimla.

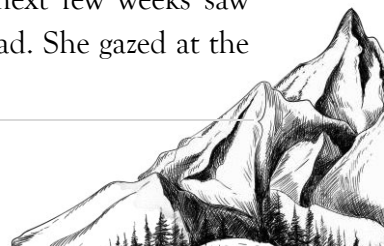
Carefully he placed lit incense sticks in the holder, ate a traditional ‘Himachali’ (belonging to Himachal Pradesh) breakfast snack prepared by his loving wife and rushed to wear the light-blue collared shirt and white pair of trousers, ironed by her.

Kishori cooked breakfast for herself and Chakrani humming a folk song in their local dialect. The Mini transistor set had been presented to her by her brother, had found a place atop a stool on a kitchen shelf. She ensured that she cooked when she was happy.

Bringing herself out of her thoughts, she called out, “Chakrani, Come and have breakfast first. We must see if you have enough clothes for college. Delhi gets a long Summer and a short, intense winter. And what about Rudrani? Is her college near yours? I hope it is!”

“Yes Ma. I spoke to her in the evening. It is only two kilometers away from my college. She will pursue a Course in Botany, her favorite subject”, Chakrani answered.

There was a sparkle in Chakrani’s eyes. The next few weeks saw Chakrani gearing up for a busy student life ahead. She gazed at the



ethereal night sky, promising herself to remain disciplined in studies, gathering new insights along the way.

Both Sanskar and Kishori brought an indefatigable spirit to the work of community groups encouraging people to bring in their full selves in whatever they did.

The entire village was encouraged by them to rediscover themselves and harness their potential by reimagining and revisiting situations to become a better version of themselves.

The magnificent Sun set over the crimson horizon. Kishori entered her kitchen to prepare 'Siddu'- a steamed delicacy from Himachal Pradesh.

"I will prepare snacks for Chakrani. How often would she be able to meet us?", Kishori pondered, lowering the evening radio broadcast volume so her husband could hear her.

"Once in two months for sure", Sanskar answered. "Chakrani, come let's pay the College fees online", he called aloud.

"Baba ('Baba', term used to address one's father), I am coming", Chakrani replied. Kishori pounded the walnuts and jaggery filling, placing them in small round balls, made from fine wheat flour dough. The delicacy went into the steamer for being savored with home-made 'Ghee' (clarified butter) subsequently. Sanskar and Chakrani completed the form- filling and payment procedures that would take the simple, determined mountain girl towards the next step in her zestful life.

"Goals are necessary to take you forward. Break down the shell of inhibition and view the world through a larger lens", Sanskar advised Chakrani, encouraging her to move towards education and a career that would help her scale heights.



He had received certifications, awards and recognitions through his academic and professional journey and believed that new innings made way for better opportunities in the future.

It was from his father, a farmer, that he learnt to be focused and to keep building for oneself while integrating a sense of surrender to Nature after efforts had been put in.

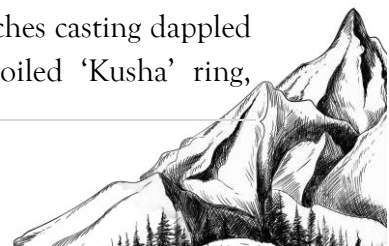
He ensured that sustainable construction materials, design and appropriate plant varieties helped to create the right temperature and ambience for the house.

“Stay strong but also do what makes your heart feel light”, Sanskar would say. Twice a year off he would go with a few close friends for Trekking and Snow Skiing, near his house. Kishori and Chakrani enjoyed going for leisurely boat rides with him and went berserk watching clouds touch mountain peaks on short treks and car trips past fog-covered roads.

Chakrani believed that human beings were meant to evolve. “We can only count on oneself. We have some unique place to fill in the Universe”, she told Rudrani. “I agree but there is this Secret life of the Universe and humanity should take tipping points seriously”, Rudrani implied.

“Oh Yes. Your One Act Play last year at the Inter -Village Youth Festival effortlessly brought out the message of motivating ourselves to maintain material wealth without jeopardizing natural ecosystems. Stories become vehicles of meaning for audiences”, Chakrani exclaimed, appreciating the talent Rudrani displayed, ever so often. “Thank you. Precious insights I share are symbols of beauty around us”, Rudrani remarked. Rudrani wore a ring made of ‘Kusha’ grass which proffered focus.

Noticing glimmering images of Oak trees’ branches casting dappled shadows on worn-out stone floor and the coiled ‘Kusha’ ring,



Chakrani realized that culture is strongly tied to the ecosystem and that gratitude enables us to tread paths where new beginnings await us.

Rudrani, the girl with hazel eyes, lived in Jwala village.

Her father Neelkanth was an Eye Specialist and mother Gaura, a Physician. She had a sense for stories and believed in spreading happiness.

Rudrani considered Chakrani a friend and a close companion for all things bright and mundane.

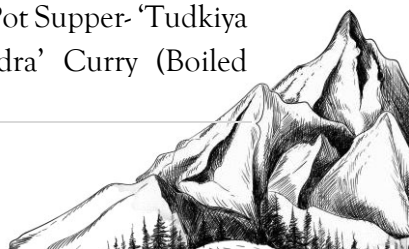
Rudrani was an extrovert by nature. Her deep dimples, throaty voice and long hair tied in a top knot made the mountain girl with rosy cheeks look younger than her age. She knew she would miss the wooded surroundings, softly flowing brooks and sitting on stumps of fallen trees, watching ever-changing hue of the skies. A quiet strength pushed her towards fulfilling her ambitions.

She easily connected with those who spoke the truth. Myriad species of plants, birds and butterflies magically transformed her garden which was once a dry patch of land surrounded by a cluster of Pine trees.

Her grandmother kept farm workers happy and broke into age-old songs proclaiming the fraternity of humankind and epitomizing the spirit of ‘food is home, music is home, people are home’.

She adored folk music, having imbibed the passion with which her Granny played folk instruments. Old Storage rooms to store grains, Pantry rooms to store groceries and deep stone pits used to pound whole spices attracted the attention of well-read tourists passing by.

Granny gave a tour occasionally to eager passersby. She spoke in ‘Pahari’ language and cooked lip-smacking One Pot Supper- ‘Tudkiya Bhat’ (Lentils, rice and vegetables) and ‘Madra’ Curry (Boiled



Chickpeas) ‘Kabuli Chana’ cooked in curd) whenever she wanted to pamper her son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter.

The girls shared laughs and giggles. Dancing minds of the two friends often saw singing flowers tossing in the breeze. They had a fundamental sense of belonging to the world.

Their world was not wrapped in arrogance but fueled by the belief that knowledge was futile, if the heart remained insensitive. Education without humility was false power for these girls who had been taught to be grateful for new beginnings.

Walking with grace and purpose was their motto. Time stood still for them when crisp winter air, imbued with the sweet fragrance of Mountain roses drifted through their mountain homes.

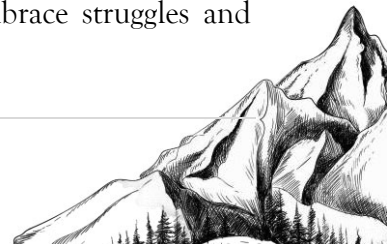
The inseparable friends had helped Government and Non-Profit agencies clean an alpine lake and make zero- waste lifestyle a reality, by mobilizing people from two villages.

“We generate maximum textile waste. My friend Vilasini has started a startup which recycles textile waste and turns them into recycled bags, clothes and accessories that advance sustainable fashion”, Rudrani elucidated, noticing that Chakrani was cheerily busy, plucking red apples.

“That’s impressive”, Chakrani remarked, closely maintaining her balance with the overhanging basket on her back, brimming with plucked apples.

“I appreciate efforts which help restore Mother Nature, her infinite glory”, Chakrani added, her burgundy, brown scarf fluttering in the soft breeze.

“We inherit the consequences of our actions. Delaying action will lead to missed opportunities. We need to embrace struggles and



gather courage to make life easier by adapting to new changes”, Rudrani explicated holding her friends’ hands while climbing uphill.

In half a day, the devoted friends had plucked over a hundred red apples together, chattering along.

Rudrani’s grandmother nurtured her verdant Apple orchard with exceptional passion. At 88 years, the wrinkles on her face did betray her eager demeanor and indomitable spirit.

Her quaint room brimmed with the lively chaos of a life well-lived. Storage spaces were deep. She kept old iron and copper utensils there. Framed photos, ceramic figurines, recipe cards were always visible to her even though her room received a gentle glow of light, through the larger part of the day.

Steady sound of her breathing held a soothing hold over Rudrani.

It was nearly five years since the Self-Help group she started had grown from a 3-member to a 30-member team. She was always around her grandmother when both were at home.

At the Processing Center, fifty energetic village women who cleaned and processed harvested apples and made apple jam, apple candy, apple juice, apple pie, apple flakes and apple cakes for sale at shops, located in every district. Harvest season was a time to celebrate.

These fervent women made pickles. The enterprise had an annual turnover crossing 40 million INR. Tremendous effort went into grading, packing and transportation. Efforts became manifold before results were achieved ever more for life in the mountains. The ladies merrily examined bonds of sisterhood and womanhood working hard to prepare and package products for local and international customers.



The flourishing Kitchen Garden at the back of their house thrived with brinjal, cucumber, potato, tomato, pumpkin, bottle gourd, garlic and beans.

The flower garden had more colors than fragrances. Flowers of many hues fluttered with joy. Mild scents rose up.

A marvelous miracle with each bud blossoming into a flower unfurled with the Sun spreading beams of heat and light to nourish creation.

Caring relationships strengthened their morale. Empathy was an integral part of human interaction, they realized.

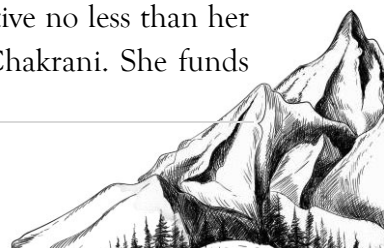
A steadfast devotee of Ma Tara Devi who protected clans and regions along sprawling Mountain ranges, her devout Grandmother invited 9 small village girls twice a year and looked after them for 9 days and 9 nights with unwavering devotion. She performed elaborate rituals to invoke divine feminine power and hoped noble actions by others would let a little of the wonder spill onto the larger world.

Offerings of food were served to villagers and town folk without use of onion and garlic, throughout the nine days and nine nights.

Integration of communities during celebrations was the norm. Invited audience from towns near and far would sit on the ground and eat together during weddings, childbirth and retirement functions.

“Does Grandma sponsor the education of these girls?”, Chakrani asked, curious about outreach services towards education. Rudrani relished a juicy, green apple and turned towards Chakrani.

She jumped off the dangling tree branch she was perched on and sprinkled wood ash from a circular container around fresh saplings planted by her mother two days earlier. Inquisitive no less than her friend, on most matters, Rudrani answered, “Chakrani. She funds



their education through the year from her share of the profit she earns from the Apple fruit business.”

“That is noteworthy”, Chakrani aired, inspired by the Octogenarian’s vision and efforts.

“Did you sprinkle manure over those?”, Chakrani enquired, her forehead, shining with sweat drops.

“I did that yesterday Let’s go home. I must start packing tonight”, Rudrani confirmed.

They had read about how excessive rainfall, unseasonal natural events and melting glaciers due to climate change were damaging crops.

“Yes. Same here”, Chakrani revealed. Skillfully, they tied the sturdy jute bags, filled with 300 apples.

Walking past walnut trees and colorful flower beds resplendent with Pansies and Rain lilies, tended by Rudrani’s mother, Chakrani remembered her grandmother’s story about ‘KalpVriksh’ tree in heaven and how it fulfilled what one asked for if the intention was pure.

She had heard rich narratives about mythological figures from her grandmother and watched her in meditation.

She remembered Granny telling her, ‘Life is like a mirror. Be grateful and compassionate. Smile at life and life will smile back at you’, when she was 9-years old. Much of what she found power in was a result of what Granny had taught her. For Granny, hobbies sparked a reason to live. Granny was known for fostering a spirit of discipline among those she interacted with. Her family took pride in the fact that she was an Encyclopedia on Edible Wild vegetation in Himachal Pradesh.



She added a unique taste twist to wild mushroom pickle and dry fruit pickle which would be a mix of seasoned cashew nuts, raisins and dry cherries.

Festivals were occasions to find ecstasy within oneself. Local men and women gathered in an open ground, dancing in circles. Processions of deities were a medium of reaching out to bless devotees.

“Don’t let fear turn you against your playful heart. Surround yourself with happy faces”, Granny proclaimed, enthusing her granddaughter to see potential for renewal and beauty in every aspect of life. “Granny, I understand that these festivals are an invitation to slow down by being present in the moment”, Rudrani expressed, helping Granny clean the metal urn for prayer before making food offerings for Mother Goddess.

Carefully, Rudrani washed mango leaves to be used to decorate the home temple and took out paints to make a floor decoration in front of the temple.

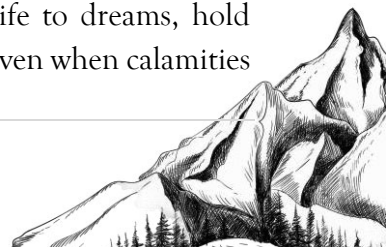
During the nine sacred nights, young girls, boys and exuberant adults wore colorful costumes, danced in circles combining their own dance movements with ‘Gujarati Garba’ dance steps. Enthusiastic villagers twirled, trying to live their best life while navigating the daily challenges they faced.

“Know your self-worth”, Neelkanth told Rudrani. “Be open to learning. We learn from youngsters and those with valuable experience to share”, he continued.

“Sure, Baba. I will keep that in mind”, Rudrani responded, acknowledging her father’s lessons for her.

Chakrani sang and painted when she was not studying.

“You are enough. You are not broken. Give life to dreams, hold steady in your truth and be exactly who you are even when calamities



have turned the world upside down”, Kishori preached, oiling her daughter’s hair and lovingly tying them in neat plaits.

Chakrani slept beside her mother. Overnight pitter-patter of raindrops lulled her to sleep.



Chapter 2

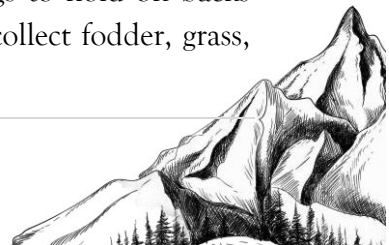
Six Mountain Divas

Chakrani and Rudrani went cherry picking together. They had immense talent- from painting and gardening to sports and Computers. They played marbles together, did skipping and hopscotch.

“Lush green carpets, gurgling streams, Pine trees.” That is how Kishori described her parental village would be, bedecked in the rain. It was five kilometers away from where she resided now. “Those were my childhood days”, she reminisced, her eyes sparkling with nostalgic delight. “It was the same way here, for my village, but a lot has changed now”, Sanskar replied. “We stored cold drinks and home-made butter in chilled stream water”, he reminisced.

“Baba, we still do that, though the river is narrower. Both of you have taught me that we must find tranquility in a world we may not always understand. Haven’t you?”, Chakrani exclaimed, keeping the loving banter alive with her inputs. She had seen her maternal grandmother make coiled grass discs to place on head as a cushion against heavy baskets.

Granny would also tie cane baskets with strings to hold on backs while her maternal aunt went to the forest to collect fodder, grass,



hay and firewood. Kishori would even now grind salt and flavor it at home with ginger, garlic, chilies and coriander leaves for taste she had grown up with.

Rudrani wrote her aspirations down in a small diary gifted by her father. A bit rebellious, her imagination took flight easily and she used observation and the kaleidoscope of memories she possessed to make sense of the world around her. Since childhood, they recognized that agony and ecstasy went together.

Their friends Tara, Alokika, Titli and Ujali had large families. The best friends had always seen how happy they were, adjusting, supporting, taking on life as it came.

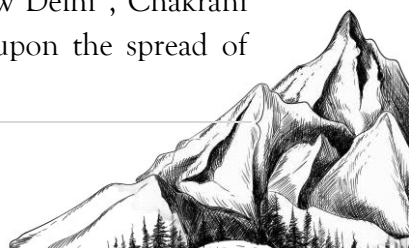
They watched mountain rivers flow, through rugged terrain. “Rivers leap past huge boulders and chart their own course. We have to be open to life in the same way”, Rudrani pronounced, tutoring her friends while trekking along a mountain river trail.

The two friends trudged along meadows accompanying cows and goats their families reared, when they were younger. They had seen their grandmothers, mothers, neighbors and cousins trudge past treks to collect firewood and cut wild grass for their livestock.

Helping their mothers by sowing, reaping, plucking vegetables, cooking and clearing in and around the house and kitchen was an intrinsic part of who they were and what they were supposed to deliver as a part of their daily routine.

Celebrating the aroma of wet Earth and falling rain, holding an umbrella together, Chakrani and Rudrani went to the evening market to buy new clothes and useful daily items for use during their hostel life in the big city.

“We will work on Assignments together in New Delhi”, Chakrani told Rudrani rolling her eyes wide to glance upon the spread of



colorful Silk and cotton scarves in delicate florals hanging over a long metallic rod in a shop.

Wearing these specifically designed scarves was a tradition in their families and a matter of pride and honor. Scarves also helped hair retain moisture protecting them from Sun's ultra-violet rays.

"Yes, and study for examinations together. See how blessed Tara, Ujali, Titli and Alokika are! They study, play and even complete household chores together", Rudrani exclaimed expecting Chakrani's reaction.

"Yes. Within a year or more, they would also join Colleges in other cities and meet here only. I will join Music, Environment and Elocution Clubs in my college", Chakrani visualized. "How about you?", she enquired, turning her gaze away from the hill market.

"Of course. I am raring to go. There are many plans I have made. I will share with you. We have less than 20 days before we join our colleges", Rudrani expressed, her hazel eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"I will buy that sturdy cloth bag with a leather base, this beautiful cotton shirt adorned with sequined motifs, that chic brocade waistcoat, half a dozen scarves and this quilted jacket", Chakrani shared, pointing to her selection of clothes and accessories after spending nearly an hour in deciding what to buy.

Trying them on herself before a small mirror fixed on a wall placed on another rod, she approved them, simultaneously helping Rudrani choose two stylish sweaters for herself. "I will buy long kurtas with cotton pants and studded accessories for myself from the adjoining shops", Rudrani told Chakrani and they proceeded towards the Purchase Counter to make payments against their purchases.



“Alright. While you do that, I will pick two cushions in light geometric patterns from the shop across the road, for our comfort in our hostel rooms”, Rudrani informed. “Fine”, Chakrani affirmed.

A young Salesboy folded the selected garments and packed them in a jute bag. Rudrani tried a few scarves around her hair and said, “Let us pay and see other shops. These jute bags are made by the organization where Dhara’s sister works as a Volunteer”, she whispered.

“That is wonderful”, Chakrani remarked, pulling out money from her purse, crafted by her mother from upcycled cloth materials. Gently, she placed it before the person sitting at the Billing Counter. She received the money returned by him, thanked the Salesboy and noticed the cluster of marigolds placed at a corner.

Rudrani noticed diffusers infused with Cedarwood and Eucalyptus oil fragrances around the shop. They add fragrance and keep mustiness and insects away in this damp weather, she concluded.

It was not long before Rudrani had completed her purchases of Kurtas and clothing accessories and Chakrani had bought the cushions.

Holding each other’s hands with a spring in their step, they went along with eyes glued to the market square abuzz with lively lights, busy food vendors and teeming crowds. These were scenes they had lived through during their childhood.

Scent of wildflowers alongside trails and alpine meadows, continued to nurture feelings of wonder in the childhood friends and they merrily went about discovering beauty around them.

Proceeding towards their respective homes to keep the grocery and garment bags and inform their families about the plan to meet



friends at Titli's house, Chakrani suggested, "Let's meet at Titli's house." "Sure, will be there in a jiffy", Rudrani avouched.

Soaring temperatures and unending global wars had deterred but not closed the sense of blooming joy that emanated from colorful pictures captured by tourists returning from the Valley of Flowers.

Alokika, Titli, Tara and Ujali were younger than Chakrani and Rudrani by a year. They studied in the same school as Chakrani and Rudrani. They had a lively get-together on Titli's terrace with Titli having to do much of the running around.

She would have rushed up and down the flight of stairs connected to her kitchen and the terrace more than 20 times but this she thought was a small price to pay for the joy of hosting a farewell party for her favorite seniors.

The chummy friends frolicked around, absorbing a spectacular Sunset from Titli's terrace. It offered stunning vistas of lush green farms, terrace fields and majestic mountains.

"Let's enjoy this fresh peach fruit juice together", Titli offered, placing a tray arranged with six tall glasses garnished with a salt and black salt mixture around their rims. My parents will meet you before you leave", Titli informed Chakrani and Rudrani.

"Sure, we seek their blessings", the outgoing duo responded in chorus. "We will keep taking Video calls with you both", they promised. The vegetable fritters prepared by Titli's mother were delectably crispy. The girls savored them with slow relish and friendly banter.

Rudrani hugged her friends one after another. Chakrani followed suit. Titli untied two goats from their rope so they could freely move around the barn and feast on fresh grass placed by her elder sister.



Titli who was in Senior school and lived in Ujali's village innocently enquired, Chakrani Di, Rudrani Di (the term 'Di' used to address someone as an elder sister), "I know God is omnipresent but how do you think will our local deity bless you there?", she posed, puzzled by matters relating to their impending movement to the Capital city.

Chakrani introspected the big transformation that was about to happen in her and her friends' lives. She recognized that she and Rudrani needed to give themselves permission to change and choose connection, in the big world waiting for them.

Chakrani took nearly a minute and answered, "Titli, we will find a temple nearby. I will keep idols and pictures of Gods and Goddesses. Thank you for your concern", Rudrani remarked. "I will also do as Chakrani just explained. We will be home once in two months and during festival holidays. We will pray at temples here and be blessed by high cosmic energy on every visit", she reaffirmed.

"That would be great", Titli screamed, satisfied with the answer.

"Take care of yourselves and your belongings", she advised, lifting the oval teak wood tray carved by her father.

"Thank you", Rudrani answered. "Study hard and look after yourself and your large families", Chakrani emphasized.

"Thank you", Titli muttered, rushing towards the steep steps that led her to the courtyard downstairs, to keep the tray in the kitchen. She returned with her parents and two small chairs on which they sat, conversing with Chakrani and Rudrani about their course, among other things.

"Tell your grandmother that I continue to make the detox water using herbs I have grown in these small pots", Titli's mother opined, handing out fresh *Opuntia* leaves straight off her small flowerpot hanging on the terrace. "That is wonderful. I will tell Granny for



sure. Thank you for this plant. I am sure she would use this”, Rudrani acknowledged placing the plant carefully in a colorful jute bag she always carried to keep money and her mobile phone in.

A joyous peal of laughter and cheerful assurances reverberated through the mountain home of bubbly Titli.

“Preferring the familiar, and the safe helps us survive, but it prevents learning and keeps us away from experiencing the novel. I have told my neighbor that we will be helping her with Plum-picking tomorrow”, Alokika told Titli, helping her clean the terrace. “Wonderful, I will be there. It is a Sunday so we can have a fun picnic at the Plum orchard”, Titli announced pulling Alokika to wash hands before they could play Skipping Rope together. Later, in the evening, the friends took a stroll before parting and promised to meet again the very next day.

“Difficult experiences contribute to our unique strengths”, Titli’s mother had pointed out to the six friends that very evening. Alokika recalled those words and walked home gazing at drifting clouds that looked like fluffs of snow.

She vowed to appreciate the beauty of imperfection and understood the value of embracing life’s challenges for a happier life.

“Hiking and trekking have made us explorers”, Chakrani recognized, navigating a tiring climb through forested hills with Rudrani on their way back. “Yes. Villagers on this side must be waiting for a replacement bridge to connect them to the road”, Rudrani affirmed, pointing towards a broken bridge across a river leading to a road on the other side of the mountain. Chakrani turned to view what Rudrani was pointing at and let out a sigh.

With the town road, flanked by their villages on either side in sight, slowly the two friends walked back. Sunday did turn out to be a fun



day with both Alokika and Titli plucking Plums, their eyes expressive of the joy of shared discovery of finding Apricots alongside Plums.

Alokika's neighbor, who owned these orchards and had revived them through a Government subsidy, appreciated their quiet courage. "Let's be careful of leopards or other wild animals, hiding behind bushes", Alokika told Titli. "Alright, we shall have a quick picnic and then go back home", Titli asserted, applying turmeric on a knee wound she suffered while climbing down a tree trunk.

Walking home, Alokika observed "My parents say that one could be carefree and still be focused on actions." "That is how it was for us today", Titli contended. They gripped each other's arms, watching local people and tourists flooding evening streets, circles of mist floating in the air.

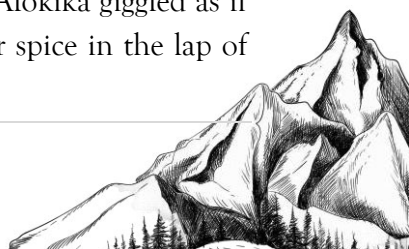
"This traffic jam is terrible. I am thankful that we are not in a vehicle", Ujali noted, pointing towards a choked mountain road connecting two towns.

They were most free-spirited while walking along fog-covered Mall Road together on weekend evenings once or twice every month.

"Resorts and hotels are built on fragile rivers. Landslides initiated due to prolonged heavy rainfall disrupt traffic flow. Tourist taxes should be levied to discourage excessive hill tourism. People are spreading litter and causing noise pollution", Alokika complained raising her voice for Ujali to hear, over the shrill of blaring horns.

Noticing a bush of Rocket weed ('Jakhiya' in local language) on the side of the road, Ujali cheered. The tiny seeds were used as a flavoring condiment in regional cuisine. She was looking forward to learning cooking from her mother.

She plucked a stalk and showed it to Alokika. Alokika giggled as if attesting to her joy over discovering the popular spice in the lap of



nature. Natural springs were a cascade of wonder for the girls who had children's souls dwelling in the house of tomorrow. Alokika loved losing herself in lush, terraced gardens. She played with her wild side while plucking wild walnuts. "We have seen family members harvest Pine Nuts from their cones at my grandfather's house in Upper Himachal. It is a task that requires patience and precision because the nuts are clumped close together. Rituals using Pine nuts garlands and dry fruits garlands are observed there", Alokika revealed. Friendly musings entwined with memories of a loving family made their journey more pleasant.

Walking together, the friends reached their homes just when dusk broke. Setting Sun and rising Moon looked benevolently upon their homes, fields and gardens.



Chapter 3

Girls And Their Grandmothers

Alokika and Titli's grandmothers were best friends. Their 'joie de vivre' (zest for life) matched perfectly with one another, layered with a timeless integrity.

"My grandmother manages the farm and runs our restaurant, wearing fifteen kilograms of heavy, silver jewelry. Isn't that amazing?", Alokika observed, spotting wild deer on the other side of the valley.

"She always makes time to meet my grandmother", Titli noted.

"I hope to maintain our friendship just like them and like Chakrani and Rudrani", Titli wished. The friends walked to Secondary School navigating their steps over fallen fruits from trees uprooted by constant rain. "We shall forever share our collection of dolls and feed barley grains to Deer", Alokika proposed. Titli squealed with delight at the mention of dolls.

"Most fruits left on trees are either infected or half-eaten by wild animals and birds, Alokika complained, waving at a group of feisty elderly women who ran a bustling Supermarket in the town market. Sweet fragrance of Night Jasmine and Hydrangea flowers wafted through the breeze, composing a symphony of scents.



“Loss has led to a permanent alteration of their inner worlds. Experiencing natural catastrophes and personal adversities, these brave ladies have acknowledged life’s challenges with sensitivity”, Ujali exchanged, tightening her shoulders lest her school bag slip. She strengthened her grip over her feet while descending through a slope. “Definitely. We outgrow a version of ourselves and heal deep wounds with time”, Tara concluded. Tara had an indefinable charm, and all her friends were smitten by it.

“Spiritual and vocational activities keep these ladies on the go”, Titli remarked, drawing her friend’s attention to the group of fifteen women practicing deep breathing exercises at the open Courtyard of the Senior Citizen Centre. “Yes. They practice Yoga. I notice them every day, walking past this roadside curve facing the Centre, on way to school”, Alokika confirmed.

“I have observed that memories of days gone by have a special place in their hearts. By observing how they explore the ups and downs of familial ties, I have learnt to never forget my own insignificance”, Ujali expressed.

“Few women here are my grandmother’s friends. I am impressed by how they have maintained a lively spirit through interaction and engagement”, Tara avowed. “My mother knows one lady, particularly known for her spirit of defiance”, Ujali averred.

The four friends walked together in pairs, chatting and admiring the stunning scenery spreading out before them.

These industrious women had no time for despair in their lives. Over years they had built for themselves safe spaces imbued with the richness of female friendship. It was a zone of sharing secrets, where tears were not awkward and where the bond of love enabled friends to feel one another’s pain and joy like it were their own. They shared their learnings with one another.



“Life is an unveiling journey of shadow and light. Granny says, isn’t it?”, Ujali expressed to Alokika, referring to Rudrani’s grandmother. “Yes. Clinging to the old, the once familiar is as important as being ready for new things and big changes”, my grandfather, a tall person with very large hands who lives in Upper Himachal always says”, Alokika agreed.

“I remember. We met him at your house last year when he stayed with you for a few days. He has piercing blue eyes and told us to nurture our proud identity”, Titli recalled.

“I love the resilience of social life. We have so much to learn from everyone”, Tara realized. These intimate interactions glimmering like twinkling lights illuminated the valley.

“Yes, and how we pick the pieces of our shattered lives in an extraordinary moment. Words sweep away small anxieties, moving around by conveying meaning, nurturing strong bonds we share with communities around us”, Alokika verbalized, observing humming bees fluttering above a bed of flowers, by the side of the road. “Aren’t they establishing a rhythmic communication with me?”, Alokika said to herself.

Mist suddenly cleared and a golden, nebulous Sun shone through.

The girls reached their homes and shared the farewell party experience with their parents.

“Nature reflects the wild and instinctual. Healing is a vital part of reclaiming your power”, Sanskar told Chakrani, arranging documents in a folder for Chakrani to take with her to university. Musical rain fell gently on their house roof, nestled in a verdant valley. She laughed, watching wild goats playing in the rain, around an irrigation pond. A thunderous roar echoed. Shepherds rushed as their sheep headed to their shed drenched by rain.



“Vulnerability to floods is widespread but you and Ma have taught me that life is about flowing around challenges”, Chakrani communicated, helping her father close the sliding windows and wooden doors around their cozy house. Wild walnuts scattered on rain-soaked twigs and Oak tree branches shook while bright red leaves got wet with the downpour.

“Gazing at lush valleys makes me dance, sing and jump”, Chakrani muttered, collecting raindrops in outstretched hands before settling her polka-dotted outfit, fluttering against the breeze.

Gaura maintained a herbal garden, abundant with healing plants. She took extra care of these tender plants when a blanket of snow spread across snow peaks overlooking her house. It was the inimitable spark of joy she radiated while plucking tiny red ‘Kafal’ fruits from trees which rubbed off on Rudrani. A Champion of social justice, Gaura led the movement that offered unwavering support to tribals in nearby districts who it was believed safeguard ecosystems and own forests as much as others. “I will miss your self-effacing humor and the turn of phrases you give in our dialect to daily situations”, Rudrani put forth, hugging her mother, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“You will keep coming through these three years. I will pack Himalayan red rice and Barnyard millet for you. You can make it whenever you crave home food. It requires minimum ingredients and one utensil”, Gaura advised, arranging Rudrani’s summer and winter clothes in separate piles. With a crisp cotton hand-embroidered handkerchief she wiped off her daughter’s tears, patting her on the crown of her head, a medium of transferring blessings.

Rudrani bowed and said, “Sure Ma. I will cook ‘Guchchi Pulao’ (rare, exotic variety of mushroom cooked with rice and flavored with whole spices) and split black lentils (‘Maash dal’).” Rudrani missed



the flicker of hesitation that crossed her mother's face as she ran towards the kitchen. Gaura wanted to pamper her daughter as much as she could.

Rudrani was ever upbeat about collecting 'Guchchi' mushrooms from hilly trails far up the valley was excitedly cooking dinner.

She had put in countless hours of silent labor promoting and propagating traditional varieties of millets, vegetables and few cash crops.

Imbued with the sensory richness of the lingering scent of wildflowers, evening walks with father and quiet observation of her mother's gardening, Rudrani had a blessed childhood. "Remember the sunshine when the storm seems unending", her mother had taught her.

"Face every situation with courage and optimism", her father would say, whenever she was disturbed by events happening around her. Rudrani had seen abandoned houses from where youth had fled economic adversity towards greener pastures. Her next-door neighbor Narayani, who had completed school, reclaimed her identity to earn and fund her brother's education. She had lost a call center job and now sold spiced corn and assorted vegetable dumplings near the National Park, frequented by tourists.

Dhara, another neighbor whose family was financially better off, had built a tree house, carved out of Pine tree- wood and nestled in the branches of one, forty feet above ground. The investment from her father and her own diligence paid off and the treehouse offered more than forest views.

"Food is tasty dear", Gaura complimented relishing the meal. "My granddaughter is one in a million", Rudrani's grandmother pronounced, "You did it", her father complimented.



“Thank you”, Rudrani acknowledged, serving them again.

“Dhara is going to turn the treehouse she has been busy with into a homestay soon. I met her today. There are four private decks with luxury amenities, beds with a canopied net, open-roof bathrooms and a balcony made of thatched roof and bamboo walls. Open lawns and wooden architecture in a quiet valley setting add to the charm”, Rudrani elaborated.

“I remember her grandmother. She shared Black Plums or ‘Jamun’ from her trees also called Indian Blackberry. Consistently, we ate Jamuns them as they lowered blood sugar and controlled cholesterol”, Granny recounted, at the mention of Dhara, Rudrani’s school friend and neighbor. Revisiting days gone by with affection, Gaura added turpentine oil to Paint and painted the house, a task she had been carrying out for the past two days and thought she would need another two days.

“Children today have big dreams and go all out to fulfil them”, Rudrani’s grandmother articulated, her dark eyes and wrinkles glowing with pride. “That is noteworthy”, Gaura observed.

“The dining hall is built around the tree trunk and so is a reading bench with a tiny cupboard brimming with books. Dhara plans to hire local craftswomen, cleaners, cooks, gardeners, farmers and folk dancers for running the homestay well”, Rudrani elaborated.

“Am so proud of this generation. They are careless but if they progress with the right values in place, they have my heart”, Granny giggled.

Rudrani held her hand accompanying her to her bedroom.

“Yes Ma. We slid on mosaic floors in our childhood and ran in dusty playgrounds. Our stone and wood houses keep us cool in summer and warm in winter. These days eco-friendly construction materials



that ensure minimizing carbon footprint are being increasingly utilized. Concrete, asphalt and glass structures retain heat”, Gaura remarked. Her Mother-in-law patted her on the back and rinsed her mouth with detox water. It held the power of vital locally grown herbs.

“Digital addiction is devouring the minds of people, these days. We need to detox our minds first and then our bodies and the environment”, Neelkanth shared with Gaura. “Yes”, Gaura agreed and called her daughter to say, “Rudrani, let’s work on the kitchen garden together tomorrow morning.”

“Sure Ma”, Rudrani consented, taking in view of a starry sky from a window by the staircase in her house built by her parents with love, stone and wood.

Over the years Rudrani had learnt the importance of perfect soil preparation, harvesting and tending an eco-friendly kitchen garden for supporting healthy living and reducing waste.

Sustainable farming practices and changing climate patterns were challenges farmers dealt with.

Mother and daughter took sweeping views, returning after spending nearly an hour in the flower garden, to meditate on dry pine-leaf matted cushions.

“I will miss my bed by the window”, Rudrani said to herself, watching birds let out sweet morning chirpings. “See you soon”, she imagined the bird say. Thoughts of a career in her hometown after completing her graduation filled her with renewed vigor.

Her mother’s eyes glowed with confidence. She caressed her that night and whispered, “Rudrani, you must trust that you are growing. Always honor your boundaries. There is no need to explain them to anyone.”



Rudrani lowered her eyes, absorbing her mother's words of advice and soon the starry night gave way to a bright moonlit night. Sleep ushered in, a dreamy silence. "Alright Ma. Goodnight", Rudrani whispered, hugging her mother tightly.

Rainy weather increased slipping and skidding risks, causing landslides that damaged houses and claimed lives.

"When we were little children, we would shout whenever it got dark in a train passing through a tunnel", Grandma told Rudrani. "You travelled in train!", Rudrani remarked, surprised that Grandma experienced train rides through her childhood.

"We felt lost in fairs in our childhood, but not anymore. Smoothly you would surf through life's rough waves now that you are mature", Grandma continued. Sky was overcast with dark clouds. Grandma exhaled sharply, relishing spiced tea prepared by Rudrani. "Light rain feels like a soft benediction", Grandma cheered.

Rudrani read about villagers in the upper mountains jolted awake by early morning tremors, on a news website and read about the possible causes for frequent devastating earthquakes. There is an urgent need for a sustainable approach to development in fragile ecosystems, she reminded herself. "I question the effectiveness of current disaster management strategies", Grandma posed. Rudrani was shocked. How did Grandma know, she wondered. But why wouldn't she? They were common now, Rudrani told herself. Rudrani nodded to show Grandma that she was listening.

"Illegal land mining and unsustainable development practices are a growing threat triggering extreme climatic events. Land mining poisons wells ruining land", Grandma lamented, her face turning pale.

"Grandma, landslides triggered a flash flood recently claiming lives and damaging a hydro-electric project. I know illegal quarries chip



away at law, land and livelihood. Quarry stone aggregates are used for laying the foundation for buildings and roadworks and are major raw materials for the construction industry. Preventive measures which improve the odds of survival are the need of the hour. A complete ban is probably not happening”, Rudrani considered.

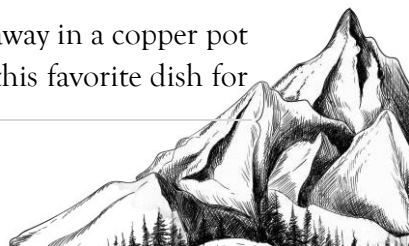
“There are agencies from the Government and the Non-Government sector working together to rehabilitate disaster victims and encourage afforestation. A lot needs to be done, I agree. What is worth loving is worth fighting for”, Rudrani continued cheering her loving grandmother and hugging her tightly. “Move forward with willpower. New beginnings are meant for your path”, Grandma asserted, amplifying her pitch and positive intentions for her affectionate grandchild. Grandma had taught Rudrani how to make re-usable toys. They recognized the debt they owed to Mother Earth and practiced mindful gratitude. “By building ecologically sensitive houses similar to good old mud-coated walls which remain cool in summer and warm in winter, we have satisfied our conscience”, Grandma explained.

“These adaptive, self-sufficient houses are worthy examples. Now city dwellers are also using natural building materials to construct high-performance buildings which leave no carbon footprint”, Rudrani elaborated, hoping Grandma felt better. Rudrani realized that she found her way back to herself stronger after hearty conversations with Grandma.

She knew there was enough to look forward to.

Teak (‘Sagwan’) trees, Cedar (‘Deodar’) trees, Oak trees called ‘Banj’ in Uttarakhand and ‘Ban’ in Himachal Pradesh and Pine trees (‘Chir’) manifested stability and entering their realm was like stepping through sacred doorways with grace to attain peace of mind.

Grandma stirred fresh vegetable soup bubbling away in a copper pot and slowly chopped leafy greens to add making this favorite dish for



her intelligent granddaughter. Enjoying the misty atmosphere outside she also cooked a rich gravy using yoghurt and dry fruits, infused with the warmth of her love and the bold flavors of a spice mix she had prepared from herbs she tended in her garden.

The next morning, she accompanied Grandma to the Apple Processing Centre, the Self-Help Group led by Grandma crossing a gurgling mountain spring. They enjoyed breakfast in a little clearing. Rudrani was grateful that the Self-Help group encouraged women to look inwards and measure success by their own parameters. Women healed from past wounds and celebrated their unique journeys after recognizing the importance of community.

She returned home past meandering stone paths, overgrown with soft, creeping vines, after greeting the zestful Self-Help Group members sharing a smile with her, at the Apple Processing Centre.

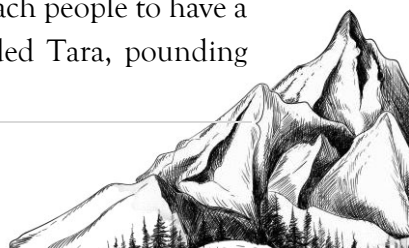


Chapter 4

Tara- Blessed and Charming

Tara, a 17 -years old Mountain girl, excelled in studies and was always the more mature friend in the group of vivacious buddies Chakrani, Rudrani, Alokika, Ujali and Titli. She had golden hair, blue eyes and cherubic skin. Daily toil never affected the radiant glow she exuded. She was a divinely blessed child of the hills, known in ‘Hariyali’ village where she lived with her parents and in towns and villages near and far. She lived in a raw brick and mud house made by her parents Ram Narayan and Sita Devi. Ceramic planters, bamboo shields and sculptures covered with rust protection material added an earthy charm to the Herbs house nurtured by them. Formulations of medicinal herbs prepared by Sita Devi were made from secret processes, handed over by her mother, an exceptional, traditional Physician (‘Vaidya’) herself.

“The realm where the ordinary intersects with the occult, is rooted in science and logic”, Sita Devi taught Tara who read significant texts on internal medicine from a young age. Religious scriptures were explained to her by her father, a devout practitioner of sacred rituals. Alongside her studies, Tara built a life dedicated to healing. “Show gratitude to the Universe. Recognize love and teach people to have a heart that forgets the worst”, Sita Devi reminded Tara, pounding



fresh ginger and mixing tiny drops of honey for a lady who complained of cough and was about to visit.

Her parents blessed her. “We are proud that even before gaining a degree in Pharmacy, you are confident of empowering others”, her father affirmed.

Sita Devi kept herbal supplements made from turmeric, Moringa, fennel seeds, herbs and spices in small packets, to be handed over to patients. She often gave them free of cost to those unable to pay.

“I do that. I use lessons you and Baba taught me, in healing sessions”, Tara replied, wiping raindrops off colorful Terracotta planters and wind chimes adorning her terrace. She installed waterproof lights and LED lanterns in her attempt to bring modernity into her home that was a natural hut serving as a Healing Centre, study room for Tara and her friends and a space for therapeutic sessions for those seeking emotional healing.

Tara opened the door for the coughing lady. “Be careful, there is water on the floor”, Tara warned. “Chew this paste before meals and do not have tangy fruits especially during the rains if you want relief”, Sita Devi recommended, closely examining the lady. The patient thanked her and left. The legacy of Tara’s family’s expertise in curing and healing people of ailments and agonies was unparalleled.

Whenever Tara cooked with her mother, everything seemed simpler. From her parents, she had learnt to integrate meditative aspects to protect her peace and lead a life of deep, sacred value. Mud beds, wood pillars and furnishings made from natural materials, reflected the family’s belief in venerating nature and living every moment as a representation of eternity and of infinite value. For villagers, Sita Devi was a magician.

“Celebrate your dreams. With right intent and effort in place, wishes do come true”, she told her daughter.



She reminded every patient, “Medicines are bitter, but they cure you with the bitterness.” She knew the power of words and virtues of stories and herbs. “Purify your actions and live in the moment. Joy comes from mastering your emotions and not suppressing them. Share love and leave behind kindness”, she proffered, waving her wooden ladle like a fairy’s wand while concocting potions.

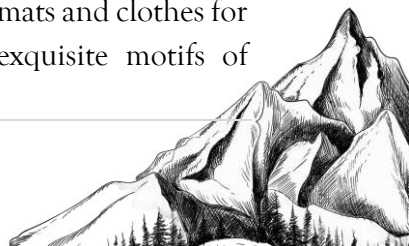
She made sure that along with her reassuring touch, she made people aware that even her medicines were infused with positive thoughts for best results. “These work only when you believe in yourself”, she always told her patients.

Tara had golden hair just like her mother. They dressed in similar costumes during festivals. The way scarves were tied varied from region to region. She was creative and made exquisite craft items using pine needles. It was a local craft few could grasp. She taught the skill to three young girls known to her. They sold baskets they made and earned pocket money.

“Have power over your mind, not outside events”, was the dictum she had internalized from her father. “Eat together and work together, even if you do not live together. Stay connected to Mother Nature and see yourselves step into moments of stability”, he blessed, those who came to convey their gratitude. When migrant laborers on the verge of breaking down approached him, he counselled them.

“Your calm exterior hides a soul fighting for its own survival. Practice healing exercises”, Ram Narayan ji (‘Ji’ was used to offer respect to seniors) would suggest. Within a few days they would see a transformation within themselves.

Tara made medicines using plant extracts, candies using natural sugars and condiments and incense sticks from dried flower petals. She embroidered beautiful cushion covers, table mats and clothes for herself and her mother with richly colored exquisite motifs of



Peonies, Birds of Paradise and Chrysanthemums. Her creativity was an avenue of discovery. “Soon, I will start a YouTube channel to guide fellow healthcare professionals, about traditional medicines”, Tara promised her parents.

“I will visit the Library in Shimla tomorrow to add to the rich repository you have bequeathed me with in the form of ancient texts”, Tara offered, communicating her intentions, and thanked the Universe for giving her such meaningful conversations which deepened her connection to her roots and strengthened her faith.

Taking in views of lush greenery from her terrace, Tara realized the intoxicating power of nature. There were mysterious and hidden aspects of nature that would unravel before her if she trusted her intuition, she told herself. “Let go of the need to be always right, Ujali. Your parents will understand your point of view and so should you. I know you should stand strong in your independence and others do not understand you, but you must maintain relationships”, she put out, over a phone conversation, counselling Ujali on a domestic issue.

Her family overcame hardships with fortitude. Deep-rooted values of tradition, unity and family bond helped her motivate those depressed to foster connection and authenticity in relationships. She was fun-loving. Fresh blooms thrived and hearts laughed with joy when she was around.

“You have the power to choose your responses. Healing from emotional wounds is easier by disconnecting from distractions. Connect with mountains, rivers and nature. That is how we find power in our own presence”, she suggested. It had taken her more than five years to master the art of meditation. She understood the subtleties of blessings and bondage of past actions, from her father.



It was a proud moment for her parents when a renowned Saint visited the hill temple near their house and blessed her.

Her paternal grandmother lived with their family till she passed away at the age of 100 years, last year. She only visited her daughter in the city twice in her lifetime and avoided the city hustle bustle as much as she could. Gossip and rumors against her never worked. She was unlettered and demonstrated how to lead a virtuous life by focusing on an intention and moving towards action. She taught her children and grandchildren to worship Nature. The Mother Goddess was adored as the force behind the entire creation.

On many instances her grandmother's words came in strong – 'To find both beauty and stillness within us and outside, you must develop a unique awareness of the connection between body and soul. I absorb the purity all around. Life is a profound celebration of resilience and transformation. I can reflect, adapt and help selflessly. Easily, I reach out to my inner voice here. I will live and die here.'

Tara recalled, hugging her tight as a ten-year-old girl, pure love overflowing with her grandmother's tears.

It was because of the deep values instilled in young Tara by her grandmother by way of layered stories, untold sagas and specific rituals, that Tara had bloomed into becoming an individual of integrity, complete by themselves. Today, people were changed by her kindness and compassion, touched by her nurturing care. Ancient wonders still existed helping devotees hold on to faith and prayer by undertaking arduous journeys and specific rituals. Cave temples, natural structures and statues affected Pilgrims by surrounding them with positive and helping them stand in their awareness. Faith and Prayer provided emotional stability and fostered a spirit of unity and harmony.



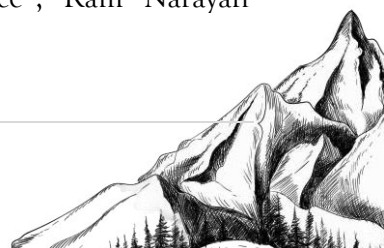
Mountains enabled travelers address the need for solitude. When landslides were initiated due to prolonged heavy rainfall, destruction of roads and bridges left scores of pilgrims and tourists trapped in valleys. Army, Air Force and Paramilitary troops evacuated people from flood-ravaged areas. Engineers were brought in to build mountain roads.

“Colors of Mountain have changed after forest fires. They bear the burden of biomass fires, stubble burning and constant drilling. We are at the mercy of forces, we do not control”, Tara lamented.

“Yes dear. Rivers flow in full spate because of soil erosion. Construction of flyovers, tunnels and underpasses weakens the terrain. What do we do? We depend on firewood and non-timber forest produce but does not plant enough trees! Lurking dangers are invisible to us. City dwellers throng the mountain regions seeking leisure and adventure. Lakes, forests and parks are disappearing giving way to super-expensive Villas with pools”, Sita Devi rued, hopelessness marking her facial expressions.

“Extensive use of explosives to drill holes leave toxic Sulphur fumes severely polluting the air. Intense noise during limestone mining exacerbates the problem of strong tremors deepening fault lines and spiraling climate crisis”, Ram Narayan added. Eye contact among the family of three who held pure intentions made it easier to get attuned to the silent dialogue around them. In the evening, they prayed together. Sita Devi held a community prayer session in her house to improve the morale of her neighbors. Tara burnt bay leaves and alum together to ward off impurities and sprinkled cinnamon powder around her house to usher in positivity.

“Spiritual awakening is about cultivating a spacious awareness that holds both joy and sorrow with equal grace”, Ram Narayan



moralized, inspiring the visitors to encounter challenges with equanimity.

Visitors included local men and women who enthusiastically participated in festivals and ‘Doli Yatra’ (religious procession) of Deities.

“Talking to you keeps me abreast of all the latest developments in our area. I am religious and I am a farmer. By associating with flagship Community Information Resource Centers, we gain insights on developments in the fields of Health, Agriculture, Climate, Environment, Technology and Government welfare schemes”, a local farmer shared. The group of visitors listened. Devotional songs to the sound of lilting music uplifted the space, elevating moods of those gathered at Tara’s house.

It was a bright, sunny morning. Dust leapt into the air when local dancers wearing masks, swirled on a barren playground. They carried leaves and flowers in a basket and held them above their heads.

Tara observed the rituals from a window. Momentarily, her helplessness was forgotten. Her racing mind suddenly became quiet. She religiously practiced the ritual of worshipping Sun God by performing the ‘Surya Namaskar’ ritual followed by prayers for protection.

Meditation techniques that she practiced and taught to students who came to her offered both peace and clarity. A sudden calm settled in.

“Ma. I wanted to tell you that few people from Rang town, 10 kilometers away, called in the morning to thank you and Baba for initiating them into honey-making. They are earning well through the Government-backed scheme”, Tara disclosed.

“That is great”, both Ram Narayan and Sita Devi voiced, in chorus. “There is another good news. Vasudev bhaiya (elder brother) from



Shodashi village has reaped a good Kiwi harvest. You motivated his father to seek assistance for cultivating Kiwi”, Tara informed.

“Yes, we do remember. This is encouraging. Organic farming, water sprinklers, native seeds and cash-fetching harvests”, her parents recalled, their exuberance rubbing off on their charming, versatile, wise daughter.

Strength, courage, compassion, persuasion, faith, healing. Life is a tranquil oasis one moment and a raging storm, another. A tapestry of vibrant colors and textures. With these thoughts in her mind, Tara forged ahead to take on a new day.

The same evening, she met few friends with whom she shared her experiences. Together, they explored the town market, where tiny sustainable enterprises came up. They celebrated their togetherness and together represented logic in an illogical world.

Ram Narayan sent seekers who came for natural healing sessions to Dharam Kot, a town on the crest of a hill, above McCleod Ganj for yoga, meditation and scenic Peak views.

Sita Devi would suggest Chamba for temples, art and cultural immersion.

Noticing glimmering sunlight the next morning, Tara decided to till bare soil exposing it under the Sun so that seeds could be sown after some days.

Weeks of care for blooms were required. Delay in planting seeds for herbs used by her family in making traditional medicines, potions and pastes impacted their quality and the schedule set by her parents for medicines delivery for patients.

Year-round water availability was a challenge. Innovative systems were put in place to store rainwater and restore groundwater in a better way.



“I adore Malana for offering centuries -old traditions, Shangarh for deep solitude, Tosh for chilled cafes and a relaxed backpacker scene and Kaza in the picturesque Lahaul and Spiti valley for ancient monasteries and soul-soothing silence”, Tara reminisced. For her parents, she prepared a light ‘Jholi Bhat’ using rice, curd and flavoring spices for dinner. “We will go to Kaza again dear”, Sita Devi promised relishing the mildly flavored steamed vegetables, prepared by her loving daughter in the afternoon.

“Himachal Pradesh has so much to offer. Only yesterday, Vasudev bhaiya mentioned having visited towns in Old Manali, with his sister Paraambha. Paraambha runs a travel agency catering to Solo women travelers. That’s encouraging. Old Manali is known for riverside cafes, Indie bakeries and curated artefacts. Plenty of options which vibe well with the Solo traveler community are also there”, Tara said to herself, laying Pumpkin seeds rich in Magnesium out for drying in the Sun.

A girl who chose open-mindedness, honesty and self-respect knew that her wanderings were detours she took from moments when she tuned into a higher frequency to help her mind move in silence.

“Mind finds steadiness and our boat gets anchored by chanting the Lord’s name”, her father reminded everyone who came to their house looking for answers and hope in a world driven by uncertainties and demands.



Chapter 5

University Admission And Faculty Guidance

Summers in Delhi colleges blazed with varied activities. Both the Mountain girls immersed themselves in Students Welfare Committee activities in their respective colleges.

The tang of summers in the Capital city saw them sharing stories from the mountains with enthusiastic student volunteers striving to make a change. “Critical steps are needed to safeguard communities and the environment in the face of an increasingly uncertain future”, Chakrani apprised, going through the Slide Presentation she had put together for the Nature Club student members.

“You have successfully brought out interconnections between environmental instability created by climate change, deforestation and unsustainable development and a world driven by excessive wants and unbridled consumption”, Prof. Trishla discerned, praising students’ effort to motivate them.

“Inspirational examples of kindness, humility and simplicity every time a catastrophe struck, have strengthened our belief in humanity, haven’t they”, Prof. Trishla observed.

“If you are confident, no one can defeat you.



STEP FORWARD IN STRENGTH RATHER THAN REMAIN BOUND BY BLAME. Unstinting efforts by people have created wonders and there is a lot that all of us need to do”, she continued.

Both Chakrani and Rudrani joined Nature Clubs in their respective Colleges. They took the lead in holding regular informative sessions for students with experts on Organic farming, Compost making and waste management, aimed at raising awareness among students on environment conservation and as an Environmental appeal for every citizen. “I will introduce you to Pyaari tonight”, Chakrani told Rudrani enjoying an evening stroll at leisure, around the periphery encircling their college premises.

“Sure. I am only too eager to meet her. Have heard a lot about your Senior who is also a Mountain girl”, Rudrani yelled, adjusting the amethyst necklace she had presented to Chakrani on her birthday, along Chakrani’s delicate neck. Chakrani let out a peppy steady shrill.

They bought gifts for one another from the best market according to them for students with limited budgets. Chakrani ran around the room looking for the key even as she was scrolling through her mobile phone to search for an upmarket restaurant, to take Pyaari and Rudrani for dinner. “Fine. See you outside your college gate at 8 PM. Pyaari and I will come together. We shall go for dinner to a Himalayan Cuisine restaurant in a rickshaw. Should be back to the hostel by 10 PM”, said Chakrani.

“See you” Rudrani responded, hugging Chakrani before turning towards the narrow lane that led her to her college.

“It’s been a roller coaster ride for me here, in the Plains, sisters”, Pyaari shared, her insistent voice belying her naïve demeanor.

Relishing traditional ‘Himachali Dham’ meal which included pulses, vegetables, rice, sweet dish and Chapati, at a tiny restaurant run by a



couple who lived near the University area and set up their enterprise close by, she expressed, “The rent I pay is high but I work part-time and my parents also send me money.”

“I have worked on strengthening forest regeneration initiatives of Forest Councils called Van Panchayats. Treks through steep paths reinforce how forests have held the secrets of nature that we have plundered. Urban gaze has exoticized Himalayas which is fine for me, but hill stations with lush coniferous canopies need to be taken care of by each of us by understanding our relationship with nature, Flora and Fauna. You should learn from new insights, work hard, grab new opportunities and keep enhancing your skill sets”, Pyaari suggested.

“We will. Local people lack education, awareness and hold on to superstitions and caste prejudices. Yet we come across examples of inclusivity when people overthrowing caste and religious barriers stand together for a common cause”, Chakrani opined.

“There is an increased awareness on ecological conservation. There are inspiring examples of people of different castes living in the same house with their families and cooking together”, Rudrani acceded.

“There are Climate and biodiversity loss crises heading towards us. Government has issued guidelines to generate tradable green credits for conservation programs. Activities such as generating green forest cover, waste management and sustainable agriculture are laudable”, Pyaari delivered, turning towards strongly flavored sauces that let out inviting aromas from tiny glass jars in front of her.

Chakrani and Rudrani also relished the meal, having got accustomed to the taste of non-stop hostel Mess food for over two months.

“I had this meal when I was home last weekend for the ‘Harela’ ceremony heralding Monsoon”, Rudrani exclaimed.



Chakrani nodded excitedly indicating to Pyaari that it was the same for her. In Pyaari, the girls had found a friend and quiet companion.

“Life here is as tough as up there, if not less, I would say. But my parents and brothers always motivate me to chart my own path and achieve success by making the most of opportunities along the way”, Pyaari shared.

“You have achieved a lot by way of mobilizing Student Volunteers who have become Champions for a sustainable environment for all. Uncovering a trove of questions troubling young minds or furthering the voice of those who remained on the margins, you have made a mark. I read in the newsletter about the Nature Club’s Outreach efforts in cleaning rivers, planting trees and curbing pollution in New Delhi city”, Chakrani enumerated, looking towards Rudrani and waving at the waiter to bring the bill.

“You have inspired us. I am making a Slide Deck Presentation for Faculty Coordinator, Nature Club. We will be taking the students to Nirali Nursery and herbal garden situated near the Ridge area on Saturday”, Rudrani revealed, staring at both Chakrani and Pyaari for feedback.

“That would be an enriching experience, I am sure”, Pyaari screamed and appeared embarrassed at speaking loudly. Pyaari then took a Selfie with her new friends, checking her phone constantly.

Chakrani watched intently, wondering when her friends would get up. It was ten past nine. Hostel rules were stringent.

Reading her thoughts, Pyaari and Rudrani got up abruptly, checking if their belongings were with them.

Gentle Summer breeze scattered dry leaves outside. Light was fading. The girls laughed heartily making the most of this beautiful bonding



moment for them. It had been a fruitful experience for both Chakrani and Rudrani through their graduation years.

They at all times remembered what they had been told during their growing up years. Having an honest relationship with their human experience stood them well through their experiences so far.

“Thank you Chakrani, Thank you Rudrani. It was a wholesome and may I say chatty meal with you both. I had a lovely time. Keep up the noble intent. I plan to return to my village after graduation and work there”, said Pyaari. Before she could ask her hostesses what they had planned, they chortled inserting “Same here” alongside. Hugging Chakrani and Rudrani turn by turn, Pyaari declared, “When you hold hope like a magic within you, you can make things happen.”

The girls listened.

Signaling an autorickshaw towards them for the 2- km long return journey to hostel, Rudrani murmured, “Unless I get admission to a post-graduate course in a subject of my interest.” “You would. You can always work alongside. Create or join a Startup and empower women from marginalized communities”, Pyaari recommended, squeezing herself hilariously inside the autorickshaw, with Chakrani seated on her left and Rudrani on her right.

“You said it. That’s how it will be”, Rudrani connoted, clapping over Chakrani’s shoulder in good cheer. The three teenagers giggled, bringing a passionate new energy suffused with their hopes, dreams and anxieties.

Settling down in her rented apartment, Pyaari dialed in a Video call with her family and again promised them that it was a matter of ten months and then she would be back home. She shared about her interaction with Chakrani and Rudrani, with her mother who was a busy, village woman managing fields, livestock and a large joint family.



“I know Rudrani’s grandmother very well. She runs a Self-Help Group empowering rural women. She has many Apples Orchards and incorporates Pollinator and root stock methods to improve and increase yield”, Pyaari’s mother remarked.

“Really. She must be an industrious lady”, Pyaari screeched, patting the table on which she had placed her laptop. “Definitely”, her mother nodded.

Pyaari’s mother waved at Pyaari and said, " Eat right my dear. Hope you are not skipping breakfast!"

“Ma (Mother), I made ‘Siddu’ for breakfast yesterday. I will show you photographs and videos of me exploring the intricacies of historic architecture in New Delhi and Old Delhi, when I come over during the long weekend break”, Pyaari narrated over a half-hour long visual interaction over the phone, with her father, brothers and their families. Then she prepared herself for a day, full of tasks, goals and learnings.

Glimpses of home flitted across her mindscape as she lay on the bed. She remembered starry skies and how her mother taught her to flow like water and learn from bees and wasps.

After deeply satisfying hours in their farm and garden they would sit in the dappled shade of the winter Sun on the terrace, surrendering their efforts to a Higher Power.

As Chairperson of the Department of Botanical Sciences, Prof. Trishla had made significant academic and administrative contributions to the student community. She mentored Pyaari, motivating her to stand for the post of President, Students Welfare Board.



She co-chaired International Cultural Exchange Programs which aimed at bringing together diverse experts from around the world to celebrate and represent their respective cultures and heritage.

The College Management commended her for earning international recognition for the College by way of Students Exchange Programme.

Prof. Trishla, who held an academic specialization in Plant Botany and held a degree in Elementary Education had authored 15 books and published over 30 research papers in reputed journals on themes spanning Environment sustainability, gender, digital education and climate change.

She had delivered lectures and chaired sessions at National and International Seminars across India and abroad. She was also part of Curriculum Review Committee and Editorial Boards.

“We need to overcome our obsession with material things. You saw forest fires, lightning strikes, Campfires and mismanaged human activities like stubble burning, when we visited Himachal Pradesh on a Field trip last year”, Prof. Trishla set forth, addressing Nature Club student Volunteers on a bright Saturday morning, seated on cane chairs beside the large Ashoka tree that served as a custodian of the sprawling College lawn.

A rare mix of intelligence and ambition, she had taken on the task of building students upon the foundation of early hopes and calibrated nurturing. “Newspapers these days spell out fresh casualties due to torrential rains causing flash floods and cloudbursts in a mountain town. Surviving laborers and workers of hydropower projects have been evacuated to temporary sheds. It is your duty to sensitize citizens, amplify unheard voices and foster learning through mentorship, she emphasized. As part of an international team on a research project, we will send you to the same village next month



whereas a team you must compile a report on how natural disasters and man-made technological hazards influence the vulnerability of communities”, she explained.

“Displaced people can be settled in villages rendered empty by migration. Teach Communities how to think, not what to think”, Prof. Manokamna added, before making a Presentation before student volunteers on environmental degradation, air and water pollution and ecosystem restoration. Enthusiasm among student Volunteers was contagious.

Within the next few days, they formed sub-groups with specific Plan of Action in place. Chakrani noticed clouds of dust whirling above her college lawns for an entire week. Intermittent showers did bring respite from the sweltering heat. Bright red ‘Semal’ flowers from the giant Red Silk-cotton tree near the main gate rendered color to the otherwise dull weather which had been lingering over weeks.

Chakrani was overjoyed to see the tree and happily shared with her classmates how extensive its medicinal and environmental uses were.

“The bark is used to treat digestive ailments and skin inflammation while the soft seed pods are used to cook a nutritious vegetable dish”, Chakrani told a classmate. “Tell your friends that the flowers and roots have many medicinal properties and the silky seed fiber is used to stuff pillows”, Tara added when Chakrani shared about the tree being present on the University premises.

The classmate was intrigued by Chakrani’s deep knowledge of trees and plants. “We live in the lap of nature in the hills and in harmony with it”, Chakrani expounded.

“My friend Rudrani will pursue a course in Botany from the college nearby and another friend a year younger aspires to join the Pharmacy college here”, Chakrani enunciated.



“I look forward to learning from you about your mountain life even as I share with you about city life during our course in Social Entrepreneurship”, the classmate intended.

In the evening the girls interacted, spending the rest of the evening getting to know one another.

Prof. Manokamna who taught subjects under the Integrated Pharmacy course at New Delhi College of Pharmacy, was Prof. Trishla’s best friend.

Trishla often invited Manokamna to her college for seminars and meetings relating to Nature Club activities and to hold sessions on medicinal plants to ignite their interest in plants. They took up significant themes using audio-visual tools of communication to sensitize the 500 members-strong Nature Club student members who pursued undergraduate and post-graduate programs across disciplines.

Prof. Manokamna organized similar campaigns in her college, where students carried out plantation drives whole-heartedly.

Characterized by their easy camaraderie and contrasting personas, Trishla and Manokamna friendship led them to taking on the task of championing of folk artists with dedication.

On a humid Friday afternoon, when the Delhi sky was cast with moving fluffs of dark clouds casting wet spells in some places. Upon concluding a Nature Club faculty meeting, Manokamna invited Trishla to her staff room for a conversation over tea. “I will accompany you to Hariyali village. We must meet Tara’s parents and convince them about how beneficial it is for Tara to pursue the Pharmacy course from your college and how well she would be taken care of by us”, Trishla offered, responding to Manokamna’s intent.



Manokamna allowed for a multiplicity of views and incorporated students participation in Department Projects and events. Her unwavering commitment to women's empowerment through education was influenced by her growing professional curiosity.

She welcomed students' perspectives wholeheartedly.

Asking a few of her students to wait, she opened her lunch box before Prof. Trishla and asserted, "Yes dear. It's been over a year since you have been telling me about Tara. I am genuinely looking forward to knowing about her."

The mixed vegetables dish prepared by her was relished by Prof. Trishla as was the healthy and tasty raw guava chutney and green tomato and onion dish prepared by Prof. Trishla, relished by her.

After a quick working lunch, Trishla got up and drove back to her college, prepping herself to judge 'Best out of Waste' competition by First year students.

There were well-crafted products made using innovative techniques and biodegradable waste materials by creative students, displayed in front of her. She found it difficult to rank the creations I, II and III and present award to the winners.

A model of a fodder thresher using used wooden logs, solar lamp, hand pump, drone made using wastepaper trimmings, participants brought in the best of art and creativity. The same evening, she awarded the winners certificates and blessed all those students who participated by handing over Certificates of Participation to them. Then closing her staff room, she proceeded to Manokamna's College hoping to take ten minutes of her time before she left for home.

"My student Rudrani has been raving about Tara. I met Tara last Summer when we had organized a Summer Camp for Nature Club members at Hariyali village", Trishla expressed.



“Tara is an extraordinary girl. People are changed by her total kindness and vivacity. I sensed pure, grounding peace near her. She has been imparted knowledge by her parents and blessed by the Universe to help people turn heartbreaks into spiritual awakenings and sorrow into learnings”, Trishla elucidated.

“She will be joining our college next year. Let’s make a video call to her. I want to see the camphor plant she mentioned when we met”, Manokamna proposed. Over the call, Tara caressed a tiny Camphor plant abundant with small green leaves with buds.

She plucked a small leaf, explaining the Professors how she and her mother used the leaves during worship rituals at home.

Both Trishla and Manokamna were amazed, seeing the plant for the first time. They had not expected to see such a plant even though they did use camphor discs at home during special prayer rituals at home. They wished her well, motivating her to do well in examinations and subsequently enroll in the Pharmacy college. “I am looking forward to serving humanity after earning an educational degree under your guidance, Madam”, Tara replied, thanking both Trishla and Manokamna.



Chapter 6

Moksh And Surya- Homebound And Raring to Go

Moksh, Sanskar's younger brother was 29 years old. As an Investment Banker, he had earned enough to fulfil his dream of building 'Fitness Village', a Fitness and Healing Center in Jwala village, his native village. Surya, Neelkanth's younger brother was 30 years old, had a 2- years old son. His wife and son lived in Jwala village, close to Neelkanth and Gaura's house.

"Isn't it astonishing Surya, that the day our lease for this Apartment closes is also the day construction work after prayer ceremonies, at our native village, Khushdol", Moksh reflected, sipping lemon tea from a ceramic cup, peering over the balcony of his ninth-floor city Apartment, his home for the past nine years.

"Yes, we will be with our families tomorrow and our dream Fitness Village with wooden gym equipment and natural healing products and services, ready to go, in less than a year. A soothing, calm air and enchanting vision of wild forests and Solar systems on roofs would welcome us", Surya responded, supervising two Packaging Company workers, who were packing utensils and his Gymnasium equipment.

"I guess so", Moksh replied, flashing an unabashed grin.



“This equipment and our furniture and wares would reach Khushdol village in about two days by road. I have meetings planned with architects and construction experts, through the week ahead”, he explicated. His ideas were mostly inventive.

“And yes, our upcoming project is as much yours as it is mine. You are helming the Landscaping and Nature Therapy aspects for ‘Fitness Village’, Moksh specified.

Surya waved in affirmation and remarked, “I can say that even though we stumble on uncertainties every now and then, there is always room to evolve. Life is about striking a balance between thought, action, prayer and service! In addition to physical exercise, people need healthy diets, a retreat where they can rejuvenate by connecting with nature’s treasures such as mountain herbs, sounds, sights and stillness. I will meet Experts from the fields of construction, nutrition, medicine and botanists and then move forward with combining indigenous knowledge systems enriched with local flavor”, Surya informed.

He packed the fragile photo frame in bubble-wrap packing sheets and vividly reminisced the year gone by, when he had purchased it from a plush mall nearby, with his wife and son, visiting him during summer vacations.

Soon after the Packaging Company workers left, Surya cooked lunch and dinner for himself and Moksh. Since their Apartment was semi-furnished other than utensils and kitchen tools that were to be packed by evening, everything else in the kitchen was to stay.

Relishing ‘Sepu Wadi’ (Cooked lentil dumplings with spinach and spices in fragrant curry) with rice for lunch, lauding Surya’s culinary skills, Moksh acclaimed, “Keep turning out such delicious meals and snacks in our village as well. I am in for lunch outings. Sylvan setting,



sparkling air, soothing bird call, give the meals the elevated, soulful dimension back home.”

Moksh’s face lit up with the prospect of returning to the village. He was counting the hours.

“I would. You are most welcome. Moreover, to see this Project through, we need to keep meeting at least three or four times a week. I wish we can maintain a lasting friendship”, Surya avowed, wiping his wooden spatula and assorted cutlery, so that they could be packed in cardboard boxes, to be taken home. He turned the kitchen into a bustling laboratory with his culinary experiments.

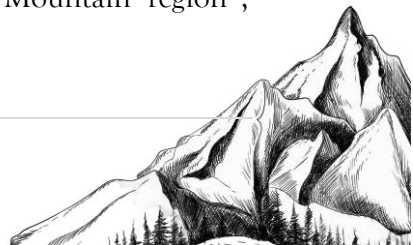
“Do not forget to pack the glass jar of large chilies and ginger steeped in the juice of lemons you prepared last week. You make it so well and it retains the spice and tang for an entire season”, Moksh reminded Surya.

“Alright”, Surya grinned and nodded.

“I am so looking forward serving our region, community and family. I am all set to rediscover forgotten corners of small and big towns, weaving through their bazaars and alleys and looking at the world through the people I meet. How they embrace uncertainties and face the unknown”, Moksh professed.

We have made a conscious choice to re-frame difficulties as opportunities for growth and learning and would help selflessly”, Moksh recognized.

“Our brothers have been working day and night. Now, it’s our turn. Noble intentions, concerted efforts and people-focused measures which keep the flora and fauna around conserved are needed. In no time we then should be able to bring back the lost glory of this ecologically sensitive and naturally abundant Mountain region”,



Surya ascertained. “I understand that our decisions have lasting consequences”, Moksh noted.

“With our skills, we can nurture healthier indoor environments and improve buildings energy and carbon efficiency by embracing environment-friendly practices and utilizing natural materials. I Know. Solar Cities and Clean Air Programme breathe in new possibilities. We can make a difference by honoring our purpose on the back of continued innovation and community participation. We shall only use using eco-friendly building blocks to construct the Fitness Resort”, Surya reasoned.

“We must urgently do that. A temple was partially submerged in the overflowing river due to incessant rain. Limestone mining has hollowed out mountains in many places, endangering the existence of villages. Only yesterday were the newspapers filled with news of a midday cloudburst causing devastating flash floods and landslides in Himachal Pradesh damaging houses and power plants and destroying water systems. Workers were swept away by raging waters. Debris blocked rivers causing major overflow”, Moksh complained.

“We are paying a heavy price for development”, Surya replied. “We must honor what’s right even when it is hard, pause, reassess and do what matters. A range of public policy and infrastructure initiatives that encourage cleaner production need to be taken and we should move forward with purpose. Policy regulations which keep the interests of the forest communities under consideration and campaigns for Community awareness and participation hold the key to informed Planning and effective implementation of Public Service Schemes. A friend of mine runs an enterprise that stitches Camping tents made from renewable materials” , Surya disclosed.

“That would be a step in the right direction”, Moksh declared. “This Property would be a quiet retreat where fitness enthusiasts and peace



seekers see themselves for who they truly are and are able to spend time alone and respect it. The heart craves honest conversations, genuine connections and unfiltered vulnerabilities and they should be satisfied that their soul knows its truth and its worth”, Moksh deliberated. Surya extended his hand and clapped against Moksh’s right palm to show that he was in complete agreement.

Sun turned a beautiful orange, a celestial wonder running the Universe with perfection. The childhood friends absorbed inspiration from its beauty, watching it together on their last evening in a city that had been their home for a few years.

They carefully packed their fragrant Jasmine, Gardenia, Alyssum, Nasturtium and White Rose flowers swaying in earthen pots. Being ardent devotees of Mother Goddess, they decided to re-create a lotus pond in their village homes, hoping that the one on the terrace they had mounted would be nurtured by the next inhabitants with the same level of care.

The friends bid adieu to their city apartment and neighbors. The truck that followed their car with furniture and appliances was all set. Even the humid morning felt pleasant because they were heading home. The road trip back home saw Moksh and Surya through pouring rain which felt like a welcome sign to them. Winding roads and jingling of bells around mountain goats made them reconnect with wilderness.

Turning off the highway, taking the road through the hinterland, the yellow ripening mustard brought a smile. The friends reached their homes at dusk, happy with the decision to go back to where they truly belonged.

“A weathered face, my friend and a faded corner. I see the ordinary miracle in the worn and weathered and have learnt to let go of ideal



outcomes”, Moksh asserted while camping with Surya, under a starlit sky over a weekend, after they had settled down.

“Through our fitness resort and other ventures in the future, we must aim at responding to every customer’s unique journey”, Surya pronounced, bringing from a mobile gas stove placed in his car, two cups of freshly brewed ginger tea for the twosome in the makeshift design office from where they supervised the construction work of the Fitness resort. “In this mosaic of diverse cultures and customs we have to maintain the sanctity of lifelong bonds and understand that brokenness can be beautiful”, Moksh concluded.

Over the next six months, both Moksh and Surya realized that their flaws, unfinished edges around the construction work they began and imperfections of people they interacted with on a daily basis were fuel for expression.



Chapter 7

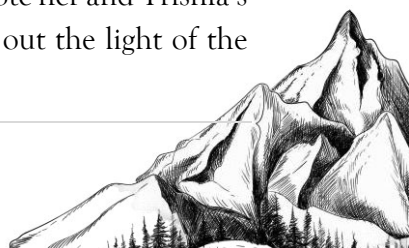
Charting The Path To Education

It was only a matter of one year hereon that the wheel of time brought Tara to the destination of becoming a teacher's favorite student at college. Her easy-going nature made her popular among the student community of the Under-graduate Program in Pharmacy. She left a specific WhatsApp number for anyone who wished to connect with her and seek counselling on physical and emotional aspects of an individual's well-being.

Tara joined the New Delhi College of Pharmacy, in the month of July. It was happening for the very first time. Monsoon season was not the same as it used to be. But good people and the goodness they had, never went unnoticed. Prof. Manokamna and Prof. Trishla were overjoyed. They welcomed Tara into the University and introduced her as 'The Wise Therapist' to faculty and Senior students.

"I shall put in my best and work hard", Tara promised, after the Orientation session got over. She was resolute and tenacious and always completed what she set out for with intense conviction.

"We know you will", Prof. Trishla agreed. "Save our phone numbers dear", Prof. Manokamna suggested. Then she wrote her and Trishla's mobile numbers on a paper slip before turning out the light of the



staff room. “Thank you, Madam”, Tara hailed, folding her hands in gratitude. She walked slowly towards Prof. Manokamna and received the student kit and paper slip from her.

“I shall be in Class at 9 AM tomorrow”, she conveyed, bending down to touch the feet of the two energetic Professors. “May God bless you.”

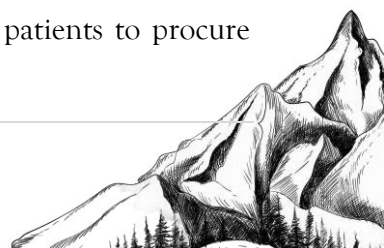
With these words, the dynamic ladies accorded blessings to Tara, one after another. Another day carrying with it its own daydreams and deeds, closed, having proven its existence to eternity.

It wasn't long before Tara became popular among students. She appreciated her sincerity, intelligence and politeness. Both students and teachers felt comfortable around her. There was a healing energy around her, and she radiated it rather effortlessly.

University lecturers, Laboratory staff, gardeners and other Support staff and students who interacted with Tara keenly observed how the zestful Mountain girl excelled in studies, extra-curricular activities. Effortlessly she was healing students through their emotional struggles and bringing together a ‘Student-group’ which dived into inner engineering by organizing and attending spiritual sessions together.

Back in Hariyali village, Tara's fast friends, Alokika, Ujali and Titli had carved out distinct career aspirations along with boundless ardor to face challenges with determination. They knew they had to keep making efforts to achieve great goals. Every week, they visited her parents, helping around in carrying out household tasks.

Occasionally, they followed through with Video Calls for families who desperately wanted to take motivational consultations from Tara. They had also started reading the ‘Great Book of Medicinal Herbs and Healing Plants’ but referred online patients to procure medicines from local, established therapists.



On the last day of their respective courses, before Final exams were to begin, Chakrani and Rudrani sauntered around university lawns, soaking in the greenery. The magnificent setting Sun backdrop dazzled with an interesting interplay of light and sound.

It was a day which brought with it the message of love, like every other day. Before retreating into darkness to make way for night it preached that life was to be a vibrant celebration of solidarity, unity, community, fraternity and harmony and not a saga of despair and sorrow.

“This lively city has given us more than just Academic knowledge”, Chakrani stated.

“Fast action, Professionalism, Opportunities and accepting of individuals from different places and varied backgrounds to name a few”, Rudrani delineated, gesturing her hands to indicate pace.

Holding Rudrani’s hand, Chakrani signified her intention by saying, “We shall always remain true friends. Once we return to our villages and chart our own paths, let us promise to stay in touch and abide by promises made to ourselves. We shall work towards starting something new by unblocking our intuition and expanding our knowledge.”

“It’s time to take new steps, my dear”, Rudrani swore. “We need each other as much as people in the village need us”, she reaffirmed.

“You are right. We shall continue to pursue our dreams”, Chakrani validated.

It was freeing being with the Universe, being present in the moment. Hope is making something happen, Faith is believing it will happen and Courage is making it happen. I will make people understand that healing by overcoming struggles is our responsibility and that life can still be extraordinary”, Chakrani pledged.



As Champions of folk artists, the girls had directed a street play by rehearsing a play with 15 student- performers, for over a month.

The Open-Air Amphitheatre behind the Academic building was packed to full capacity on a summer evening after the examinations were over, marked by the view of an ethereal sky. The audience sat with rapturous attention.

Student Performers from College and folk artists invited from outside sang, screamed, whistled and stomped together in a one-hour long, grand spectacle. Different facets of artistry collaborated to lift the performance.

The Street Play through Skit, Mime and Mimicry reminded humans of the importance of repaying debt and adhering to the commitment to resolve carbon footprints, to meet the country's carbon goals. Ecological crisis that the planet faces was the theme depicted through a stellar mix of performances.

The College Director addressed the students and faculty in the audience. Her words had shaped generations. Humor, warmth and her luminous intellect shone through her speech. She had held teaching and research positions at the Center for Environment Development and rose to hold the Director's Chair, after years of dedicated service in the corridors of Academia.

Huge trees tossing gently in the morning breeze witnessed the cheer and applause when she said, "We are impressed with the brilliant performances by our students and the folk artists. Fragility of nature makes us humble, and these performances brought us face to face with ourselves. Sharing an intimate confidence in the knowledge that a unique co-created artistic piece of work will bring joy helps in effecting a change for the better. We aim to make children truly responsible and emotionally secure."



Faculty and students applauded the performances and Director's speech.

Chakrani, who stood close to Rudrani near the stage, gripped her elbow and nearly fainted with joy.

When asked to share her thoughts on stage, Chakrani greeted the audience and addressed them.

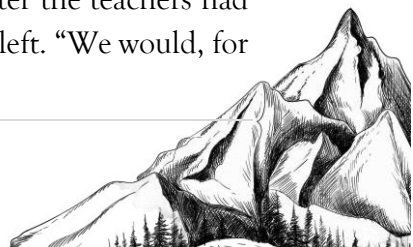
“Generative AI will transform knowledge work. But we have to stay connected with our inner worlds and then look outside to hear deeper meanings. Technical advancement cannot replace human relationships. Life is a magical synthesis of science and myth, technology and tradition, impermanence and universality”, she emphasized.

The audience cheered and many of them came towards Chakrani to converse with her.

“I believe that with awareness comes the power to communicate better, to connect deeply and to understand others in a way they may not even understand themselves. If you believe in the strength of a shared consciousness and the potential for a better future born from our connection to it, you would be able to build up a stable connection emotionally. PUT OUT THE RIGHT ENERGY AND MANIFEST A NEW EXISTENCE”, Rudrani spelled out concluding her speech, inviting loud cheer from an enthusiastic audience.

Folk artists were widely appreciated. The College Director acknowledged their efforts and looked forward to inviting them in future. The subsequent day went by with the Eco- Club Faculty handing over Certificates of Participation to Student Volunteers across courses and batches.

“Keep up the good work”, Rudrani screamed after the teachers had handed over the certificates to each student and left. “We would, for



we are the Champions”, they promised before dispersing back to their respective classrooms.

Chakrani maintained her enthusiasm and experienced an invigorating high when she connected with nature.

“We open the vastness in our minds by teasing out the mysteries of the natural world and its recuperative power. That’s how we make space for new energies”, Chakrani sighed.

Rudrani nodded releasing a long branch flown off a tree near them and fixed upon Chakrani’s Kurta sleeve.

“Preparatory leaves for Final examinations are starting tomorrow. What do you say. Could we meet Junior students and all our teachers once? Our Railway reservations will get confirmed on the last day of our examinations!”, Chakrani apprised, clicking pictures with Rudrani around Campus.

“I am in. I plan to start revision work in the afternoon. So, the entire morning is free”, Rudrani disclosed, smiling for a photograph with the College name inscribed on the building, behind her. The Sun receded soon after, leaving a light orange silhouette over the sky, its rays still falling through leaves over the grass. Under the dappled shade of the large trees, birds fluttered their wings planning to fly afar in large symmetric flock formations.

Together, the true friends walked. They shared a unique bond of partnership. They ushered in positivity wherever they went. Flowering on almond trees, appearance of small tender buds on the branches were miracles of the everyday they grew up watching and now they knew that a life of everlasting love and devotion to near and dear ones was itself a breathtaking miracle.

“We shall go for adventures together and for treks and long walks”, Chakrani ideated.



“Yes. I will also start an Agricultural-Technology Startup which will solve many issues farmers face today on the ground”, Rudrani envisioned. “Wow. I am in”, Chakrani cheered hugging Rudrani. “Life is a beautiful ride, and we are learning and transforming through our personal discoveries.” Chakrani let out a loud squeal and stretched her neck up to soak in a day fast paling into dusk at the far end of the darkened sky.



Chapter 8

Trees Are Life

Raseshwari held the villagers' affection with her softness and wisdom.

"Nature is the Giver, the Nurturer and the Destroyer", she highlighted every time the village community met her near the large 'Padam' tree (Golden brown Himalayan tree), every fortnight. The hills cradled her laughter. As the village Sarpanch, she had significant responsibilities to serve, and men and women looked up to her. 'Nature never rushes yet everything is accomplished in its time', she observed, while visiting Gaura, who was her niece. "A deeply interconnected world in the forest is pulsing with life, wisdom and intention", Gaura remarked, watching her aunt's eyes sparkling with joy as she reciprocated. "I collect seeds for reforestation and hope to build an Eco Park soon", Gaura shared. "Our childhood was filled with soul-refreshing days immersed in nature's quiet magic. I would go on long, meandering walks through green fields, and peaceful hill farms, with your mother", Raseshwari recalled, remembering times spent with her elder sister. "We would lose our path on quiet woodland trails, and she always said Nature is not mindless. The natural world is alive with empathy, intelligence and relationships", she continued.



“I understand, my dear Aunt. The fields still hold my mother’s gentleness”, Gaura remarked, handing over an earthen glass with flavored lukewarm water to her aunt. “Please drink this. I boiled turmeric leaves in hot water and added ginger and honey. Just like grandmother used to give us when we caught a cold. “Thank you, Gaura”, Raseshwari acknowledged, holding the glass in a tight grip.

“Genetic technology has increased efficiency, and we create seeds of the future, but native varieties are equally important”, Gaura explained, placing stacks of “Bivhaati”- dried grass and piles of long stalks knotted together and used in winters as firewood, in a corner, so that she could enjoy the drink while taking in the view of sunlight filtering through tall Deodar trees.

“I feel privileged that you came over last evening to stay with us. All thanks to the Gram Panchayat meeting being held in our village this time”, Gaura maintained. “Yes. Your cousins are also planning to invite you to our village soon”, Raseshwari stated, referring to her children who lived with her in Deodar Kanan village cradled in Deodar Kanan valley.

“I still make brooms from outer shell and ropes from skin of dried stalks, the way your grandmother would. Trees knew her. Leaves whispered to her ears. Ignoring the dull ache in her arms, she ploughed through. After lunch, she would take a short nap, head back to the fields after tea and work till Sun set”, Raseshwari envisioned, remembering her mother. “Yes. I remember Grandmother used outer peel of leaf stalks to make hair shampoo. Today, I completely advocate protecting agriculture and rare plants with the same urgency”, Gaura conceded.

Cool air laced with earthy scent known as petrichor, suffused the environment, adding to the peace of an afternoon spent simply being.



“Global warming is alarming. Coastal areas are in danger. We just got past washed off roads and vanished houses due to excessive rainfall. Islands are under water. Pacific coasts are getting submerged. Fruiting, farming and flowering are impacted. Health of people is getting affected with irritability, sweating and extreme weather taking a toll. The 1 degree Celsius, 2 degrees Celsius increase affects Oceans, Mother Earth and our biodiversity”, Rudrani articulated, initiating a conversation with both her grandmothers over dinner.

“Create the right habitat for Flora and Fauna. Habitat fragmentation needs to be corrected. Integrate farming and forestry in mutually beneficial ways, my child”, Raseshwari answered.

“In managed plantations, where trees grow fast and close together, they often lack resilience. But in wild forests, they grow slowly and in diverse groups. They are healthier, live longer and withstand environmental threats better. Growth that is slow, intentional and rooted in connection is more sustainable than rapid, isolated success. Forests have memory and personality”, Rudrani’s grandmother added, offering walnut chutney and Apricot (‘Chuli’) oil served with meals, to her guest. Chopped Colocasia (‘Arbi’) leaves delicacy coated with ground split chickpea flour and steamed or fried, Chapati (bread roasted using wheat dough) and flavored Chickpea (‘Madra’) dish were also relished. Through thick weeds in the wild, they had traversed paths, empty valleys and dark forests enfolding their childhood.

“I spotted ‘Utish’, a local Alder tree and was thrilled. They are rare now”, Raseshwari complained.

Gaura sensed discomfort in her voice. “Aunt, efforts are on to plant more native varieties, and I am sure when you visit our town next time, you will be happier”, she assured.



In the evening, Rudrani prepared wheat flour and jaggery pancakes eaten with 'ghee' (clarified butter) for breakfast while her mother made 'Kheer' (creamy milk pudding made with dry fruits).

"Both mother and daughter are so talented", Raseshwari voiced, relishing the breakfast. Then, turning towards Rudrani's grandmother, she requested, "Please join me for the Village feast for which I was invited, nearly a month in advance." "Sure. We are so pleased to have you over as Chief Guest in our own village", Rudrani's grandmother conveyed. She was satisfied with the events as they were unraveling, with her wishes getting fulfilled just when her heart was longing for something brighter.

At the Town Square, Raseshwari was welcomed as the Chief guest for the village function. Food carts and live Performances enlivened the scene. Local deity processions and folk dances were followed by ceremonies for daughters married out of Kinnaur, being blessed with sweetened puffed rice offerings, dry fruits and laddus, followed by a feast.

After the feast, Raseshwari blessed villagers who sought her blessings, advised those who came for advice and bid adieu to her loving niece and her family. Wrapped in stillness and a cool breeze, time slowed down, and she welcomed it. The visit was a soft, healing pause between the chaos. She proceeded towards her village with community workers accompanying her.

'A Forest made of song where leaves sing the song of thousand-years-old trees', she hummed along.

Kindness and care changed the city-dwellers who visited the mountain regions every summer. Connected by borders and cultures, they loved the act of living and just being.



Returning to her village, Raseshwari bowed to the force that animates and sustains the entire Universe when her car crossed forests dotted with tall Deodar trees.

Hearing rustling within leaves while inhaling woody forest fragrance all at once, she returned home. Flowers and vines clung playfully to the walls around her garden. Butterflies sprinted on flowers. Cozy happiness in her mountain home near her loved ones lent her quiet strength. Age was a measure of grace for her and healthy ageing was the way forward.



Chapter 9

Young Buds

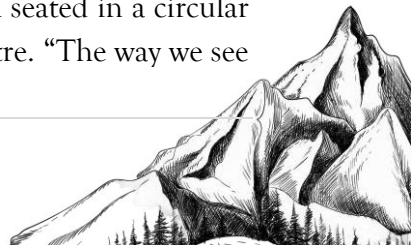
Chandan, a middle-school teacher had taught both Chakrani and Rudrani who studied in the same grade in the same school but had always been in separate sections. Son of a Government school teacher who taught his students and children to learn from nature's wisdom, he grew up across towns in Himachal Pradesh his father was posted at.

"Know your role in society and start with small efforts", my father would say, Chandan reminisced sharing with other teachers and his students', anecdotes from his past.

"Words carry direction. You should think and work with a spirit of service, humility, devotion and generosity. Make a checklist of things to do. Learn budgeting, checking out your expenses, even if it is from the money given by your parents", he sermonized.

The morning Sun spilled softly across the woods. It was a Saturday and Chandan had called Ninth- graders to address them on 'How to face their fears and achieve success in studies.'

He sat on the wooden step and the group of forty-five students who turned up out of a batch of 90, surrounded him seated in a circular arrangement, in the open-air school Amphitheatre. "The way we see



things, matters. Each of you has incredible strength to weather any storm, so don't give up. Life is bigger than today. By thinking the right thoughts, taking the right steps and remaining brave and strong, you can become thoughtful and responsible leaders."

Madhav, who was a Flautist and lived in Chandan's village often came to listen to Chandan Baba, as he addressed him.

He hoped Chandan would teach his three years old son one day.

Madhav was also a Shepherd and a flute-seller whose selfless rendition of tunes carried the purest form of love for the Divine. He played the flute while on way to take his goats and sheep for grazing early in the morning. He also played outside the temple under the soft glow of an evening prayer gathering. "A happy heart, a clear mind and spirituality in the daily rhythm of your life will help you overcome difficulties", the rustic shepherd preached, turning towards the students in modest simplicity. There was a round of applause, and he folded his hands while walking away from the Microphone towards Chandan, his role model.

"Baba. I always make attempts to reach out for something new like you advise and mostly receive a positive outcome." His eyes gleamed with pride as he spoke. The students clapped. "That is so good to hear, Madhav. Children, you can maintain your friends' groups but always be ready to take a stand for yourself. Schools shut when rains lashed but now things were stable on the work front for one and all-farmers, bankers, shopkeepers, tourists, fruit Pluckers, tillers and construction workers who crossed borders and toiled night and day, to earn a wage", Chandan observed. "I see myself in the role of a Global Diplomat", Riddhi shared with the group. "With my sister Siddhi who is a year older, I read and play. Together we go out there and do what needs to be done, be it memorizing for exams or helping our parents under the hot Sun in the fields", she added.



“You inspire us to nurture extraordinary dreams in life. We are pursuing software courses online and divide our time between homework, exam preparations, designing deity costumes with our mother and other chores”, Riddhi expressed to her teacher, Chandan Sir.

“Yes. You must always be ready to start anew by remaining emotionally strong and knowing your power. Inside dark soil sprout seeds of joy. Connect deeply with friends and family with whom laughter fills the air. I believe stories are shared under open skies. Joy takes root when we learn from the successes, pains and struggles of others”, Chandan mulled over. He was a simple schoolteacher for whom the weight of a child’s trust was paramount. In the evening, he often played volleyball with students who enjoyed the game. “Adhere to a regimen be it in studies or in a sport. Do everything right, hold your tongue, protect your space. Then see how unity, solidarity and harmony bring prosperity for you”, he preached. He firmly believed in what he taught and this came through in both his words and actions. Kids were loud, grubby, full of dreams. Chandan Sir became nostalgic, sharing his school time anecdotes and learnings, by just observing his parents. His students had been taught to savor moments by being truly present.

“Lift the spirit, calm the mind by staying close to books, nature and spending time with elders. Do not forget to help those who are less privileged than you are and support one another”, he concluded, observing the fading rays of Sunlight making a pattern on the floor.

“We thank you Sir for motivating us today and pray that you continue to light our path through your beliefs, kindness and experiences”, Riddhi acknowledged, offering a vote of thanks to her teacher on behalf of all the students.



Chandan Sir was an advocate of reducing pollution by planting trees. “Grow plants and flowers around. They steadily purify the environment around them and add color and shade”, he maintained motivating Eco Club student members.

The following Saturday a Parent Teacher Meet was arranged for the Class teachers and Subject teachers to interact with parents and hand over their ward’s progress report to them.

“True wisdom is sweet, simple and nourishing. You go through contrasting weather conditions as you travel across states and towns ferrying equipment, agricultural produce and fuel”, Chandan elaborated, conversing with acquaintances who were truck drivers and came to the school seeking advice for their children’s future. “Life is like a microcosm of cultural history with its hopes, anxieties and desperations. We must teach our children to make resilience a lifelong journey of growth and renewal. Life is a journey against terrifying odds. They must learn to make faithful friends who are hard to find”, a parent who was a truck driver set forth.

“I talk to locals. Every place and person carries a story, a soul, a heritage. Discovering beauty in unexpected moments keeps me going”, the parent emphasized. Other parents waiting for their turn during the Parents-Teacher Meet smiled, holding more professional ambitions in their minds for their children than previous generations.

“I eat at Highway Dhabas (restaurants selling reasonably priced cuisines on roads connecting different states) and it is there that I truly understand what it means to pause, reflect, heal much like it feels upon reaching home. There were times when rocks were being blown apart by gunpowder and I was driving on vanished roads when hands froze and we gripped the seat in fear”, the ‘truck driver’ parent shared, opening steadily.



“Restlessness and invisible fatigue are symptoms which come with the job but your courage is your strength, and you are working so hard to educate your children. Keep up the enthusiasm. We have started remedial classes for students who need extra guidance. The owners of ‘Shudh Vaishno Dhaba’ (street restaurant serving pure vegetarian cuisine), down the road also send their children to our school. I invited him last week and he addressed the students on the importance of controlled amounts of pure fat in our diets”, Chandan shared.

“Yes Sir. Clarified butter is good for heart in controlled amounts and supports fat loss. Thank you for always motivating us and our children, sometimes we carry hope, sometimes it carries us”, the truck driver agreed and happily, collected his child’s progress report.

“Build skills, explore interests and combine fun with meaningful activities during summer vacations”, Chandan always told his students.

“We would organize summer camps to help students discover new interests and build leadership skills. Summer is active so use it for self-discovery and growth”, he suggested. “I agree. Our students need exposure to build entrepreneurship skills and to gain real-world exposure by way of innovation. We could offer them practical and creative courses. These days, flexible, skill-based learning is possible through online courses”, another schoolteacher affirmed.



Chapter 10

Spiritual Sisters

Saraswati was thirty years of age. Known within the Pilgrimage Circuit for her fierce honesty and tender rebellion, she believed that Truth sets one free.

Finding balance in familial, mundane voices playing in the background, she would undertake pilgrimage tours as a Pilgrim Guide and had helped functionaries set up First Aid Camps on the way. Her words opened windows to life's hardships, offering reflections on sustaining hope.

"Find peace in the ebb and flow of life. Know what you want. This moment is a treasure", she whispered sharing the high vibe with a batch of fifteen pilgrims who trekked more than twelve kilometers with her and couldn't contain the profound energy and psychic awakening they experienced inside the Sanctum Sanctorum housed inside a mountain cave.

"The view of the mountain ranges, the ambience and the silence blend together to calm down your senses", she explained helping an elderly couple cross a sharp rock on the route.

"Yes dear. We came from Kashmir and have many temples of repute in the mountain ranges. It was our desire to pay obeisance here and



we felt blessed, every step of the way”, the 65 years old lady shared, her eyes moist with emotion.

“This was a blessed pilgrimage”, her husband communicated. Both his wife and Saraswati felt a quiet reassurance in the hilltop’s warm embrace. “I can sense the boundless all around. We have the opportunity to hold space in this sacred stillness”, he articulated, proceeding in queue towards the souvenir shop.

Saraswati was busy narrating stories associated with the shrine to the rest of the pilgrims and waved at the old lady indicating that she will catch up with them at the souvenir shop. “Silence is woven in the daily rhythm of life”, Saraswati conveyed, offering tea to all pilgrims in her batch, from a flask she had carried with her from Base Camp.

“A kind of silence that felt ancient, I would say”, the lady indicated much to everyone’s approval of what she meant. “Yes. If you show up with presence and reverence, every moment is a reminder of how deeply we are connected”, Saraswati noted. The lady’s radiant smile matched Saraswati’s sparkling laughter who had found a steadiness within themselves while keeping faith and bearing witness without judgement to the happenings around them. “We were able to take a pause from actions and rethink”, a young pilgrim expressed offering to hold the elderly couple’s backpack on the return trek journey. “May God bless you”, the old pilgrim blessed, bestowing precious tidings. “A flower blooms in silence. Do not fight darkness, it has no power. Increase your light. Perceive yourself as you truly are. Anxiety is a signal to be interpreted, not an enemy to be defeated. Remember these words of mine once you go back to your overclocked modern lifestyle.” “Sure Sir. You are right”, the boy agreed, picking up a smooth oval pebble from the trail and placing it in his rucksack, to take home as a keepsake.



Pesky monkeys swinging from Pine and Oak trees caught her attention and she hoped the Cucumber leaves climber winding over her favorite Plum tree were spared by them.

Past rolling landscapes and mountain lakesides, the Pilgrim batch reached base camp in seven hours with convenience halts on the way. Fragile lives got healed and devotion transformed their trip into a soft memory after they reached their hometowns.

Saraswati returned home and remembered her embrace.

‘In quiet houses, old memories awake’, she wrote in her diary before calling up her sister on a Voice call. She now managed the Tea Estate nurtured by their father and mother and lived in the same house but on the floor above Saraswati’s. “Laughter filled the room and made the smallest moments with our parents funny and bright”, her younger sister Durga added. The legacy was a culmination of years of reading and writing nurtured by their mother who was a hardworking woman and a voracious reader.

The sisters shared their experiences and promised to catch up for lunch, the very next day.

“Durga, look what I bought before heading to your abode, these freshly roasted peanuts”, Saraswati chuckled, taking in the aroma of simmering spices from Durga’s kitchen. “Yeah, how we would wander around nearby caves and local villages in our childhood”, Saraswati said opening her mouth when Durga thrust peanuts in, while carefully flipping the ladle for a surprise favorite dish for her sister.

Their shawls blew vigorously as cool autumn air rushed in possibly following the path their memories took to follow through their joys and tears.

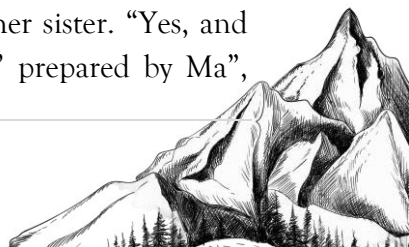


“Do spread the walnut ‘chutney’ (seasoned paste of spices and condiments served as a side dish) on the raw cucumbers. Let us eat and enjoy ourselves just like we did when we were young”, Saraswati propounded, handing over a box to her sister from the refrigerator. “Wow. You run a guest house for Tea Garden tourists all by yourself in addition to running our parents’ tea farm. I am so proud of you Durga”, Saraswati gushed, effused about enjoying salted cucumber with her sister. “Thank you. You too are a gift to the world as you help the pilgrims you take on tours to discover their true selves by combining spiritual energy around shrines with powerful storytelling. As they come into their power a true vision unfolds for them. This enables them to concentrate on the right things, remove negativity, heal actions and practice meditation”, Durga replied.

“You do know how to make someone feel special”, Saraswati chimed in. “You are such a passionate person who also solves issues miraculously. I saw how you got repair work done yesterday after fire erupted in the tea factory when a transformer blew out after rain. I had got back from the tour and was watching clouds rise above towering mountains”, Saraswati submitted. Durga hugged her sister and added a dollop of white butter to ‘Dhangru’- the white colored lentil, she had cooked for her sister.

Mixed vegetables, fried rice, Chapati and mushroom curry were being heated by Saraswati and the Village they had inherited from their parents resounded with the joy of familial love. It was an evening filled with the sisters cherishing the soft memory of their parents, laughing at their own jokes and choosing rather effortlessly to live with a sense of wonder.

“Remember how we would make tree swings and push each other, sunlight gleaming through the trees”, Durga narrated in detail, offering a second helping of the curry dish to her sister. “Yes, and then taste steaming hot sesame jaggery ‘Siddu’ prepared by Ma”,



Saraswati related. “Baba would add a large spoonful of desi ghee in the center”, Durga recalled and the sisters rejoiced heartily. Echoes of their laughter filled the empty corners of their home with loving remembrance. Evening went by with the scent of autumn, reminding the sisters of seasons of mist and mellow fruitfulness and of times with their parents when relatives and neighbors near and far visited them more.

Saraswati internalized a harmonious interconnection between spirituality and nature. She brought mythology to the pilgrims she interacted with and always told them “Surrender to a divine power but keep carrying out your duties. Believe in magic.”

Durga was all set to employ Youth aspiring for success and wishing to remain independent. She employed them at a Tea Café started by her inside the Tea estate premises.

After dinner, the sisters walked under a starlit sky together. Durga shared her plans towards enhancing the visitor experience at her Tea Estate by incorporating cultural exploration, farming behind the cup and Indian heritage aspects by way of a live demonstration of tea packaging and exhibition of various varieties of tea leaves, in a hallway that led to the office at the Tea Estate. Saraswati shared interesting anecdotes from her interactions with pilgrims she took on tours.

“When one is true to oneself completely and follows the path to fulfilling duties and achieving goals, everything gets aligned. It is your optimism, passion and belief which take you ahead”, she set forth, kissing her sister on her forehead before climbing the stairs that led her to her part of the house.

The next morning both Durga and Saraswati woke up early so that they could stand together in sunshine in their sprawling tea estate and flower garden with petals in full bloom. Scattered Pinecones



around the periphery brought a sparkle in Durga's eyes. "‘Shankil’ in our language, how we would collect them in our childhood and not let Ma use them for warmth from fire in winters", she communicated.

"Yes. She called Hibiscus flowers ‘ArthPriya’, ‘Japa Kusum’ and ‘Hari Vallabh’. Ma offered the flowers at the temple and used hibiscus leaves juice to cure our mouth ulcers, constipation and itching problems", Saraswati recalled. "When we were tired from walking back from school, she would massage our legs with herbal oils she prepared", she recounted.

"I complained whenever she applied ‘Baljad’ herb extract on my hair for good hair growth and made us drink herbal tea. And look how healthy my hair is and how much we enjoy all kinds of herbal tea we found bitter earlier", Durga intimated. "We add wedges of lemon, sugar, honey and what not to enjoy these kinds of tea. Baba considered honey as nectar served to Gods and thus a blessed offering, also a symbol of vitality, I recall", Saraswati stated.

Standing on the soil from which their wisdom grew, the sisters reveled in sisterly love, around the stillness of the morning which was a sacred gift.

Walking back to the Cottage, Saraswati confided, "I am looking forward to Ram Katha and Ganga Mahotsav as they encourage physical and emotional healing for pilgrims who return with me after pilgrimage. These events help all devotees keep hope alive and sow seeds of hope in the hearts of those who have forgotten their own light".

"Di, our parents taught us to allow faith to lead the way. We know that our choices decide the mountains we climb and the paths we trod. Let's catch up in a week. This week sees you taking devotees on pilgrimage while I develop the Tea Museum", Durga suggested, her



steady steps complementing her definite resolve to complete the work soon. The scent of aromatic tea leaves rose up as the sisters taking slow, unsteady steps on a cobbled, uneven pathway, parted.

“The stream finds its way not by knowing the route but by flowing. I am off with Pilgrims early morning tomorrow but do join me in the evening today for dinner”, Saraswati rendered.

“Sure Di. I will bring my favorite salad seasoned with sesame paste on chunks of Pineapple, spears of Broccoli, fingers of Banana and florets of Cauliflower. I am sure you will like it. Look forward to a tasty meal cooked by you”, Durga entreated, climbing up the stairs to the floor on which she resided within the same house.

Evening light returned after rain throughout the day. The sisters relished a delicious dinner together. Like two peas in a pod, the sisters enjoying one another’s company, relished raw Papaya paratha, and ‘Badaane ka Meetha’ (a traditional sweet preparation), reliving childhood recipes and keeping their hearts aligned.

The sisters would forget life’s woes and the ache of loneliness, losing sense of the heaviness of their responsibilities whenever they got together. Their shimmering togetherness sparkled out of their cracked selves and that was enough.



Chapter 11

Holy Pilgrimages

The Tea Museum at Durga and Saraswati's tea estate was set to welcome locals and tourists alike.

The sisters got prayers completed and took the first batch of visitors on a guided tour around the tea estate, together. They were pilgrims Saraswati was escorting to the renowned Badrinath Dham. They ascended higher on the winding road and saw that traffic grew heavier on the other side of town.

"We are fortunate to be starting the pilgrimage by witnessing these traditional prayers for the Tea Museum. Congratulations to both of you", a Gujarati businessman travelling with his nine-member family affirmed.

"We like our tea sweetened with jaggery and here it is for all of you", Durga posted, bringing a tray with 12 cups of freshly brewed jaggery tea.

"Thank you for your hospitality", the Gujarati man's wife vented, sipping hot tea slowly. "We make snacks and sweets using seeds and dry nuts, the way you prepare Horse-gram' laddus' and Pearl millet 'laddus' (sweet balls)."



“It is a pleasure. Urban India is rediscovering the comfort and flavor in its own traditions”, Durga reported. Let us proceed to the factory where you can see how fresh tea leaves are processed”, Durga heralded, collecting the empty cups from the friendly visitors. “Tea embodies the comfort people seek during winters. Tea is more of a ritual here. Green tea, saffron tea, cinnamon tea and tea made using only crushed almonds are versions being embraced by urban consumers for its immunity-boosting reputation”, Saraswati articulated.

“Yes. Despite the difficult life, folks here have structured cold-weather routine around warmth, healthy lifestyle, wise nutrition, hydration and self-care”, the businessman observed.

“We will welcome you when you all visit again. Have a blissful ‘Yatra’ (Pilgrimage). Do spread the word around about our hills back in Gujarat”, Durga remarked, waving at the visitors who were proceeding for the pilgrimage with Saraswati as their Guide.

“Thank you”, the group members waved. “We will make another trip soon”, another guest promised.

On the way, Saraswati stopped by a water spring where pilgrims cleaned their faces, hands and feet in the thin spray that fascinated them. “This used to be a gushing spring, but increased melting of glaciers and hotter summers have led to it thinning down”, Saraswati complained.

“We understand. Every day has sharpened you. We have set aside two days to experience the local culture and get to the small markets. It is so wonderful to see how people here make others feel seen and supported”, the Gujarati woman’s daughter-in-law averred, waving at smiling women and cherubic children climbing uphill.

“Simplicity and a pause where time loosens and a mysterious silence pervades the air. Silence lingers in the hush between moments,



footsteps and heartbeats here”, Saraswati publicized, gesturing the pilgrims to mind their steps while leaping over huge rocks near the spring.

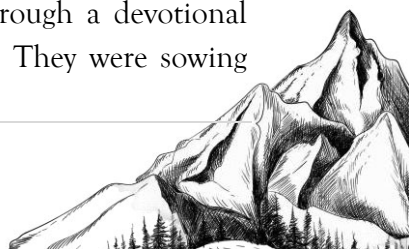
“We crossed high Himalayan meadows, situated 4000 m above sea level. There were many smaller treks, concurrently crisscrossing with the communal trek or ‘Yatra’ route, as we call it. Many lateral trails, I observed, were damaged due to natural disasters and lack of maintenance. The marvel of us standing in wonder, unable to believe the breathtaking beauty of the view holds me in a spell, even now”, Saraswati gasped.

“Devotion and dedication, I believe have brought us here”, another pilgrim from the group drawled, recovering from faster breathing because of uninterrupted climbing, by standing still. The group cheered, climbed and marched together.

“Pilgrimages help us mark ourselves with awareness to the cosmic rhythm of creation and destruction. The Bell-metal cauldron we saw on the way is used during sacred feasts. We just crossed an open space where Cooks were arranging containers for a wedding meal. Vegetables and condiments were bubbling away in a copper pot”, Saraswati sounded.

“Yes, I saw a few wedding Chefs who cook for community wedding feasts, stirring long spatulas while humming folk songs”, a pilgrim commented. “Folk songs carry stories. See how love flows easily, gently and without restraint between children and their grandparents”, another pilgrim remarked. Waving at a tiny girl tending her small flower bed with her grandmother along their garden fence, they marched.

“Happiness lives in small moments, doesn’t it?”, Saraswati voiced, turning towards the group she had steered through a devotional journey with care and conviction. “Absolutely. They were sowing



something deeper than seeds. Stones formed slowly, layer by layer. I believe they ground what is scattered and soothe what is storming”, a middle-aged man in the group commented. The group clapped listening to the rich insight.

Aligned with the rise and setting of Sun, the journey concluded with strangers and acquaintances who effortlessly slipped into easy conversations, becoming friends.

“In some ways we are alike. We support one another and assure our family that they are not walking their hard season alone”, Saraswati pointed out. “Entrepreneurship and Innovation and a system embedded with inbuilt mentorship is a natural part of how you conduct business. With time and clever business strategies, you turned enterprises into massive companies dabbling in multiple domains of industry”, Saraswati affirmed “Thank you. We hope to remain relevant in our businesses and do what truly matters”, the couple’s son replied.

Faith kept the momentum up for the group. Saraswati kept up the enthusiasm of the pilgrims by showing them shrines and nature parks on the way. Upon reaching the temple, the group was ecstatic feeling a sense of completion and devotional frenzy. Scores of devotees thronged the Sanctum Sanctorum with several groups lighting incense and chanting mantras in high tempo. Stepping into a sacred space of divine insight and spiritual guidance was the gateway for their journey towards seeking peace and divine connection.

The pilgrims swayed in devotion and returned to the hotel after a satisfying journey downhill. After lunch at a vegetarian eatery, Baby pink wild Apricot flowers, wild Peach blossoms and Walnut flowers held their fantasy till they had captured the beauty in their cameras and mindscapes.



“Thank you for the informative pilgrimage”, a member from the group vocalized, thanking Saraswati.

“It was a pleasure. Devoted pilgrims who respect mountain culture are always welcome. Please visit again. There are many shrines of great historical value throughout our beautiful state”, Saraswati urged, ensuring that every individual had received his or her share from the temple offering (‘Prasad’). Police presence stayed active across tourist stretches. Medical services along arduous pilgrim treks were reassuring.

“Caught off-guard by life’s randomness, color-coded décor in our shrines, shops and homes add a vibrance to our lives. Travelers seek quiet rather than chaos. Overtourism and skewed development have harmed nature in unfathomable ways”, a young student, part of the pilgrim trek, complained.

“We need to collectively make amends. There is a stillness that listens beneath the noise and by tuning into nature’s processes we can find develop emotional endurance”, Saraswati asserted. The group applauded, enchanted by the legends of caves she shared as they went ahead.



Chapter 12

Devotion And Grace

Rup Manjari, a devotee of SRIMATI RADHA RANI was a bangle-seller who had the mystical power of forecasting ominous events, suggesting home remedies to good results and teaching girls from nearby towns traditional skills in Embroidery, Knitting, Weaving and Stitching. She had a heightened level of intuition because she meditated with pointed concentration every morning and evening.

“Richness of intricate craftsmanship, elegance of traditional weaves and the rich tapestry of colors, patterns and textures should come out when you use your hands to create magic”, she would say to parents who sent their daughters to learn these skills from her. In BuranshVan village named after Hibiscus blooms growing abundantly, Riddhi and Siddhi lived with their parents. They had seen harsh days when cloudburst and bridge collapse instances two years back had left them bewildered. Hands trembling, eyes reddened, sweating and stammering. It was their parents’ courage and encouragement from schoolteachers which had brought them back to a life of confidence.

RupManjari’s guidance in her parents’ life awakened their energies sparking a new zeal to face life.



“I am quite excited about the Food Festival and Village Fair Chandan Sir told our Class about today”, Riddhi said to Siddhi, maneuvering a steep climb uphill from their school to house. “So am I. Let us complete designing dressy outfits for the Mother Goddess in pearly pink and peacock green colors this month. Next two months would see us studying and appearing for exams”, Siddhi projected. Tired, the sisters walked together, snugly encased in their tight hand-knitted cardigans.

“We can use digital artistry to bring out concerns of a scary apocalypse in a self-destructing world”, Riddhi envisaged. “Definitely. Only last week, Chandan Sir addressed the class on ‘Developing cleaner pathways through intensified focus on public health. Let us make a presentation on that for the event and show it to Sir first”, Siddhi suggested, corroborating her sister’s inputs.

“Count me in”, Riddhi submitted.

Seeing things in new light and new colors came easily to them blessed as they were by divine blessings and able guidance.



Chapter 13

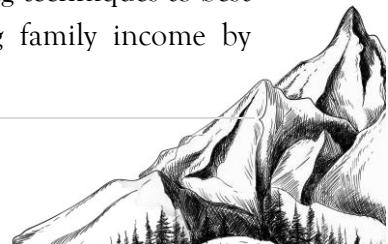
Making A Difference

In separate disasters across two districts there was panic the very next morning with an earthquake claiming fifty-two lives and cloudburst claiming twenty-one lives. Nature's fury some said. Revenge against excesses, others believed.

At a Community Meet, organized by the Department of Social Welfare, there were sixty stalls featuring thematic sensitization sessions regarding natural farming representing purity, trust and improved immunity. Stalls selling organically prepared dry food items, fresh juices and natural healing products reflected the essence of a vision for strengthening progress by connecting with people's lifestyles.

Leaning their backs on long pillows, made using plant fiber softened without the use of chemical ingredients at a stall which encouraged the public to unwind by resting their backs on them, was a gamechanger.

"The stress of having no one to talk to is common here because of migration. We are sharing Helpline numbers and information about Applications that counsel the user. From farming techniques to best schools for children and from supplementing family income by



undergoing skill training to learning nuances of knitting, various platforms created by the Department are available”, SwarnPushp announced, addressing a gathering of around 120 people who visited the fair. They were eager to hear her speak. They were seated at the Amphitheatre in the center courtyard of the district headquarters premises, where the fair was being held.

“Didi, I am looking for work. My family lived in the open embrace of the mighty mountains for generations. But recent mudslides, flash floods and inundation of riverbanks due to heavy rainfall sank my house. Our grocery shop swept away like a leaf. What do we do now? My relatives are moving to cities in search of work”, a young lady lamented, ruing the loss.

“Do not worry at all. At the district level, several jobs for youth have been created. I understand recurring problems of water shortage, sinking of houses when caves form after landslides and widespread widening of roads but hope stands tall in the face of devastation”, SwarnPushp urged, comforting the lady, compassion evident in her tone. “The Administration will take care of rehabilitation for the survivors. An entire tourism industry relies on homestays. You could get training for a job. You could earn from honey-making, handicrafts designing, knitting, weaving, joining an enterprise making snack items from local ingredients and cooking at a guest house”, she continued.

The audience was responsive. “You speak well. You could become a successful tour guide if you learnt more about our state and the many treasures within it”, Gulaabi encouraged. “We have waste recycling centers and Cleanliness Missions that are looking for skilled manpower. Contact me. I will not let you down”, she committed.

The young lady muttered “Thank you Didi”, her tears concealing a quiet fire in her eyes.



The very next day, several young and eager jobseekers thronged the Department of Social Welfare office wishing to apply in various categories.

The corridors smelled of ambition. It was a matter of time when quiet beginnings paved the way for youth to join a public school as a teacher, become a gardener, make honey or become a Cook at a guest house.

“People getting help leads to motivation for them and satisfaction for us”, SwarnPushp reflected, sharing what she felt with Gulaabi, from a place of quiet thought, seated in her cabin, feeling emotionally fulfilled. Both knew there was a lot they had to do for their people. People who quietly carried the weight of life’s struggles felt secure when money inflow was steady, stomachs full and daily conversations with family and friends endearing.

SwarnPushp who once lifted grass loads on backs and still stacked apples, landed the Government job in the Department of Agriculture through merit and ever since had been learning new skills every day. Once back from work, she still took time out to watch wildlife, deer and birds, bond with cattle and arrange grass in stacks along with her parents. Gulaabi reported to SwarnPushp, at work. She walked back home enriched by the experiences she had with SwarnPushp Madam while on touring around Blocks.



Chapter 14

Food Festival and Village Fair

An upcoming Food Festival and Village Fair was announced by the local Minister. The District Magistrate set out the date and specifications for performances by students, dance and music specifications and experts to be invited. It was to be held in Spring of the subsequent year. With two months in hand, there was a lot that was to be done to organize such a Fair at Ujala town, with participation by school students and stalls by over hundred entrepreneurs from various districts across the state, who would showcase the indigenous traditions of their respective districts and communities.

Administration expected a footfall of half a million people, because of pleasant weather in February and appropriate location for people from neighboring states and tourists.

Trishla and Manokamna encouraged women who made Apricot ('Chuli') garlands out of seeds for temple prayers, to put up a stall and showcase how they used outer covering and made oil from seeds.

With fascination, they watched how two sisters-in-law who were Tara's neighbors, made a two-flame mud stove for their kitchen,



outdoors. Family members rolled apple tree nets together and handled change of seasons with grace.

From the staff room, with the festival two months away distinctly marked on the Planner, a view of the city's air suffused with the smell of Petrichor upon light rain was visible, Trishla made a phone call. Trishla suggested the Sarpanch of Hariyali village, "Please demonstrate how fruit wine is made and packaged. We could have a separate stall for that. Our student volunteers will assist you."

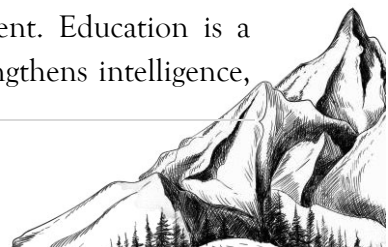
"Alright Madam. Few women from our village would like to set up a Food Van, showcasing different cuisines from the state", the Sarpanch promised.

"That is an excellent idea", Trishla vouched. "We could have many Food Vans", she added.

"These rural women are symbols of endurance who despite tenuous farm and domestic household routines stand out as figures of care, carry steel tiffin boxes for family members on field despite back-breaking loads keeping them engaged", Manokamna mentioned. "They have begun to create rituals of comfort and have found micro-freedoms within their lifestyles, with modernization and penetration of technology", Trishla referred.

"Technology magnifies our voice and our responsibility. Once we speak from identity and not insecurity, we can seek honesty, encouragement and genuine connection for ourselves to fulfil our commitments. By way of involving students and community members, we can place role models before them, build entrepreneurship groups and encourage people to become better than they could ever be", Trishla observed.

"Our students must learn to unfurl sails through stormy winds by sustaining momentum in a chaotic environment. Education is a complete journey that sharpens the mind, strengthens intelligence,



builds confidence and awakens spiritual awareness”, Manokamna decoded, her busy mind churning ideas on how she would share with student volunteers, new ideas for the Food Festival and Village Fair.

After lunch, Chandan arrived at the fair with a batch of 30 students from Class IX, as part of an educational tour for them.

SwarnPushp and Gulaabi who felt satisfied looking at the event’s success met Chandan and shared the Government Department’s plan of organizing a “Food festival and Village Fair” after two months.

“We need to call in students for participation in this Festival and Fair we are organizing. Even after the event there are themes on which we would invite them to conduct joint surveys during their summer holidays”, SwarnPushp laid out, approaching the set of chairs, where Chandan was seated with the group of students.

Chandan and the students stood up. “Madam, we look forward to enriching our students’ experiences by having them participate in events and surveys. There are lots of activities dear children. Certificates will be handed over, after you have worked to make the event a success”, Gulaabi intimated, distributing Department of Community Development newsletters and brochures, a tiny notepad and a pen in a neon-colored folder made from recycled paper to the students.

“Thank you, Madam”, students responded, happy receiving the pen and note-pad while going past the brochure hurriedly.

SwarnPushp and Gulaabi motivated Chandan to mobilize support for the event. The students started clapping in excitement the moment they got to know that schools would also be invited to participate in the event.



“February should be fine for us Madam, as examinations for all classes would be over by then. We would get the students to complete preparations for the event beforehand”, Chandan set out, signaling his students to look at the hill tribal dance being performed on a rectangular stage.

“Very well. We could meet teachers from other schools and brainstorm on new ideas with them”, SwarnPushp proposed, distributing leaflets on social themes and schemes launched, under the aegis of Social Justice department.

“I shall discuss with Principal Sir and revert. Co-scholastic pursuits encourage students to embrace growth and strive for excellence with inner strength”, Chandan pronounced, ordering his delightfully loud students to maintain decorum.

“I agree. Gulaabi, offer rice flour pancakes made by the co-operative group members”, SwarnPushp requested. “Yes Madam”, Gulaabi acknowledged and promptly offered wafer-thin dry pancakes to Chandan and the students.

“Folk art, floor coverings, Tabletop accessories, ceramics, juices, pickles, serums, snacks, soaps, shampoos, face creams made from flowers, products using dry leaves, fiber, bamboo, wood, raw materials and much more. All are welcome. Students representing their schools can make presentations and carry out performances on socially relevant themes”, Gulaabi stipulated.

Frenzied applause erupted.

The next morning at PrasannVan, Chandan’s native village, which was closest to Ujala town where the Fair was being held, his School was abuzz with activity, chatter and ‘hulla-baloo’ (boisterous frenzy) around the upcoming event. Using Solar panels to power the school’s electricity requirements, the school served as a role model to other schools in the region towards adopting renewable sources of



energy. A Recycling Unit recycled paper and distributed paper products to needy students, displaying by example, the significance of recycling and reusing natural products.

Chandan nurtured curiosity in students through personal stories and practical exercises. “Challenge yourselves. Re-direct your energy to activities which enhance your knowledge about science, society and arts”, he advised school students.

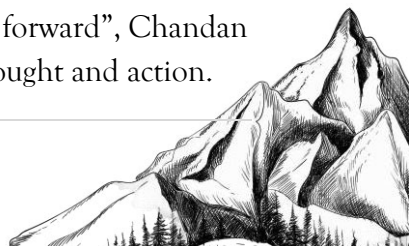
“Intensive agriculture leached pesticides deep into water tables. Develop a skilled, future-ready creative workforce for the nation. Years of over-extraction have depleted aquifers, concentrating Arsenic and Fluoride. Unregulated industrial discharge has introduced heavy metals like Chromium, Lead, Cadmium and Mercury”, he broached, during the Eco Club Period in school on Friday.

“Sir, the build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has raised regional temperatures, worsened droughts and led to a rise in instances of fire, killing trees. This was an issue impacting the present and future of life on the planet”, Riddhi raised.

Chandan smiled, happy that his students were thinking in the right direction. “Environmental effects of litter from deciduous trees are harmful”, Siddhi articulated.

“The way our mothers and grandmothers utilize fresh and dry farm litter is worth learning from because of the manner in which everything gathered from nature is returned back to it”, Siddhi pondered, arranging the students’ notebooks in a neat pile as instructed by Chandan Sir.

“Absolutely, Natural farming improves soil fertility. Initiatives that push for better outcomes for soil health and human health are the need of the hour. It is on the youth to take them forward”, Chandan urged, motivating the group towards positive thought and action.



Ever concerned about the health of his students he maintained a herbal garden in the school garden for urgent therapy for students' common ailments while in school, the natural way.

He planted Lemongrass which had a refreshing aroma used to flavor tea and was an effective mosquito repellent.

"Mint has menthol-rich leaves which act as natural insect barriers and help cure cold and cough. Marigolds contain Pyrethrins which deter mosquitoes, aphids and garden flies. These are stunning blooms, nevertheless, aren't they?", he posed.

"Yes Sir", the students screamed, vibrant beauty of color swaying outside their classroom window.

In the evening, Chandan had invited his friends after a long gap and eagerly awaited their arrival.

He was a happy bachelor. Finicky about cleanliness, he ensured that he cleaned his house and cooked food himself. Excitement changed to delightful nods as each of his five friends came in one after another, though brothers Chandrashekhhar and Gangadhar turned in together.

"A yellow-grey cloud of noxious poison is engulfing the Capital city covering the air with a dusty haze, as per news reports. To protect health and lungs of minor children, online classes are being held through the week and sporting activities re-planned", Chandan announced, offering lemongrass tea prepared by him to his five friends, who came over for a bonfire dinner at his house which was within the school premises. "As Vice Principal, it is your duty to protect the health of our Mountain children, Chandan", Vaikunth highlighted, adding tiny sticks from a jute bag filled by the school gardener with wooden sticks, to light a bonfire in the center of Chandan's tiny garden.



“New Delhi is a shining urban center. Last week when I had gone there on work, I saw an intricate pattern of lights as the plane landed”, Giri recalled.

“That must be quite a sight. I still look up when a plane flies past. The contrails etched in the vast sky make the view look beautiful from down here”, Vaikunth replied.

“We would support agencies in mobilizing communities for participating in the ‘Food Festival and Village fair’. Different Government Departments and Non-profit agencies will co-ordinate with the locals to showcase diverse cuisine and handicrafts. Our focus is to involve students and their parents in campaigns for raising productivity, lowering input costs, improving farm incomes, lowering global warming and improving health of women and children. What do you say?”, Chandan enquired, laying out ‘Pahaari’ Pancakes (‘Pataande’), Rajmah dal, Sepu-Wadi in curry, a mildly flavored nettle leaves preparation and red rice, rich in iron and good for diabetics, he had cooked, before his friends had arrived, on a wooden table in his garden.

“Chandan uses lemon, coriander, garlic and Hemp seeds used as a condiment (‘Bhang’ seeds) to make our special mountain salt (‘Pahadi Namak’ or ‘Lun’). I will surely taste it”, Gangadhar aired, picking up slices of cucumber from the salad bowl and dipping them in the plate holding the tasty salt mixture. Chandrashekhar followed his brother in tasting it while Hari passed plates to Giri and Vaikunth before serving himself. “We are in. Remember how vehemently, students from schools across Himachal Pradesh protested when the bridge joining Phulsia and Kalina villages collapsed, following the ghastly Earth burst incident. We can work together”, Giri cajoled. Turning towards Chandan, Chandrashekhar remarked, “This would enable students to read more, work in teams and face problems head on.”



“Absolutely. Only yesterday were my middle school students sharing their concerns against the backdrop of severe air pollution and poor air quality. I think they could effectively come up with a Slide Show on ‘Local and Global efforts to accelerate climate action worldwide’, Chandan conveyed. “Your passionate engagement with this project thrills me no end. I hope we deliver the message clearly”, he praised. His friends cheered him and went about cracking jokes and remembering old times.

On their way back from a meet-up with Chandan at PrasannVan school, the friends decided to take a walk before proceeding to their houses. This would give them nearly two hours together, chatting and taking in the magnificent beauty of the mountains. The Five adventurous friends often went for trekking and snow skiing together.

“We take family elders and children for treatment to hospitals frequently. We need better healthcare facilities and trust science over myths. Climate change deepens disparities in health, livelihoods and social participation. Through this event that Chandan told us about today, we should raise awareness about these issues”, Chandrashekhar deliberated, walking on dew-soaked grass on a winter picnic.

“Relying on assistive devices, medicines and community support systems requires infrastructural upgradation. Let us suggest ideas to Chandan on how we plan to raise awareness through the event”, Gangadhar responded, taking in the morning’s hush with a view of birds in circling flight hovering above. “Camping in the wilderness was fun but so is Picnic on Waterfalls. I completely agree with both of you on the awareness aspect”, Giri noted.

“Earth underneath holds ancient secrets wrapped in belief. We are fortunate to bask in majestic Sun’s glory this winter afternoon even



as the mountain peaks that side got fresh snow over the last few days”, Hari remarked, pointing to a set of mighty mountain ranges in the distance.

Vaikunth wiped his face after returning from the nearby waterfall, refreshed with a cool water splash and took out his bounty of Persimmon fruits to share with his friends. “The fruit is delicious, though changing weather patterns have shortened its shelf life”, Giri stated, relishing ‘Khurma’ as his mother called it. “That’s where the practice of Sun-drying them for use during harsh winters helps”, Vaikunth intimated, picking one deep orange fruit from the pile.

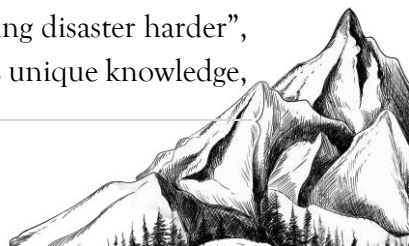
Treading along woodland paths after the picnic, the friends enjoyed scenic views along the way.

“Disruptions in healthcare, medicine supply, damage to rehabilitation centers, loss of assistive technologies turned earthquakes and cloudbursts in the recent past, into a life-threatening emergency”, Giri imparted, clicking photographs as he spoke.

Crossing sprawling fields with thriving ‘Jhangora’ or Barnyard millet (‘Samak’ rice), a staple cereal of the region, Gangadhar told his friends about a local farmer he knew who embraced organic farming. He grew Artichoke and Himalayan Chives and earned well. “We saw changing weather within a span of a day”, Hari observed.

“Half-measures that have failed to address deeper issues are being replaced with bold, long-term Government action”, Vaikunth advanced. “Global climate action has enabled text-based alerts and early-warning systems, and preparedness and participation gaps are being worked upon”, he posited.

“Inaccessible shelters and evacuation centers, poverty and limited access to credit or insurance, make recovery during disaster harder”, Chandrashekhar rued. “Our local people possess unique knowledge,



have adaptive coping skills and resourcefulness. Thus, with intelligent planning and execution, strengthening disaster resilience of communities is not too difficult”, Gangadhar concluded, showing Hari, carved caves to their right. “It seems as though a hidden doorway opens and a divine shield of light surrounds us”, Hari replied, stopping to capture the splendor of the ancient door to the cave temple in his camera. “Thanks. I will visit again, over the coming weekend with my family”, he replied.

In half an hour the friends went their separate ways promising each other that they would meet on Friday evening to chalk out a strategy for the Food Festival and Village Fair, for reaching out to the public with a meaningful message to take home.

On Friday, Chandan and his five friends met at Giri’s house, which was a hub of devices and latest gadgets he proudly maintained. “I was busy all day wrapping gifts for Children’s Day function in school”, Chandan revealed. “Look, this is a gadget I devised which sieves different kinds of pulses according to size and kind of chaff”, Giri displayed, explaining the workings of a machine in his hand and six different sizes of sieve nets placed on a table by the side.

“My mother will be thrilled”, Vaikunth exclaimed. “This is how I wish to encourage creativity and curiosity among children”, Chandan unveiled.

“Keep yourself relevant and teach others to take actions to come out of difficult times”, Gangadhar exhorted, cajoling them to reach their full potential through times good and bad.

Hari prepared ginger tea in Giri’s kitchen for friends.

“We could make a presentation for the public on how food reaches from Seed stage to market and onto our tables. Problems and concerns relating to electricity and water availability could be aired as well”, Chandrashekhar pitched.



“I am writing down so that we can share ideas with SwarnPushp Madam”, he informed.

“Farm mechanization, crop protection, use of nanotechnology, IT (Information Technology) in agriculture, Zero-budget farming, everything could be covered”, Gangadhar deliberated. “Words have consequences. What we say and how we present will decide how we instill values in the audience in the long run”, Hari averred.

“A fair future for all is our goal”, Giri avouched, drawing the living room curtains after Sunset. He noticed frost on basil leaves growing in a planter in his Verandah. Temperature was coming down with winter setting in though days were still sunny and bright.



Chapter 15

To Himachal and Back

“When you were sharing the joys and angsts of university life with friends, I saw joy drifting through”, Granny told Chakrani and Rudrani when they went to seek her blessings before leaving for college after the autumn break. Work hard and eat a balanced diet there”, Gaura instructed, hugging them before they bent down to touch her feet.

“Ma, apart from spending New Year’s Eve with us, our girls are joining us for the ‘Food Festival and Village Fair’ being held in February at Ujala town”, Gaura shared. A jubilant reaction from her mother-in-law followed.

“We would be there, Ma”, Rudrani assured, closing her overloaded suitcase for the train journey in less than two hours. “That’s like my intelligent girl”, Gaura commended.

“Did you meet SwarnPushp Madam recently, Aunty?”, Chakrani enquired, letting her curiosity switch into a polite query. “Yes dear. My Aunt Raseshwari met us at the Department of Community Development last week. Both SwarnPushp and Gulaabi were there in the meeting. They are relying on you for several activities and tasks. Do meet them on your next visit and motivate classmates from



college to make the upcoming event a success!", Gaura answered. "I will share this vital piece of information with my parents over the phone, now that we have only so much time to pick luggage and say goodbye to them", Chakrani reasoned.

The girls boarded the Cab waving back till the car turned. Chakrani and Rudrani sought Sanskar and Kishori's blessings. The families shared happy moments as neighbors. When they laughed together, the world shifted for the better.

Sanskar kept himself fit and always told Chakrani, "Face the truth. Be the witness to your dreams." His sharp voice resounded. Chakrani could hear him from afar just like she felt the warmth of her mother's hug.

Back in college, Chakrani and Rudrani organized a meeting with faculty and student volunteers in their colleges and shared with them about the upcoming festival and fair in Ujala town.

Prof. Trishla listened and posited, "We will participate in the event actively. Let the invitation letter come from the Department."

She had an influential academic career breaking major institutional barriers to improved campus governance under her leadership. With Prof. Manokamna, she remained committed to advancing women's education through continued work with Government bodies and NGOs. 'We will become the wind beneath their wings' was their motto.

"We could work with community women and showcase regional Indian cooking", Shaina, who had accompanied the batch for the tour to Rudrani's mountain village with Rudrani and fellow students, proposed.

"We closely observed how villagers mitigated food waste through preservation of perishable, surplus produce for use during harsh



winters. They dried unused apples, bottle gourd, apricots, taro, amaranth leaves, tomatoes and pumpkin in the Sun consistently and stored them in jars for use later. They would wipe their mud stoves every time they were used”, Shaina elaborated, recounting faces of soft-hearted hill folk, hiding struggles behind the smile.

“Make the connection and blend scientific knowledge with traditional wisdom they hold, to make a positive difference in their lives”, Prof. Trishla reiterated. “Yes Madam. We could build awareness on metabolic changes and help them integrate in their diets, healthy dietary choices”, Rudrani added.

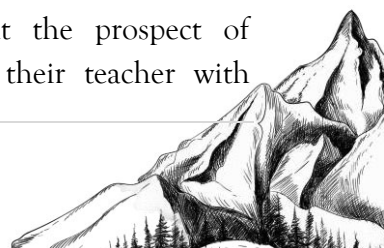
“Under the patient breath of trees, we paused, when the wind paused”, the Teacher Coordinator accompanying the group reflected. “Houses made with eco-friendly materials have always offered comfort through climate extremes”, she ascertained.

“Yes. Mountain people peacefully overcome intricate challenges though loss has changed their inner wiring. Let us meet next week with your ideas to take this forward. We would send the shortlisted ideas to the Department thereafter for approval”, Trishla proposed.

“Thank you, Madam”, the Eco Club volunteers reacted while leaving the classroom, inspired a bit more.

Back in PrasannVan School, Chandan’s presence created spaces of warmth, questioning and possibility for students and their parents alike. “We live in a dynamic, collaborative, deeply connected living ecosystem. Each of you can prepare a talk, demonstration, film, collage, group skit or arrange an exhibition at the ‘Food festival and Village Fair’ to be held at Ujala town”, he announced, during the morning assembly. Loud cheer from the students followed.

The same December day in their classroom, Riddhi and Siddhi who were unable to contain their excitement at the prospect of participating in the festival, conversed with their teacher with



confidence. “Sir, our winter vacations are starting from tomorrow. Could we meet our classmates in the Activity lab to work on a Slide show and skit on the ‘Need for urgent action to Save the Planet’ ”, Riddhi requested.

“We assure you that we would not let our preparations for examinations in January, suffer”, Siddhi vowed, standing behind Riddhi along with other classmates who wished to join them in this endeavor.

Chandan Sir looked pleased with what the girls articulated. “Yes. The Activity Lab shall remain open. You are active students who are also tech-savvy. Make the most of resources at hand. You can take guidance from any of your subject teachers. I stay within school premises, so I can also guide you anytime. Proper Time Management is the key to success. Study hard. I look forward to seeing all your ideas in action. We must send the approved entries to the Department by mid-January”, he pressed, handing out worksheets for all subjects to them for practice.

“Thank you, Sir”, the students squealed, pushing one another, trying to collect the worksheets.

For over a fortnight, both Riddhi and Siddhi along with a team of eight students from different sections met one another at each other’s homes and school. They brought about integrity in imagination through creative endeavors for the February event to leave a lasting impact.

From her rented house, late in the evening, Pyaari spoke to her family.

“Ma, I will represent my college in the ‘Food festival and Village Fair’ being held at Ujala town, in February”, she pledged. “Artificially preserved snacks are common here. Few mothers leave vegetables here to dry under the Sun”, she remarked. “That is good news. It’s



been a while since you came. Work hard for your exams and at this event make your college and our region proud. Food habits are different in plains and mountains. Take the best of each”, her mother guided, her cherubic face flush with contentment from ordinary moments.

“Yes Ma”, Pyaari answered, moving on to chat with her father and siblings.

“There is excitement for what kind of people we will meet at the event. We could have a presentation on eco-friendly techniques of making bricks”, she informed.

The unique spirit and genuine kindness of Pyaari’s family members who traversed generations living in old, dilapidated houses with broken roofs to modern-day cement and brick houses in the village, not for once let them forget that they had a bigger world to belong to.

“I made ‘Katlu’ today. These breads cooked on stove with chopped spinach, garlic leaves and spices were Pyaari’s favorite”, her sister-in-law informed.

“I still relish them”, Pyaari emphasized, sending a kiss to her sister-in-law through the Video Chat.

“I made ‘Kachalu’ with chopped Taro pieces and buttermilk here in my room, two days back”, Pyaari conveyed, watching her brother signal a ‘Wow’ from behind. “Brother, have our broken cow sheds been repaired?”, Pyaari enquired, concerned for the cows in her house.

“Yes Pyaari. These days we are busy gathering as much dried grass as we can. It is already cold and we are leaving no stone unturned to make the cow sheds warm for winters by placing ‘Chalaru’ (dried grass, broken twigs)”, he opened. Pyaari appeared satisfied with her



brother's answer. When she closed the chat with her father wishing her success, scenes from her childhood came before her.

Scenes of her mother making butter at home and the rest of them using twigs and small branches to clean teeth and watching deer graze, flitted before her.

Pyaari invited Chakrani and Rudrani to her place, the subsequent weekend.

“We could make illustrative pamphlets and record Videos of the health benefits of our state's local cuisine and provide additional information about healthy ingredients and alternative recipes. This will build our audience's nutritional literacy”, Pyaari inferred, turning towards the girls for their reactions.

“That is an excellent idea. Our bodies carry wisdom and remain healthy when foods with natural wholeness are consumed. Making of Compost, rainwater harvesting and using hydel energy to grind grain into flour are old practices which need to be harnessed, with changes relevant in these times”, Chakrani enlisted.

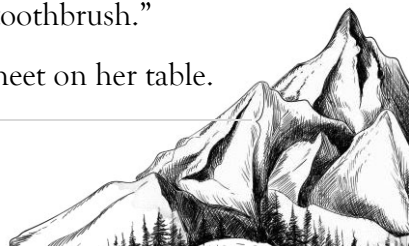
Rudrani smiled and brought a blank sheet and a pen from Pyaari's study table.

Quietly she noted down whatever came to her.

Excitedly, Pyaari snatched the sheet from her, lit a lamp behind the study table and began reading aloud.

“Carom leaves aid in fat loss, stress relief, liver health, kidney stones, cure head aches and respiratory issues. To protect from frost during winters we store vegetables such as lemons, Colocasia, Taro and ginger in a pit for 2-3 months, by covering with ash. ‘Timra’ tree with thorns has leaves which are used as a natural mouth freshener and branches that are used as ‘Daatun’ or primitive toothbrush.”

Rudrani clapped. Pyaari emulated, placing the sheet on her table.



“This is how we would go. Add Vegetable pickle to which Sea Buckthorn juice (‘Surch’ in Kinnauri) was added. That is a delicacy”, Pyaari emphasized.

“Alright, let us meet every evening here and work on this together”, Chakrani apprised.

“Done”, Rudrani notified. “Done”, Pyaari confirmed. The ladies sat on a park bench in front of Pyaari’s rented house before Chakrani and Rudrani departed for their respective hostels.

The nip in the air could be clearly felt by these aspiring professionals away from home on a journey of hope. The trio often walked to the Ridge to witness the vibrant blossoming of Jacaranda and Gulmohar. Love for the ordinary and going out of the way to help others came easily to them.

Over the next one-month, regular evening meetings, after lectures in college during the day and despite the air quality deterioration helped them collaborate on preparing Videos and pamphlets on significant themes.

“We indulged in a fragrant, bubbly facial with wildflower extracts last time I visited home. Both Ma and Granny make hair shampoo using herbs at home”, Rudrani recalled.

“I saw my mother’s aunt in the adjoining village wash clothes with ‘Ganor’ (wild fruit) extract. Her granddaughter-in-law told me that this herb was getting increasingly rare. They have sloping roofs made from thatch and consider Cattle part of family”, Chakrani recalled.

“Isn’t that amazing”, Pyaari exclaimed before the girls got back to their projects. “Cooking fermented rice porridge and using of iron ‘Kadhai’ (deep-bottomed vessel) for added nutrition, Use of Tandoor and layering stoves with ‘Chikni mitti’ or organic soil the same way mud houses are cleaned and coated to keep them warm in winters



and cool in summers are ways of life which when blended with modern practices go a long way in bringing comfort”, Pyaari unraveled.

“This reminds me of ash we used to clean utensils though it sounds outdated now”, Chakrani remarked.

“Few people still follow those habits”, Rudrani highlighted, summing up the discussions with ‘To each his own’, or should it be ‘To each her own’ dictum that she explored through public sensitization on these themes, watching her friends laugh and work together.

“I am thinking of creating a separate Presentation for citizens of Delhi, fellow students and nearby neighborhood residents on how they can reconnect with rhythms of their own breath, hunger, sleep and emotion”, Chakrani said, describing her detailed plan.

“That is a great idea, but when will you do that. We have examinations next month and this event the subsequent month”, Pyaari posed.

“Chakrani, how would we connect with nearby neighborhoods if I were to join you in this initiative?”, Rudrani enquired.

“I take your concerns”, Chakrani answered. “I have classmates who have friends living in nearby localities. I could write a letter seeking permission and describing our intended message. They would forward it there. As for when we can plan this, we have five days between our last exam and the event at Ujala town”, she concluded.

“I admire you for your clarity. Keep it steady”, Pyaari recommended, winding her window blinds down upon Delhi’s glorious Sunset.

“Thank you, Di”, Chakrani replied. “I am in for this”, Rudrani affirmed, sharing the text and layouts she had designed on her laptop for the Nutritional literacy pamphlets to be circulated, for the much-looked-forward to event.



“You are most welcome. Lovely layouts”, Chakrani appreciated, viewing the pamphlet designs being shown by Rudrani.

“Lovely”, Pyaari said in a whistling tone. “The Time slots for Video shoots for the three of us are ready. I would intimate both of you with WhatsApp. We must help one another in making these Videos next week. I will get the set-up ready in the other room”, she decided.

“We have the ring lights. We will bring them next week”, Chakrani planned out. Rudrani nodded in agreement.

It had been a busy day for both Chakrani and Rudrani with laboratory work and assignment sheets to be completed towards preparations for Term examinations.

The friends walked to their hostels together, two kilometers away from Pyaari’s house.

Noticing tents being erected at a community park for a wedding, they reminisced how they attended weddings utilizing an entire day at villages near and far.

“Last winter, we went to a village 8 kms away and attended a wedding of my mother’s cousin during the day. We enjoyed a communal feast and returned to the village. My mother’s brother returned to work in his fields that very evening, before returning home”, Rudrani recounted with pride.



Chapter 16

Students Gear Up For The Festival and Fair

“Many a times, unscrupulous middlemen gave my parents different rates for the produce they sold- Peas, tomatoes and pear. Farmers were always in debt of moneylenders”, Narayani retraced, discussing farming trends with the gaze of an insider, narrating her parents’ relentless journey with Gulaabi, who came to her stall to buy walnut ‘Siddu’ and potato fries for an afternoon meeting with Urban forestry experts who came from all over India, to the Department to share their initiatives.

“Taking out their own share from our unsold produce and selling it ahead for profits, without giving us any money was so common but not anymore”, Narayani called out, sending a warm nod towards Gulaabi, while paying her for the snacks.

“Your parents stand out as shining examples of enterprising cultivators, taking the risk of planting Kiwi in the mountains and reaping success in a span of five years characterized by erratic weather and devastating natural events wreaking havoc”, Gulaabi agreed, promptly making the payment for eatables packed by Narayani.



“Thank you Didi. You understand our unrecognized battles and unsaid words with such sensitivity.”

“Why would I not? My family also uses Power Tiller. Tomorrow we shall be sowing Spring Onions, Spinach and Peas so that we can reap them before frost and harsh winters take over. I make furrows, ridges and flat beds”, Gulaabi explained, defining her schedule.

“You could read about broken wildlife corridors, water crisis and rampant biodiversity loss and become a part of the signature campaign we are carrying out for advocating these concerns”, she suggested.

Narayani promised she would. Her personality emanated the effervescence of an empowered woman.

“Welcome. It is up to the youth to help their communities connect with technology to move forward. In the month of February our department is organizing a Food festival and Village Fair to sensitize and motivate people towards leading economically and environmentally sustaining lives. I wish to invite your parents to share their success story”. Narayani’s eyes lit up at the mention of her parents. “Sure Didi. I will make sure that they attend the event and address the public”, she replied.

“I should hurry. See you”, Gulaabi shouted, rushing to her workplace, half a kilometer away.

After exactly a week, at the juncture of Kali valley and Jwala village, where narrow, winding roads stemming from different mountain ranges merged, Dhara and Narayani bumped into each other.

“Trees have stood through floods, droughts and yet remained rooted, unyielding, alive”, Dhara acclaimed, taking shelter under a tin roof on her way back from the market carrying groceries. Hearing Raindrops, Dhara and Narayani who had known one another for



about three years, chatted animatedly under a rusted make-shift roof meant to store produce kept by vendors, who fetched and sold it on their backs. They knew each other because they had studied at the same Coaching Center.

“Trees are a living philosophy of endurance”, Narayani testified, listening to wind sounds through trees. Roots, berries, figs, leaves and fruits are meant for wildlife as well. I was pounced upon by monkeys so had to get rabies injection done just now from the Clinic in the market.

“Oh. Do take care”, Dhara whispered.

“My garden has Mulberry, ‘Sheesham’ (Indian Rosewood) and Neem trees with grand shade and majestic canopy”, Narayani shared. “I have a Peepal tree which survives in pollution and absorbs Carbon dioxide, a Mulberry tree, a Jamun tree, Malta trees and ‘Goolhar’ trees (known for healing powerfully), in my garden”, Dhara replied, exchanging a laugh with her friend.

“Satisfaction of walking barefoot on grass needs to be felt to be internalized. I have used Towel stands and soap cases made from recycled materials in my Homestay. Wedges for mirrors tucked into the nooks of the house are all made using re-processed wood. To promote local industry, I have hung handloom curtains made by local weavers ”, she boasted.

“This is noteworthy. I also use natural products as much as possible at my restaurant. It is because of the thriving Kitchen garden nurtured by my parents that I can run a modest restaurant and earn a decent income”, Narayani revealed, her face infused with a sense of gratitude.

“Do get in touch with SwarnPushp Madam and Gulaabi Didi at the Department of Community Development and see how you could



participate in the 'Food festival and Village fair' they are organizing in the month of February."

"That is wonderful. I shall do the needful. Thanks for sharing this vital information", Dhara replied.

Once rain stopped, the sound of rustling leaves crunching under the feet of passers-by amplified. The girls, now working women, parted ways.

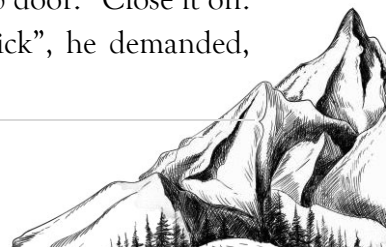
At school, during winter vacations, on a day when the air was bitterly cold, Riddhi and Siddhi worked on a presentation together on 'Sustainability for inclusive global growth, Entanglement of Capitalism and Climate crisis'.

The Activity Lab had been opened for them, and they awaited arrival of three other students who were to work with them for the event.

"We played till the streetlights flickered on in our younger days. Our teachers combined fun and meaningful activities for their students to be able to step into the next academic year more confident, skilled and college -ready. We hope to do the same for you all", Chandan offered, observing the student team at work.

"Thank you, Sir. We wish to welcome a new morning and secure a sustainable future. Sustainable energy transition strategies towards clean energy and mass adoption of AI could address existing vulnerabilities. We will prepare a Visual presentation and stage a skit on these themes", Riddhi unveiled. "Very well. People know what they are capable of and have an inherent kindness. To combat erosion, pollution, coastal zone disaster, storm surges and microplastic pollution, innovative nature-based solutions compatible with our cultural practices are needed", Chandan mulled over.

A cold drift of air came through the Activity Lab door. "Close it off. We do not want you to catch a cold or fall sick", he demanded,



worried about his students' safety. The windows were tightly fastened.

"I will close it Sir", the aged School Peon answered, serving hot cups of cardamom tea to Chandan Sir and the students.

"We could predict disasters not so long ago but now everything is uncontrolled. With loss of livelihoods and displacement, it is getting difficult to survive. Because of skewed development, geographical limitations are becoming a hurdle instead of strength. Ancient wisdom still teaches us to regulate ecological balance by making rational choices", he prescribed and closed the door.

"In a world splintered by greed, gifts we can give are presence and kindness. But all is not lost. We are making global strides in restorative medicine, and a growing social network is taking away the anxiety of Senior citizens, helping them move forward with optimism", said Chandan.

"I believe you Sir. I move my body all day and practice gentle breathing to stay fit. It is important to embrace the little moments and have happy thoughts", the Peon chattered and collected the empty cups before leaving.

"Embrace your power and celebrate quiet miracles", Chandan enjoined, turning towards the five students who had braved cold winds to reach school to work in a team.

"Extreme cold wave conditions, dense fog conditions in winters, strong heatwaves in summers, Floods and waterlogging after seasonal and unseasonal downpours, earthquakes and Tsunamis, we are living life precariously", Siddhi deliberated, her facial expressions reflective of the concerns she spoke about. "Rapid urbanization has contributed to the expanding sprawl. Impact of cloudbursts gets compounded when urban and rural design fail to factor in localized



faults. Climate patterns, human behavior and reckless development are inter-related”, Siddhi stated.

“Nice to know that you are reading up”, Chandan commented. Siddhi folded her hands to acknowledge her teacher’s appreciation.

Three students sat together working on a script for a skit on these themes, their chuckles intermittently adding puffs of warmth in the cold weather. Dressed in cozy knits and stylish boots to walk through thin layers of snow from home to school and woolen caps covering their hair neatly tied in plaits, the three girl students looked like dolls and the two boys’ resembled Santa Claus.

“I hope your parents are coming in the evening to take you home. Complete all tasks at school this week. Next week gets colder all the way into January”, Chandan laid out, concerned about the students.

“Yes Sir,” they answered in chorus. A student from the group of three, working on the Skit script conveyed the essence and said, “Growing interconnections between AI (Artificial Intelligence) and energy and how AI will be deployed to forecast and optimize hybrid solar-wind-battery plants and ensure 24/7 access to renewable energy will be talked about in our story.”

“We will bring to light the importance of reducing use of non-renewable resources and mindless production, reusing and recycling of resources”, the second student shared.

“We would also throw light on the need for keeping indoor air fresh, prioritizing sleep and the urgent need for cleaning rivers”, the third student added.

The group enjoyed a picnic lunch with Chandan Sir, on the school lawns gleaming with filtering sunrays through trees.



“Light is fading. Let’s wrap up. You have four more days to go so do not worry”, Chandan announced, handing out Malta oranges plucked by the gardener from trees in the lawn to the students.

Glee on faces of his students illuminated a million stars, as they tried to receive their share from him.

The school atrium was filled with chatter when parents came to receive their children as dusk broke. Chandan returned to his house inside the school premises, feeling rejuvenated. While observing his students, he recognized that when Opportunity met talent, creativity blossomed.

Over the next four days of December, the enthusiastic team prepared the skit script and design for the Visual presentation. “I do not mean to contain their energy, but to make your parents realize a need for work-life balance”, Chandan clarified. “Have a vision for yourself. Join the Summer camp we will organize, over the summer vacations next year. It will help you build leadership skills”, he commanded, supervising their efforts. Reading the newspaper, he continued, “This Web Portal for youth would be beneficial in matching skills and employment opportunities for youth. Investments in AI are set to boost skill development and foster infrastructure development”, he anticipated, looking towards his students immersed in their respective activities. “Yes Sir. Summer is a time for self-discovery and growth. I will join the Summer Camp and enroll online courses for skill-based learning”, Siddhi marked out, putting out a clear-cut goal for her to achieve.

“Time for some gluten-free goodness. Try these millet crepes I made at home yesterday”, Chandan offered, opening a stainless-steel tiffin box from which aroma of fresh food emanated. Children took turns to wash hands and relish the snack offering, from their teacher.



“Explore interests and build your profile during summer vacations. Read career- inspiring books. Lead the Artificial Intelligence (AI) era”, Chandan emphasized, inspiring students and acknowledging their appreciation for the tasty crepes. “Schools will become innovation hubs in the near future”, he estimated, before deciding to let the children concentrate. Wide reading had given him in-depth world knowledge, and he wished that students gained from the benefits of keeping themselves abreast of current affairs and historic events.

Life unfolded slowly, enabling personal growth because of introspection for the old and young alike. Trees, bare and patient held meaning in both their emptiness and blossoming.

Back in University in New Delhi, watching a Florist tie myriad flowers to make flower bouquets shrouded with pink crepe paper, cellophane, spray on glitter, spangles, tinsel, scotch-taped into bamboo stalks, at a shop in the market close to their respective Colleges, they were reminded of how freely they plucked and piled a big mound of flowers back home for special festivals and occasions. Upon reaching their respective hostels, they bid each other goodbye.

After settling down, Chakrani called up Rudrani wanting to share her thoughts. “I applied pure rose oil made at home and it has surely soothed my nerves”, Chakrani called Rudrani sharing how she felt from her hostel room.

“Nice to know that. I made honey tea for relief from a sore throat, using one of my hostel friend’s electric kettles to warm water. The same honey was made by us at home. Ma had packed it in a tiny vial for me, on my last trip”, Rudrani upheld.

The friends promised to meet the next evening at Pyaari’s house after a busy day at college, a step towards earning them a bright future.



Moon's bright beams spun the thread of dreams under the gentle hush of night. She knew rather well how to turn in extreme exhaustion by gathering strength, to come about more alert.

The next morning Rudrani wore a light orange cardigan knitted by her grandmother. Over lunch on Campus, a classmate reacted, "These sweaters are warmer than the readymade ones we wear. My mother used to knit for me when I was younger. You are lucky that you get to wear these even now."

Rudrani smiled, her heart swelling with pride.

"Yes, you are right. My grandmother still buys bunches of wool and knits for us. Lucky I am. Thanks", she reasserted, acknowledging the candid appreciation.

Late into the night, Chakrani wrote introductory script for capturing Video footage of her speaking about nutrition followed by sharing of healthy recipes and important lifestyle tips to boost immunity.

Universe is a living presence. We let the body choose the pace by remaining attuned to the smallest signals. Behind the smile lies a quiet storm. Thus, we need to see with softer eyes and listen with deeper hearts. This is a series on 'Miracle Superfoods'.

Settled under her blanket, she realized how her desire to give advice and wanting to help others was coming true. There was scope for learning and for making a difference in others' lives.



Chapter 17

Ujala Town: Nurturing Success

It was time for Fairy, Pari, Peter and Fun to visit Ujala town in Himachal Pradesh for the Internship Program at the Department of Community Development. Upon reaching, they were accorded a grand welcome at the State University. They were students at the Center for Environmental Research in Bangalore. The University transformed Science education by incorporating activity-based learning and scientific experiments in the curriculum. Pari aspired to become a feisty Journalist, one who questioned and identified matters of social justice. Peter was a curious student while both Fun and Fairy closely observed impact of geographical and environmental factors on human activities, livelihoods and public health.

The steady march of time led everyone to the 'Food Festival and Village Fair'. It was inaugurated by the Chief Minister with much fanfare. Music created a cultural spectacle on one side of the open ground. Beats dropped and the Park came alive. Two consecutive days of high-octane action schedule were here with a promise to offer learning, fun, a dip into the cultural ethos and natural products on sale being shared by those manning the stalls.



Presentations were on the theme of Environment, Education, Climate Challenges, healthy diets, food choices and individual success stories along with co-operative movements' milestones.

The clock whispered a constant reminder over the last six months with all participants from within the state of Himachal Pradesh and other states gearing up for the event step-by-step.

The air was alive with the rhythm of music and pulsating drumbeats. Adding glitz to the dazzling atmosphere were young local children and adults performing dances in small groups.

Senior citizens from nearby districts added a warm presence, uplifting the spirit of the young performers.

There were over eighty stalls weaving together the rich cultural heritage and culinary legacy of the region.

Chakrani and Rudrani's presentation and stall were weaving a culinary tapestry, one dish at a time.

Decorated with Platters of sweets and nuts, they served 'Ogla Chilta', 'Koda Chilta', 'Favra Chilta' which were local pancakes made using different cereals available locally.

"The 'Chilta' looks like Crepe", Peter reviewed. "Fermented vegetables are rich in probiotics, bioactive compounds and micronutrients. Fermentation eliminates anti-nutritional factors and addresses micro-nutrient deficiencies, contributing to prevention and management of non-communicable diseases", Chakrani explained visitors coming to the stall to taste the snacks. Rudrani conveyed her opinions and ideas gently when curious children asked her questions about the benefits of warming Ragi malt drink made from Finger millet, rich in Calcium, Iron and Fiber.

"Who are these?", a group of five teachers asked Rudrani, pointing towards Fairy, Fun, Pari and Peter.



“Fairy, Pari, Peter and Fun are students. They are studying in Bangalore. They came here and joined the Summer Internship program with the Department of Community Development last year. They visited The Himalayan Nature Park yesterday”, Rudrani answered. Fairy greeted the teachers, dressed in a well-tailored overcoat feeling a contrast in the rush of wind in the mountains and at Sea. Fun wore a beige muffler presented to him by his father especially for the trip. Peter wore a pleated pantsuit while Fun wore a structured shirt and a pair of formal trousers.

Such was the anticipation held by their teachers and parents over the last two months, that they knew they had to put their best foot forward.

Fairy, Fun, Peter and Pari proceeded to see the stall put together by Riddhi, Siddhi and their classmates. Riddhi had decorated the stall with organic cotton flower coasters, she had crocheted, an art her mother taught her and her sister Siddhi.

At the impeccably illustrated stall, Vaikunth was busy holding brief talks throughout the day, addressing multiple groups visiting the stall on Global Health challenges and the need for going for regular health check-ups. “The Talk on local Public and Private health care system was informative. I would like to invest in your startup”, a foreigner from Europe came about, initiating an investment offer. “Thank you so much. It will be a noble initiative. I assure you there is a lot we can do together. You are welcome to work with us”, Giri answered and handed out a brochure to him. Chandrashekhar, Hari and Gangadhar interacted with scores of visitors, wanting to know more about the health care Application they had proposed in the Presentation on stage and about the Core team set up in districts and Blocks to enhance health services delivery to local populations.



Overeager influencers, enthusiastic youth claiming to be inveterate foodies and regional and national Food writers captured how the festival and the messages it communicated found resonance with diverse audiences through Video footage, interviews and articles in newspapers.

“Through the Social Innovation and Incubation Mission and Global traditional knowledge Repository, we can make informed choices”, Minister of Social Development and Culture who was the Chief Guest, proclaimed.

“You all have traveled a journey carved out of grit, audacity and a refusal to be boxed in. Enhancing nutritional quality, timely lifestyle changes and rising popularity of gut health and fermented foods as displayed in stalls here, will prevent long-term health risks”, Minister of Food and Agriculture professed to thunderous applause.

When a schoolteacher, a school student and a Primary Health Center worker spoke about their work in environment conservation, promoting nutrition education and delivering health services to the community, focusing on shared challenges and shared triumphs, the over 50,000 strong audience clapped with few children clambering on top of their chairs.

Riddhi dressed in a delicate drape from Himachal Pradesh’s folk costume repertoire was in a vibrant fabric in red. Her slicked back hair added a somber look to her petite frame. “We need to ignite imagination and begin fresh thinking. We are grappling with devastating geological events, as is evident in increase in frequency of landslides. As we support those displaced and hold compassion for the ongoing struggles of disaster victims, we must remember our softness and sacred connection to all living things and to Mother Nature.”

The audience went into a rapturous round of revelry.



Taking hold of the microphone after the Presentation and Riddhi's speech, Siddhi enounced, "Hold strength and vulnerability together. In every action, ensure that you are adopting renewable energy and completing tasks that through a mindful approach."

Chandan experienced a feeling of pride after the Presentation. He smiled and waved at them, sitting at the Stuffed toys and Hemp bags Counter.

It had been an exhilarating journey, for the students and their Craft teacher who had painstakingly turned to craft from natural materials collected over a period of one month and turned into toys and bags over another. Energetic choreography of students from Siddhi's troupe performance, exhibited striking discipline, teamwork and two months of careful preparation.

"How we guide without controlling is worth thinking about?", Giri said to Chandan, seated behind the dignitaries, in the audience. Expressive faces and infectious energy of the youngest performers won repeated affectionate applause from parents and guests.

"Yes, it is a learning experience for these children", Chandan agreed, offering Pecans mixed with ground rice husk he bought from a stall, to Giri. "The child can imagine himself or herself do things he or she could not earlier. Through participation in such events, they have discovered their own capabilities", Hari delved in after his team's Presentation, addressing a friend who worked in the armed forces. They were neighbors since they were kids. "Yes. We do it all the time. One must let courage grow slowly. Build a steady and resilient spirit", he mentored, turning towards his own children, nudging him to show them around. When the occasion demanded, he could be extraordinarily firm and emphatic.

Loud crackles and thumps reverberated across the large lawn covered with make-shift roofs. The visitors were greeted by blue skies.



Rush of wind carried with it the feeling that one could open one's eyes to a field of wonder.

"We walked to the event past lovely gardens and woods. It is on reaching here that we were jostled in by other tourists", a foreign tourist chipped in, appearing enthusiastic for what lay ahead. "I bought this Cashmere shawl yesterday. It is quite warm", she highlighted, showing her grey shawl with pink flowers to another tourist from Europe she had befriended at the fair.

"I bought this Pashmina shawl", the lady perpended, enjoying Pumpkin sweet treats she bought from a stall. "Try these", she offered to her new friend. "It is gratifying to see enterprising people become self-reliant", the lady wearing the Cashmere shawl adverted. The friends chuckled happily and decided to explore the fair together for some time.

Alokika, Ujali and Titli took charge of selling Water Chestnut flour cookies, beetroot and carrot candies, offering light sweetness and natural energy.



Chapter 18

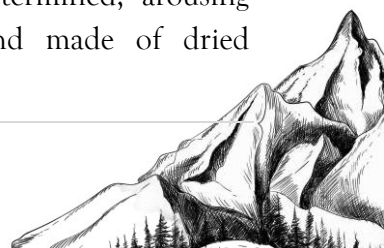
Performances Galore

A small-town local girl in a red -yellow printed suit with braided hair tied with ribbons enacted a One-Act Play, expressing the message that above the tumult of everyday living, nature never failed to inspire with beauty. Through crisp dialogue delivery, she brought out the significance of mindful consumption, reuse and reimagination of materials and discard some habits. On a Placard, she had written ‘Microplastics disrupt hormones, impair gut health and increase inflammation by interfering with our long-term metabolic function’.

“Always ask for a ceramic cup”, she suggested, retreating backstage, carrying her own stainless-steel tumbler.

“We do. I do.” Such expressions echoed, with children and adults expressing that they followed these suggestions all the time.

“Juicy Persimmon fruits are hung to dry. They look like edible ornaments, don’t they?”, Chakrani picked out, jumping on stage before turning to Rudrani to say her lines. “They do. They are so nutritive. Mash them into seasonal treats. Their mild flavor blended with spices, yoghurt, nuts and mixed into warm bakes gets us something delicious every time”, Rudrani determined, arousing audience’s interest in a deep brown garland made of dried



Persimmon fruit she was holding. The audience clapped, impressed by their energy and skill in communicating meaningful messages.

Peter concluded his speech and exited after the Presentation and demonstration. “Grief changes shape. It never goes away. We brought hope for those who lost family members because of flooding”, an aged man seated with his wife as audience at the ‘Food Festival and Village Fair’ shared with pragmatic Peter.

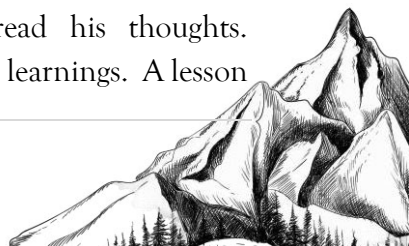
“Your team’s performance was impactful”, the aged man’s wife appreciated. Peter bowed in acknowledgement. We are dressed in folk attire as we belong to hilly region. The aged woman wore a red embroidered dress adorned with geometric and folk motifs with a green scarf draped gracefully over her head. Her husband wore a green velvet ‘Kinnauri’ cap, a green striped shirt styled with a chunky belt and a white pair of trousers.

“Do visit that stall there, young man. After flooding left them jobless last year, we set up a small training center for women and then employed them on our small piece of land, adding more varieties of fruits and vegetables to our existing spread. We make a decent income”, the man revealed.

“That is commendable. We will visit the stall once my friends wind up from the stage. All the best”, Peter wished and rushed back to help get the installations they had used, off the stage.

“Adversities in life will make you test your limits”, Peter remembered his father’s words just before he joined the graduation course. “Always choose self-respect over approval and flow like water through complicated, challenging dynamics”, his mother had added. Peter felt grateful for their concern and thought he had lots to share with them when he returned home.

Fun, who had known him for a while, read his thoughts. “Sometimes, what others experience also gives us learnings. A lesson



in self-sufficiency or how making questionable decisions can bear results in the long run, isn't it", the aged man put forth.

"Absolutely, my friend", Peter responded flinging his right arm around Fun's new friend, walking through the fair with cheery camaraderie.

A folk performer embodied a girl-next-door vibe with a pink dupatta over her head and a floral kameez. She sported a regal look which was accessorized with a layered piece. Her smoky eyes highlighted the depiction of an irate, village woman starving for food and water in a desert landscape.

Pyaari wore a deep red fitted blouse with oxidized silver, tribal jewelry, hair center-parted and tucked under a headscarf. She conversed with the performer on stage on water scarcity. Through the act, they went ahead with sharing with the audience about Applications and services which offered real-time insights on soil health, weather and pest control and how important it was to train rural women to operate drones, spray fields, map crops, ensure efficiency and earn livelihood.

"She looks stunning in an elegant silver jewelry set. The way she emotes and communicates about ways to store and conserve water, engages the audience drawing their attention", Fairy remarked. She recalled Pyaari having shared with her the need to feel the connection with a live audience from stage and wondered if it was happening that way for Pyaari.

"Yes. The audience is enjoying", Pari reacted, cheering the performers on stage.

"Let us visit the stall of the aged couple", Peter verbalized, leading Pari, Fairy and Fun towards the opposite side of the tented premises. Peter was far more sensitive than he revealed.



Fun was excited as he considered fairs and festivals a living room for stories and was witnessing them play out in unique ways right in front of his eyes.

There were stalls which brought about the urgent need for e-waste management, another which displayed and sold items made from natural resources, promoting the practice of conscious luxury. Stalls with fresh flowers, Pomelo fruits and Apples laid out, attracted scores of customers.

The old man smiled happily and welcomed the foursome to the stall. Soft retreating winter sunlight illuminated his wrinkled, reddened face.

“It is so satisfying to see them earn proudly and support their families”, Fairy affirmed. “I sell my fruits from my orchard to a Confectionary shop where they use them to make puddings, parfaits and no-fuss sweets”, a middle-aged lady wearing the local dress shared. “That is impressive”, Pari complimented. The friends bought dried eatables spiced and packaged by the enterprising team into various sweet and savory eats.

“We watched your performance. It was relevant and interesting”, the lady validated. Fairy thanked the women entrepreneurs’ group and the aged couple. Together, the friends walked out of the stall, emboldened by way of the speeches to not abandon one’s own voice and not stay unheard.

A middle-aged couple from Shimla ran an organization for people with disabilities and sold furniture to gather funds for non-profit. The perfumes they sold were steam distilled from organic flowers, hand blended in small batches were taken well by customers.

“Feels like we entered a garden, around this stall, one that draws you in”, Pari weighed.



“Yes. I saw a few hill folks make grass slippers and shoes when we visited Rudrani’s Jwala village”, Fairy replied, crossing the fragrance stall. Pari took in a whiff after twiddling her fingers around scents of Jasmine and Wild rose packed in recycled cotton scrap boxes, in ‘Ittar’ (Oil-infused fragrances) bottles.

Fairy went into a reverie of sorts when she inhaled the heady scents. Worries felt smaller, time felt slower and perspectives on subjects she studied felt clearer.

“Wow. Amazing traditions continue to add color to their lives despite the ground constantly shifting. The trip to Himachal Pradesh was like a tour of a colorful prism situated at the roof of the world. We will go again for sure”, Pari anticipated, placing Fairy’s paisley-patterned shrug she bought from Shimla, around her neck when it blew off position due to a heavy gust of wind. “Yes. We will”, Fairy seconded, proceeding to answer a call by her mother, looking forward to her return to Bangalore.



Chapter 19

United We Stand

The next morning, both Alokika and Ujali took out a Signature campaign at the event venue before the Presentations started. The numerous stalls were still being set up back again and visitors had only started coming in. A feisty group of twenty University and twenty school students marched, holding Placards that said,

‘Keep hills trash-free and embrace Waste to Wealth technology to choose a sustainable future’.

“Find real solutions for the biggest Pollution challenges. Say Yes to Afforestation. Say No to Plastic pollution”, Ujali urged, using a portable microphone. “Recycle E-waste responsibly by enabling doorstep pickup of gadgets”, Alokika reasserted, smiling at other Bloggers, Vloggers and Media personnel, adeptly capturing their march around the festival venue. Another team of students went about taking signatures of guests on the same themes on another sheet of paper, as and when they arrived.

The crisp, sunny February day started with an imaginative and playful production contrasting different eras—those filled with nature, innocence and quiet beauty and ones filled with machines and high-end technology. Young children expressed how the right balance of



indigenous knowledge and technological advancements could make the world more stable today.

Chandan, who had the ability to convey abstract ideas to the masses engagingly, spoke about green initiatives, Plastic-free alternatives and the necessity of thinking on the right track. Giri took the microphone subsequently and shared information about prohibition of certain insecticidal chemicals and synthetic substances that posed a risk to human health.

“Inhalable microplastic smaller than 10 micrometers, harm us. Toxic pollutants such as heavy metals and hormone-disrupting compounds wreak havoc inside living organisms”, Giri emphasized.

The vibe was always buzzing at the park. By evening, over one hundred thousand visitors had visited the fair.

The Grand Finale was marked by sincere slogan chanting on key environment and nutrition themes with both adults and children taking to the stage and standing up on the audience side to take an oath towards charting a journey creating a Pollution-free future.

Food stalls served lip-smacking regional and national cuisine treats. Yak rides and Horse-riding activities kept enthusiastic children and youth engaged while folk dances and food kiosks reached audience with the magic of music and lip-smacking food.

SwarnPushp shook hands with each and every College Volunteer and Stall owner who had accompanied her and Gulaabi for the event, as part of the team from the hill state endowed with pristine beauty.

“To give life to dreams, we need to keep picking ourselves and moving forward. Painful struggles granted them the necessary growth. Keep the adventurous spirit up. Be bold and continue to remain passionate in what interests you.” The entrepreneurs thanked



her for supporting them by inviting them to a new city to sell their products. Laughter and cheer resounded. The twenty-five-member strong group performed a NATI dance to celebrate the event's success.

Wrapping her hands around a steaming mug of coffee, SwarnPushp congratulated all her colleagues for the success of the event.

Gulaabi and Raseshwari bought good-old Jaggery tea from a stall. Raseshwari had utilized organic raw materials and involved her village's youth to erect a large tree displaying the message 'Knowing trees is knowing peace'.

"You made an impact", Chandan shouted, appreciating the school students' efforts. "Yes. The audience was inspired by your Presentations and activities", SwarnPushp reiterated, turning towards Chakrani, Rudrani, Riddhi and Siddhi. "Thank you, Sir," Chakrani replied. "Thank you, Madam", Siddhi accepted in utmost humility. Gulaabi bought steamed and fried millet delicacies for Durga and Saraswati who had taken a round of the fair half an hour before the Grand Finale. They had known her for long and looked forward to attending the event.

"You nailed the Signature Campaign", Vaikunth gushed, turning towards Alokika and Ujali. "Thank you, Sir, Ujali reciprocated. "We have learnt a lot yesterday and today", she spelled out. "The last few months have made us read so much. Preparing for this event has enriched our understanding on various issues", Alokika admitted. "You were our beacons of inspiration", Tara thanked, winding up the meditation curios she had arranged in her stall. SwarnPushp smiled. Giri patted Fun and Peter, on the shoulder, as a gesture to communicate that he was lauding their efforts.

The last two weeks had seen all of them interact at the Zonal Block office in the run-up for this very event.



“I will visit your house as many locals filled me in on the healing aura it exudes. The session at your stall yesterday was an eye-opener. It seems as if a world of silence is dormant below the noise”, a lady foreign tourist reflected.

Tara folded her hands and replied, “Sure Madam. Thank you.”

“We will follow the Nature Walk idea once we return back through busy work schedules”, the lady’s husband added.

“Manifesting peace of mind will help you embody kindness and empathy. We expand our field of grace when we nurture spiritual thoughts and understand their connection with music, dance and literature”, Hari who was overhearing the conversation, preached. He gave a brief introduction to the couple about himself and invited them to his house.

“We will definitely come. The fair was a kaleidoscope of varied sights, ideas and sounds for us”, the lady announced. “You would sense wholeness in your being once you start meditating. It is like finding home in an unhomely world”, Tara’s mother emphasized, handing out her visiting card to them.

Rudrani and Riddhi ran to meet their parents who praised their performance and blessed them before proceeding to the Food Court.



Chapter 20

Lively, Interactive Fair

A stall selling handmade paper products and paper jewelry, drew scores of visitors for their craft and design. Hari demonstrated how dexterity was important in crafting them. Since the emphasis was on using a biodegradable resource, the impact would be deeper, he knew. Hari addressed visitors in batches. He lectured with authority. “Release fear. See success from a spiritual angle. Act towards achieving goals by surrendering your intentions. Step up to a new dimension. It is the beginning of a new era for us when trans-disciplinary knowledge works together with contemporary approaches. Remain in strong energy and tap into your intuition. Follow your passion to write a new success story.” There was a marked rise in enthusiasm of the visitors every time he addressed a new batch. Through those two days, he estimated to having addressed over 10,000 visitors at his stall.

“City-bred kids get wide-eyed taking in the breathtaking beauty of snowy landscapes whenever they visit the mountains”, SwarnPushp told Trishla while seeing her off the next day. “Yes. I accompanied University students once. Guided activities were well-structured. Local tourism operators were helpful”, Trishla reported. “All is well. We have Viewpoint visits. Natural vantage spots are safe as families,



tourists, locals and vendors form constant movement. We are planning trips to Tier-1 cities, Tier -2 cities and smaller towns for spreading awareness about the importance of keeping the mountains and plains clean”, SwarnPushp effused. “The idea is fascinating”, Trishla remarked.

“Indeed, Madam. Look at how litter is damaging the pristine beauty of our region”, SwarnPushp raised, showing Trishla over a dozen photographs of garbage near lakesides, riverbanks and mountain tops.

“I will mail the students’ itinerary to you”, SwarnPushp declared, opening the car door for Trishla’s ride back to New Delhi. “Do that. I will discuss with my Seniors how our students could collaborate with your team. They could stay on our Campus and hold an event for our students as well”, Trishla suggested. “I would do so, Madam. Have a safe journey”, SwarnPushp bade, closing the car door gently.

Looking through her car window, Trishla noticed high-altitude plateaus. On roof tops of many houses, solar panels were mounted at an angle. She thought about how in cities across the Indo-Gangetic plains, fog, smog and particulate matter scatter and absorb sunlight. As if her Driver read her thoughts, she noticed him pointing towards a Solar panel. “Madam, my wife’s maternal home is also in the mountains. She shares how with her siblings she would be digging holes in the field and storing vegetables to save them from frost and use them in winters. I have seen how under low winter Sun, intensity of light gets reduced as thin snow layers on solar panels reduce electricity generation”, he recounted. Sitting on the stumps of a fallen tree, a group of hill children waved at them.

The ladies waved back, generous blue expanse and a softly flowing brook keeping them mesmerized.



“I understand. As renewable sources of cost-effective energy, they are of great use. Full potential of solar energy needs to be harnessed. When heavy, wet snow block panels entirely, stored energy comes to use. Weak winter Sun warms the solar panel surface lightly”, Trishla specified, capturing a series of waterfalls in the camera of her mobile phone.

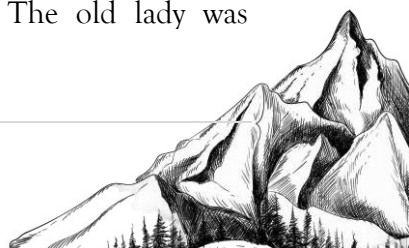
Manokamna joined her from a guest house nearby. The next halt for the Professors after a successful event they had been working on for months was a tea stall, where aromatic tea leaves steeped patiently in a pot.

Fragrance of wildflowers filled the air outside the stall. A young girl and her grandmother poured tea for them and paired it with crisp biscuits. A brief interaction ensued thereafter. Just when her guests were about to leave, the old lady vocalized her thoughts and said, “Sun’s energy and Moon’s energy give us physical and emotional power. Mark my words. Nature teaches us that being in the present moment lets us renew connect with our soul.” “Indeed”, Trishla agreed. Manokamna bought a hand-knitted muffler and scarf displayed by the young girl on a wooden table. “My mother knits them. She knits beautiful shawls though it takes a lot of her time”, the girl confided.

“These are bright and warm. I will buy these”, Manokamna confirmed.

“Really”, the girl exclaimed with delight and began packing the selected woolens in separate brown envelopes. “God bless you”, the grand lady whispered when Manokamna paid, bidding goodbye to the hardworking women.

Trishla handed down packets of five types of millet she had been presented at the event to the grandmother. The old lady was



pleasantly surprised, almost in tears. Gentle, unassuming moments did make the world a better place.

“How people here are not flown away by every storm, is worth learning from”, Trishla contemplated, watching the yellow of mustard flowers, spread out across the land that changed from mountainous to plain terrain as they approached home.

This event had been an opportunity to facilitate positive change by creating an avenue of opportunities for young people and those wishing to build a real, meaningful connection with their land.

“A very personal kind of fire ignites the aspirations of these ordinary people. With this festival in the mountains, we shall be bringing forth an exuberant variety of voices and stories ”, Manokamna brought forth.

Long queues formed outside kiosks of enterprising hill people. Laughter filled the air. Dhara showcased Closet fumigants she made using essential oils she sourced from local women and used in her Homestay.

“Establish sustainable artisan-based institutions. We aspire to build marketing linkages for people from different districts of Himachal Pradesh. This will help them get orders from all over India and assure their participation in marketing events through networks they become a part of”, the Chief Guest laid out.

His speech was well received. “We have attended Skill assessment and capacity building classes sponsored by a non-profit organization and it has helped us come this far”, a man selling woolen garments expressed.

“When the Government works with the people and private social organizations, a lot gets achieved”, he concluded.



“These are natural and not chemical-based. We also have skin creams composed of apricot and walnut oil on sale”, Dhara explained. “We compost kitchen waste and produce organic jaggery. The food stall I run is made of Organic bamboo”, Narayani mentioned, closely observing the spectators and hoping they would have a perspective change.

Vaikunth, Giri, Hari, Chandrashekhar and Gangadhar were friends who had come a long way. “From mending rickety fences in one another’s homes together to enjoying Ethical Birding and from cheering every catch and shouting for every boundary together, to preparing for this event as a team!”, Hari reminisced. “True. We must appreciate such tender, quiet moments that life gifts us”, Giri agreed.

“Youngsters want to fly away to greener pastures. Moved to new rhythms set by modern technology, they make businesses more efficient”, Vaikunth hinted, playing the Audio-Visual over a Projector screen at the event. “I admire the way they collaborate to get things done”, Giri played up, watching milling crowds jostle for space at the event.

“Increase awareness towards AI, enable skilling for AI readiness and leverage AI to deliver on agriculture, healthcare, education and delivery of services for the people”, Giri delineated, when a small group of professionals working in the IT Sector reacted on the Audio-Visual on display.

“Sir, Proper policy and safeguards to thwart the risk that AI may deepen existing inequalities, are urgently required”, a visitor from the audience vocalized.

“We advance on the path of self-reliance by expanding cooperation across key technologies and innovation domains. A balance between



leveraging AI and deploying human power will be reached”, Giri answered.

“Promote ideals of tolerance, inclusivity and social harmony by strengthening social protection, enhancing minimum wage standard frameworks and building institutional capacity”, Vaikunth remarked, staring intently at the keen visitors to see if they seemed satisfied with the reply.

Over an informal chit-chat with Vaikunth, a select group of visitors talked about their struggles and aspirations candidly. “My father is a farmer. At the age of eighty, he works on the farm every day with my brothers. Faith, hope, respect for nature, importance of time, hard work and surrender are virtues we have learnt from him. His life is a living echo of his years in the field”, Vaikunth narrated. University students listened to him with rapt attention. “My father who is his father’s best friend, reconciles multiple dimensions with vigor. He retired from Defense services and has added up a new pursuit. He prevents sale of fake seeds and fertilizers with a few friends”, Giri added. “Indeed. They are examples of how we can keep walking with high standards. They have got name, fame and respect because of their work”, Hari glossed, taking the microphone from Giri. “Thank you for motivating us”, a student yelled, before the group exited the stall.

“Our students will use art to communicate changes”, Chandan notified.

“I will address school students in batches while we are here, Sir”, Rudrani volunteered.

“Alright. You may address as many batches as possible. Few among those will accompany us to the city festival next month”, Chandan expected.



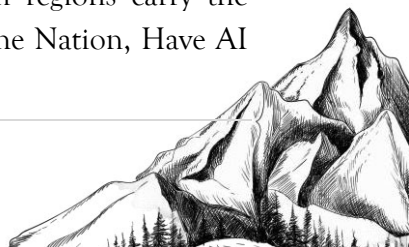
“That is fine, Sir. We are sensitizing them and that is what is important”, Chakrani stressed, handing over a write-up she had written on Vegan bags and Vegan cosmetic brands to Chandan for his comments.

“I will share my feedback with you. Interacting with grown-up kids like you keep us teachers on the go. All the best. Make use of the next three days you have here to interact with our students”, Chandan replied and proceeded to the staff room.

“We will, Sir”, Chakrani abided. “Thank you, Sir,”, Rudrani remarked. There was a spring in their step since they sensed courage within themselves, the confidence needed to make use of opportunities. “We as your teachers and Mentors want to give your energy a task, challenge and direction. So, move ahead. Sky is the limit”, Chandan exulted attempting to boost the morale of all students. Climbing the twisting stairs, behind the Primary School building complex, to see if there were any costumes left from previously staged school plays, he realized they were charting the right path with the themes selected for the event. Sight of the Sun breaking through an overcast sky allowed him to invite his friends over after lunch for relaxed conversations on the impending event preparations and current affairs that stirred their interest. Over herbal tea and ‘Siddu’ (Dumplings made using fine flour and stuffed with seasoned walnut filling), prepared by Gangadhar and Chandrashekhar’s wives, the friends cheered on.

Handicrafts artists shared their artistic journey with deep insights into the craft, from their respective stalls.

A deep friendship was forged between Giri and Peter during the event. “While Tier-1 and Tier-2 cities are cities of constant contradictions and relentless energy, mountain regions carry the weight of displacement”, Giri cognized. “Skill the Nation, Have AI



readiness, make full use of AI as an innovative tool and instill critical thinking in the minds of the citizens of our rapidly progressing nation”, he emphasized.

“Yes Sir. Accomplishing Climate adaptation through innovative technologies and creative approaches is possible. I believe Artificial Intelligence is one way of achieving that”, Peter defined.

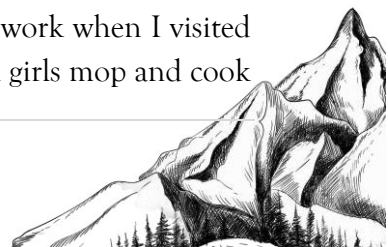
Soon Vaikunth, Chandan, Gangadhar and Chandrashekhar were brainstorming startup ideas with Peter and Fun. “We observed how mountain folk help one another selflessly and harness natural creative cycles”, Peter reflected. “Adapting to our surroundings and living in harmony with a natural rhythm represent logic in an illogical world to me. Such a way of life gets more prescient up here”, Fun articulated.

“Good-old ‘Haldi Doodh’ or turmeric milk is Turmeric latte for customers today. Endorsed by dietitians, influencers and athletes, it is an immunity-booster. For turmeric latte, I would always be whisking together milk, turmeric, black pepper and a hint of jaggery on a winter night, at home”, Pyaari unraveled at the Nutrition for All stall.

“Almonds give Magnesium, relax muscles and give healthy fats for steady energy. Roasted Chickpea keeps blood sugar stable packed as it is with protein, fiber and iron. Therefore, having a balanced activity routine is of paramount importance”, Pyaari stipulated.

“Muscles work more effectively to process blood sugar when exercise and nutrition go hand in hand. Consistency, flexibility and coordination in life’s activities promote healthy ageing. Our ancestors had immense resilience”, Gulaabi brought out, addressing a group of Senior citizens.

“You are right. I observed how hard the elderly work when I visited an idyllic town in Uttarakhand. Young boys and girls mop and cook



and share household duties with their parents and grandparents ", a lady about 60 years old deliberated, accompanied by her granddaughter who was demanding sugar candy. "This shapes our children's character. I will teach my granddaughter everything I can. Now, I must leave as she is restless and my son and daughter-in-law are waiting for us at the other side of the stage", she added.

"Sure Madam. Thank you for sharing your thoughts with our audience. We appreciate the way you see yourself training your grandchild to become a self-reliant individual with a well-rounded personality", Gulaabi lauded. The audience clapped till she asked them to quieten down.

"Nutritional functionality of traditional recipes are worth leveraging. Like how we use jaggery and no fake sugars, add Chuli oil in tea and use a particular wild herb and make salted tea", Chakrani detailed. "We add roasted corn flour mixed with clarified butter to our tea. We relish Garlic and green chilli chutney. These heighten taste in meals and give energy. We used lemon and 'Bijori' leaves as plates and placed rotis on it. Seven grain 'Ulale' are steamed and consumed with 'ghee' (clarified butter) 'Kheer', our sweetened milk dessert made with rice and dry fruits is nutritive too", Rudrani unfurled.

She demonstrated how 'Poli' or huge Chapatis were made on wood-fired stoves.

There was a surge in crowds wanting to buy native Chestnuts put up by Gaura for sale. "These are consumed once they are roasted and boiled and are rich in Calcium, Potassium and Vitamin C", Gaura aired, pointing to a small chart on which the benefits of the fruit were mentioned. Neelkanth handed out the packed fruit to buyers with receipts, while receiving payments.

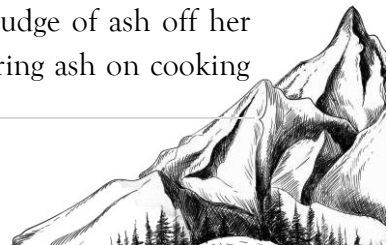


“Believe in a Higher power and trust your destiny. Learn discipline and time Management from a farmer’s life. Through frost and rain, they ensure crop protection and work tirelessly, despite climate extremes wreaking havoc and bringing crop losses”, Rup Manjari preached. She embodied the gentle warmth of a summer breeze on a sweltering day, offering comfort and solace to them.

“She is the enduring warmth that permeates even the coldest of night, enveloping her children in her unwavering love”, Siddhi mused, watching her mother against the backdrop of the large Mother Goddess idol placed in the prayer room in their house. Shimmering humor and acute observations on life were in evidence in stories their mother shared with them whenever they got the time to chat over unlimited cups of salty tea, a local tea variant and a favorite. Riddhi and Siddhi observed how their mother set an example for others. “Practice of art is as much about observation and craft as it is about invention”, she believed.

At this Himalayan festival in the city, the talented sisters explained the ethos behind the divine clothing line designs enthusiastically. Many visitors bought special deity clothes from their stall. There was no attempt at overpowering the customer mindscape whatsoever.

“Sustainable clothing is the way forward”, Riddhi turned over, displaying a range of clothes stitched by her mother for various Gods and Goddesses. “We make loofah from green ‘Ghangari’ vegetable”, her mother explained to an inquisitive elderly woman visitor from the city. “This is amazing. When we were younger, we used dried coconut husks for washing utensils. That seems obsolete today with frothy, neon-colored dishwash liquids up and about”, the visitor unscrambled. “We have natural plant fiber-based utensil cleaners. Please buy them. Chemical liquids enter our bodies and are harmful”, Siddhi explained, while wiping a smudge of ash off her head. The sisters followed the practice of smearing ash on cooking



utensils before putting them on stove so that they did not turn black and were easily cleaned. “This is how we clean our utensils”, she demonstrated to a small group visiting their stall.

The event had an emphatic impact. Visitors were inspired by simple, eco-friendly answers to heavy, environmentally- draining processes. Talks and demonstrations by experts and commoners left them engrossed and willing to turn to sustainable living. Overjoyed with the response, the sisters hugged their mother who was a devoted wife and a loving mother of two. They often fell asleep on her lap, learning together or completing household chores. Their bond with their mother was a thread woven from quiet prayer, love and care.

Watching the rush of heavy crowds at the event, Durga remarked, “Sita Devi ji’s speech and Riddhi’s mother’s talk, looks like a delicate magical meditation on the many difficult, unarticulated bits and pieces of womanhood.”

“Food stalls bring back a rush of nostalgia. Filled with people, they transport our mind to places that were an integral part of our lives”, Saraswati recognized. “You are right. We feel the same way. I keep visiting food festivals for the same authentic taste because I get to visit my hometown only once a year. Mild hiss of charring food, hot coal simmering on winter nights, Campfire hot chocolate topped with a massive, perfectly tossed marshmallow that melts right into the thick, velvety liquid, keep me happy”, a friend of Saraswati who lived and worked in New Delhi and had come all the way to meet her at the event, communicated. The warm laughter of friends mingled with the noise of visitors spread all over the premises.

“Certain plants have a cultural significance and are integral to the local ecology. Traditions use certain plants as symbols of local ecology, migration and community”, Sita Devi underscored. Local



people brought their stories to life through short demonstrations and talks at these stalls.

“In an intimate terrace setting, we plate up dishes with local inspirations at our homestay”, Dhara shared. “I have learnt to explore different possibilities. My parents have always taught me to keep up the courage. Time is an unforgiving teacher. Running the food stall by the mountain cliff, I remind myself to not lose hope”, Narayani rendered.

“There is no need to be disheartened. Life is about making limitless discoveries”, Gaura delivered, overhearing their conversation, when they came to her stall to assist her.

Durga and Saraswati thought in much the same way, though their occupations and dispositions differed.

“Business success is largely helmed by increased high-end domestic travel. There is a lot of online exposure to global trends. Tourists and Professional Vloggers share dining experiences around local cultures”, Durga decoded.

“People celebrate constant hustle and loud confidence in local circles through social media. I am happy that we can share the many varieties of tea we produce to customers in a more personalized manner through this event”, Durga added. “Yes, and the event happenings and individual stall activities here are being captured through still photography and Video footage. So, it is a win-win situation all the way”, Saraswati declared.

An unending search for meaning and a desperate cry for freedom was evident for the industrious sisters. The traditional outfits they wore were ideal for the mild February winter leaving the city in a couple of days. Soft fur lining inside the bordered gown lent warmth and kept the garment light in weight.



“We admire your traditional costume which offers you comfort enabling outdoor movement in winter”, a middle-aged woman attending the event, commented.

The sisters acknowledged the compliment with grace.

Crafting bit by bit, skilled artisans made lacquered pen cases, symmetrical flowers and birds, crafting bridal purses, pen holders, mobile phone stands and visiting card stands by adding familiar local motifs.

There were women from Self-Help groups selling knitted sweaters, mufflers and jackets stitched by them. A few male artists who were skilled in upgrading designs and colors explained the process to those taking interest in their work. There were few single crafts artists devoting their time to making beautiful handicrafts. An artistic single mother’s stall proved to be a big hit as she displayed purses made from natural, recyclable materials.

The local MLA felicitated them with a traditional ‘Himachali’ headgear and shawl to recognize and endorse crafts people and folk artists who brought goodness to the community.

“She exports high-end handbags and is from my village”, Raseshwari told Gaura while checking out every stall with her. “These are beautiful”, Gaura gasped, impressed by the artist’s creativity.

“I trained those two men and three women to talk about Forest Conservation and Forest fires”, Raseshwari issued, referring to a group addressing a bigger group on natural habitats and nature preservation.

“Yes Aunty. Natural habitats are under threat. Avenues of food and water are shrinking. Wild animals are raiding crops because we have exploited their habitats. Monkeys, porcupines and pigs damage crops. Extreme dry weather makes leaf litter and twigs become more



combustible than ever before. These inflammable leaves, branches and twigs can burn an entire forest”, Gaura accentuated.

“Small ignitions lead to major fires. Our Forests are vast. Forest Department personnel and volunteers cannot reach every spot where fire ignites. Carry out controlled fires”, the lady trained by Raseshwari, concurred. “Awareness camps urging people to be vigilant about fires are conducted by us regularly”, one out of the two men confirmed. Raseshwari clapped, signaling a victory sign from a distance. “City dwellers should know how lack of civic sense and overtourism are endangering our fragile landscape”, Gaura blasted, as though she was addressing them. The Aunt-niece duo then walked up to Chakrani and Rudrani’s stall, gushing with pride at their achievements. “Crystal-clear lake waters, mighty mountain ranges, clean air, cleanliness on the streets, sparkling sunlight, clear blue skies, we have it all. We welcome you but expect that our home is valued”, he could be heard by the audience who offered a thunderous applause.

“We have learnt to stay curious and keep positive company like Sita Devi ji has been telling us. She has the wisdom to get on with things and has gifted hope to local communities facing hopelessness. She stood by us at every crisis”, Durga told Saraswati, observing from a distance the ongoing activities at Tara’s stall. “Well, they are positivity magnets for sure”, Saraswati underlined, unable to overcome hunger pangs any longer. She opened the tiffin box she was carrying from home. Taking turns, the sister relished tender green peas spiced with fresh ginger.



Chapter 21

Sisters', Brothers' And Friends' Aspirations

CHAKRANI and RUDRANI

“The fine line between adventure and disaster is stark. Inevitable natural processes claimed lives. Last year, when a flash flood bearing mud and debris hurtled down steep slopes, a huge rock mass got dislodged along with snow and ice at an elevation crashing into a lake”, Chakrani observed. “Landslides, earthquakes, there are many triggers for disasters. Regions inherently inhospitable and risk-prone remain most vulnerable”, Rudrani continued. Raised hands from the audience led the visitors to share their experience of earthquakes in metropolitan cities with the entire audience. “Preventive measures must be in place”, a group of youth shouted.

“Preventive measures which improve the odds of survival. Indeed. We have roads blocked by snow and vehicles stuck in a rubble of ice. Drone-based detection systems are effective, though a lot more needs to be done”, Chakrani declared. Rudrani raised her right hand to quieten the uproarious audience on her right. “A sense of connection is forged, looking at Dragon fruits being sold”, Rudrani reacted. Chakrani shrugged as if responding in some way. For a



moment, images of her eating cut fruits with her family in their terrace colored her thoughts.

UJALI and TITLI

“Social media has no boundaries. The internet gives people-to-people contact a boost. By enabling the individual to share the joys of their lives, the platform has ensured valuable transfer of knowledge and opinion on a regular basis. Virtual lives of Influencers and followers’ sparks from a fire within them to reach out to the audience with new topics”, Ujali analyzed while Titli requested a large group of visitors to be seated on tiny stools, placed in the open space meant for discussions at the event venue. “Public Service messages get communicated quickly but one must ensure that the correct message gets conveyed”, Titli implied.

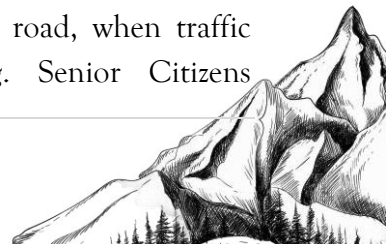
Songs of goat herders and ancient songs sung by women grinding grain played across the stall that displayed local varieties of millets and different types of wool.

Several groups gathered for picnic in wooded surroundings. For Titli, often the river rolling down from the hills that had cradled her laughter spoke to her. Watching wildlife, deer and birds all through, she had committed herself to the cause of wildlife conservation and preservation of hillsides clothed in dense forests of pink and scarlet Rhododendron flowers.

At The Event

With Naturalists, Botanists and Conservationists, Raseshwari regularly carried out Forest inspection past deep forests, green meadows and thick weeds. Government Officers and Non-profit Organization experts accompanied these teams.

Considerately they moved to the edge of the road, when traffic peaked. Raseshwari amiably ambled along. Senior Citizens



Commune groups loved listening to her. Felling of trees, construction of dams and paving of roads weakened the mountain ecosystem irreversibly.

“We saw thin layers of snow on mountain tops and frozen seasonal brooks, this year as well”, a visitor commentated. Raseshwari stood speechless.

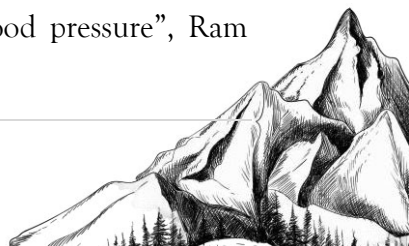
“Colors during joyful festive seasons are suggestive of hope and associated with happiness. We also took a tour of our host’s and her neighbor’s farms and orchards where they had planted several fruit trees. It was fascinating to see young women students from university who were her nieces and neighbors plough the soil, harvested grains, lentils and other crops round the year and climb trees plucking and eating fruits from heavily laden branches of drooping fruit trees”, the visitor elucidated.

Raseshwari inhaled a long, deep breath, paused and responded, “You must have come here many times over to have noticed these instances.”

“Yes, our family adores the mountains, and we visit more than once a year”, the visitor unraveled. The conversation lit the souls of both the ladies as they spoke and saw in their minds the raw beauty of the idyllic destinations.

“Use ‘Bhringaraj’ leaves to cure hair fall”, Sita Devi ji advised visitors at Tara’s stall.

“‘Nirgundi’ leaves have spiritual and medicinal benefits. These medicinal herbs cure body pain, improve mental health and treat knee and joint pains. ‘Ashwagandha’ leaves when used as a powder or pounded into a paste proffer strength, reduce obesity, control thyroid and diabetes. Its roots are for boosting memory and increasing muscle mass, but they can raise blood pressure”, Ram Narayan ji explained.



“We are very happy to be sharing these traditional treasures with you”, he conveyed, interacting with a couple visiting their stall and showing interest in the bottles and therapy vials on display. “We will buy these. We have read about their health benefits and wish to rely on the quiet wisdom of nature through these products now”, the lady resolved.

“Ropeway rides, boat trips and us climbing Malta orange trees are memories that take me down nostalgia lane”, Pyaari shared with SwarnPushp and Gulaabi, when she visited the Department of Community Development precincts, located in Ujala town, to share the Slideshow she had made on sustainable food systems and organic farming. “I have traveled through deserts and marshlands, for inspection on delivery of basic services to communities inhabiting remote areas. The path was cracked, covered with patches of broken Earth and yet a living ecosystem thrived at every turn”, SwarnPushp described, watching Pyaari’s slideshow. The big city festival will be a platform for diverse voices on art, architecture, culture and conservation of the environment”, she credited. “Madam, I find household chores more difficult than farm tasks. I have learnt how to change water sprinklers and seen my grandmother use seeds from a wild plant release foam which is used for washing clothes”, Pyaari shared, her face gleaming bright.”

“Through your talk, you can share the importance of adapting, learning and innovating. Disasters mark a pivotal place in the personal journey of survivors. Talk about how they cultivate resilience by embracing challenges, building connections and practicing self-awareness”, SwarnPushp suggested. “Sure Madam”, Pyaari assented, taking down the suggestions in a small diary, her pen scratching on the handmade paper she used in making diaries herself.



“Real strength is in the courage to defend the vulnerable. We are enabling the city-bred youth and adults to see the world with more empathy and without judgement. My family labored hard to put me through university. Today I work at a Government Department”, Gulaabi expressed, feeling ever grateful for all she had received.

“Sometimes, glance of a stranger, a neighbor coming to talk or a friend staying long enough to listen are gestures that make us feel good”, Gulaabi realized. “Saunter through city parks while building the life of your dreams”, SwarnPushp who entered her office chamber, added. “There are 25 Officers representing our state’s districts, who have registered themselves as Volunteers for the festival. I will share the list with both of you.” “Thank you, Madam”, Gulaabi replied. Thank you to both of you for always motivating us”, Pyaari answered and headed home.

Gulaabi talked about the benefits of Sunrays and how even days when the Sun felt piercingly bright were blessed days. “Vitamin D which is a simple supplement or nutrient is made available to us because of the Sun. A powerful regulator of bodily functions, it lowers inflammation, boosts cellular energy and improves serotonin levels leading to a better mood”, she glossed.

“You are good enough is what we tell communities. Pain as a presence can teach, connect and make us humble. Please try this Pommello pulp mixed with ‘Pahari Namak’, a combination of condiments with salt”, Gulaabi spelled out, pouring the orange juice from a flask in a glass with salt and swirling the contents of the glass.

“This is a unique fruit”, a small girl visiting the stall with her parents, picked out, looking at the sample Pommello fruit placed on a table. “We will buy the juice bottle”, her mother told her and requested Gulaabi for one. By the end of the event all Pommello fruit juice bottles were sold. Pyaari demonstrated how Persimmon fruit



milkshakes are made. “It is through Awareness programs such as these at a Mela with State representation and participation at national level that we are able to also bring in international collaboration”, Pyaari reflected, addressing the moving audience taking an interest in every stall. Gulaabi chatted with the audience answering their questions. “Remain light-headed. Try treasures from the plump harvest of mountain farms. We make pancakes from Acorns, harvested from Oak trees”, Gulaabi lectured, helping Pyaari with managing the customer payments. “I know. Acorns have a buttery, nutty taste and release fat slowly. Isn’t it?”, Pyaari enquired. “Yes. That is right,” Gulaabi conceded.

The event had reached its peak by now with thousands of guests moving around the large open space, gaining a deeper insight into the intersection between health, tradition and lifestyle choices.

“We use fermented legumes in our recipes. The health benefits are numerous. Tangy Citron fruits such as Hill lemons are rich in nutrients and pickle made from it uplifts the taste of our meals”, Gulaabi explicated. “We brave the cold and shovel snow off the sidewalk when the need be, with hands frozen”, Gulaabi specified, packing juice and pickle bottles while making bill receipts for buyers simultaneously.

“In silence, we get guidance for unexpected things. When we are home, there are no screeching alarms. There isn’t any urgency tugging at the edges of the day. Time stretches softly, unbothered”, Sita Devi ji mulled over. Gentle memories of yesterday made her take time off to hear the quiet hiss of the gas stove. “This is such a comforting sound, promising warmth and nourishment”, Tara exclaimed, turning towards her mother. Together, they filled essential oils in tiny glass bottles and gently placed them in recycled cotton scrap boxes for sale at the city event.



“Our children are taught to help their neighbors. This helps them build self-trust, courage and confidence”, Chandan affirmed. “Undoubtedly. I believe that true value of time lies in the memories we create and the experiences we share”, Hari reasserted, offering them roasted walnuts, he was carrying in his jacket pockets from home.

The friends continued their conversations while strolling around during the event.

The friends met Cherry, who was a student from Japan visiting India on an Exchange Program.

“I know every great spot in town. The unhurried elegance around the center of town where one can feel the wind and watch ducks prancing on riverbanks calls me back every time. I will find a job in my town and work for my people”, Pyaari intended, professing her vow to herself and the Universe. Chakrani and Rudrani, who were by her side, helping in managing the stall, felt a sense of reliable warmth hearing her speak.

“We share stories with our friends we are in touch with. We remember about our sleepovers, as little kids climbing apple and walnut trees and pairing hot chocolate with a buttery croissant at Shimla’s Mall Road cafes over birthdays”, Chakrani disclosed. Pyaari chuckled.

The three girls were set to begin their Presentation on ‘Establishing harmony between Livelihood generation and development in mountain ecosystems’, at the Himalayan City Festival in New Delhi.

“Such events bring out diverse voices on art, architecture, history and conservation. Campaigns and plantation drives fuel a deeper responsibility in participants to respond”, Moksh said to Surya. The friends had embarked on this special trip to New Delhi to attend the event so that they could support participants from their home state.



“Wet wipes have plastic. We sell plant-based, Compostable wipes. These are bottles of natural chemical-free cleaners for make-up removal. We have natural bio-enzyme cleaners with lemons and soap cleaners or dishwasher liquids made from other plant extracts”, a Self-help group lady member, holding a bottle each of both and observing the responses of customers visiting her stall. “Take small showers in your cities. There is water shortage everywhere, isn’t it!”, she complained. “Surely. Green forests and green patches in between structures and settlements are vital for survival”, the lady stressed.

“We have created a lively, multi-disciplinary online community engaged in collaborating on solutions. This means we know what the other’s expertise is and how can we work together for the benefit of the local communities at large”, she filled in, her face beaming with pride. “This is outstanding. All the best to you”, Durga lauded, before proceeding to her stall showcasing and selling several kinds of tea leaves, she grew.

“Eat antioxidants- rich foods and healthy fats such as Omega-3 fatty acids found in walnuts, flaxseeds and certain oils”, Raseshwari suggested addressing a large family from Uttarakhand visiting the fair. “Thank you. We prioritize protein to build antibodies and immune cells. We incorporate native lentils, legumes, dairy produce, eggs and plant-based alternatives in our diet”, the matriarch explained. “That is good. Build immunity for everybody and practice gentle breathing”, Raseshwari held forth. “We would”, the lady’s daughter-in-law conceded.

A play on how a whole way of life disappeared when chunks of land vanished into the river, brought to the fore faces of people who lived on the margins, narrating a story of deep loss and remarkable survival. The audience traversed the landscape of laughter, tears, beauty of alpine mountains and the grimness of poverty.



A painting by one of Chandan's students beautifully captured changing textures of the orange embers emerging from burning logs of wood. Through slogans, songs and dance, students from other local schools reinstated friendship and a celebration of the inner life of their creative world.

Giri, Vaikunth, Chandrashekhar, Gangadhar, Hari, Chandan, Sanskar and Neelkanth congregated to celebrate the successful completion of the festival. "The helpline number and Agricultural Assistance Application will go a long way in helping farmers. Over these two days, hundreds of farmers visited our stall, and we reached out to them offering guidance on crop choices, value addition and intelligent farm choices with respect to farm cycles which enrich the soil fertility. We updated their knowledge about direct transfers into farmer's bank accounts and State initiatives related to crop insurance", Giri informed.

"The newsletter distributed by the Agriculture Division celebrates achievements of farmers selected as 'Champions of Change'- an accolade to celebrate his impact on India's entrepreneurial landscape", Vaikunth passed along. "They are made aware about the procedure to apply for benefits such as improved seeds, fertilizers, mechanized equipment and natural farming. This is so good", Hari filled in and the friends clanked their glasses filled with deep red Rhododendron flower juice.

Participants, young and old were finally able to stand in their own light, their unflagging passion paying off at this instant.

Tears rolling down his wrinkled cheeks, a farmer narrated, "My muddy shoes, financial constraints, crop losses and risks of traveling through broken roads to buy seeds and sell my produce seem to have paid off. Thank you for the recognition and promise of support to each farmer", he wept, hugging Chandan guiding him all along.



Chandan blessed him and cried, “Keep attending Krishi Mahotsav, the festival for farmers. It is through participation that direct engagement with agencies and other farmers is enabled.”

“I will. I promise”, the farmer answered, joining his family who had accompanied him.

“Let your power make the noise. Climate change and future of food are interlinked. There is a dire need to close the cycle rather than continue to contribute to landfills and climate hazards. Nature’s influence on every aspect of life is palpable. Citizens and agencies need to work on long-term collaboration towards exchange of resources ”, the Chief Guest articulated, concluding the event with his motivational speech.

“Local enterprises retail mindful fabrics and through an exploration of craft and design, imaginative upcycling came to the fore. Zero-waste certifications, Low-waste processes and energy-efficient, carbon-neutral technologies are the new norm. Our clay ovens can be game-changers if adapted suitably and made pollution-free. Restaurants and bars globally are changing how diners approach sustainability”, SwarnPushp specified. Elated crowds clapped and began to disperse.

“The distinctive technique of building with thick mud walls reinforced with cement endures, preserving the wisdom of storing heat during the day and slowly releasing it at night. This earthy aesthetic of plastered, mud interiors is an intentional adaptation”, Dhara clarified to Narayani, opening the barricade that led towards the exit gate.

Crowds in large numbers needed to vacate the premises and volunteers had to ensure that there was no overcrowding.

“Yes. Check out the scores of signatures on the chart made by Raseshwari Madam marked with the slogan: *Regenerate land. Practice organic farming and compost its organic waste.*”



“There is something warm and honest about those walls of your houses. They have timeless beauty”, a Corporate Professional, visiting the Fair from Gurugram commented.

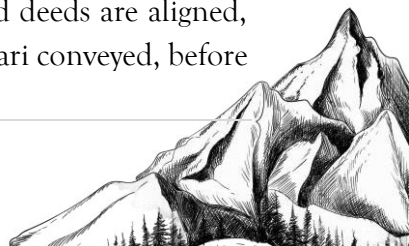
Moksh and Surya folded their hands as a gesture of acknowledgement.

Both Moksh and Surya were overjoyed hearing the visitor to their stall. “That is so true. Thank you for such a deeply reflective observation about our hilly homes”, the visitor said. The conversation soon turned into an intimate exchange with the visitor relishing the ‘Kasrod ki sabji’ or Fiddle Head fern preparation topped with cherry tomatoes and spring onion greens, prepared by Surya.

Moksh explained few visitors about the ‘Kait’ fruit, eaten as a berry or flavored with ginger, garlic and green chili.

Upon Cherry’s request, Narayani introduced her to Raseshwari. Cherry felt Raseshwari radiate an aura of an assured, beaming presence, from the moment they started conversing.

“Madam, forest functionaries can create natural barriers to break the spreading flames. This can be done by scraping away leaf litter, twigs and vegetation. Publicize toll-free numbers to contain forest fires. To increase community-level participation, involve the Community in preparing plans for conservation”, Cherry announced, highlighting the urgent need to take these steps for community welfare. Raseshwari was thrilled beyond measure listening to a young girl, probably her grand-daughter’s age articulating her thoughts with such clarity. “Informed citizenry is crucial for efforts towards preservation of nature. Feel the trees, put your hands on a bark and you know what I wish to say. I am happy to know how confident you are with your thoughts. When our thoughts and deeds are aligned, nature works in our favor. Good luck”, Raseshwari conveyed, before



joining the Signature Campaign march. Cherry felt valued listening to Raseshwari. Her indomitable spirit was contagious.

“Co-existence of Economy and Ecology ensuring balance in nature, will go a long way in helping us lead ecologically conscious lifestyles”, Narayani advised.

“Income and gender inequalities need to be eliminated while making sustainable practices growth drivers for the economy”, an Agricultural Scientist invited to address the audience stated.

Pyari introduced Cherry to Dhara and Narayani while the speech could be heard in the background.

“Cities in your country quietly survived earthquakes over the years. We experience, in these seismic-zones, landslides, cloudbursts and earthquakes changing the course of our lives in ways we could never imagine”, Dhara said to Cherry, sharing with her about her Homestay.

“Yes. I have experienced those moments of deep tenderness and grace. Our families and acquaintances are not scared of building from scratch. Fighting all the odds even through weather-related disasters, they have taught me that choosing self-worth over suffering and remaining soft yet unshakable are virtues that hold us well, bringing in emotional contentment”, Cherry remarked.

“Absolutely. Despite financial hardships I completed my education. My parents always told me to arrive with more hope than uncertainty, in any situation. Life had not allowed them the luxury of completing their matriculation and yet by being progressive and looking at things differently, they continue to guide my steps with a quiet courage”, Narayani affirmed.

Pyari, Cherry and Dhara clapped in admiration, marching towards the front so that they could hear the Speaker on the stage better.



Chapter 22

Enchanting Interactions

“On way to this event venue, I noticed Locals enjoying afternoon tea outside cafes and many collecting firewood or grass in hilly pastures”, Cherry observed. “Yes. We plan though each new day entails our effort in the mountains, for food, water and warmth”, Pyaari confirmed.

“I aim to offer Off-beat travel, slow experiences around untouched wilderness and white snowy valleys and hope that at my Homestay, tourists find relaxation and resolution. Routes, permits and local co-ordination are efficiently managed by our trained male and female guides”, Dhara acclaimed.

“I can relate. A few miles away from my house, life in the countryside in my country reflects a union of art and discipline. Our elders shape prayers out of wind. It is believed that to live honestly, we must de-clutter and embrace imperfections and impermanence with ease”, Cherry put forth. “That is so amazing. We have unique geological and spiritual sites here. You must plan a separate trip, and I will show them to you. I remember my father, whom you will meet in my house in the evening, spoke to plants. It was a meditative experience”, Tara recalled.

“Yes. Tara’s parents’ belief systems transcend ritual constraints. We clean houses on various occasions throughout the year, for Mother Goddess’s visit and thank her for bestowing abundance.



Complete presence in the moment, inner strength and emotional endurance are qualities we strive to inculcate within us, through our traditions”, Pyaari conveyed.

“Nature worship is the common thread that binds our way of life and worship”, Cherry made out.

Wearing their radiant smiles, Dhara and Narayani bid adieu to Cherry, Pyaari and Tara. They rushed towards their stall which was being thronged by eager crowds. Unschooled voices of Tara’s parents were laced with profound wisdom. They went about their daily tasks with an open mind. Most importantly, they had a big heart as was evident in the way their efforts had impacted lives of those who sought their counsel. On the other side of their small stall, Ram Narayan ji addressed a small gathering.

“Meditation retreats revive your inner calm. There is a lot you can’t control but you carry a light that can be renewed. New beginnings and partnerships can be seen as departures that serve as catalysts for growth, renewal and self-discovery. Take a step back and see how things are shaping.”

The city event organizers had organized lunch for all the participants in a large lawn beyond the tented space earmarked for the event. For evening, a special session was planned because of Sita Devi ji and Ram Narayan ji’s popularity. Senior citizens and adults formed the majority among the audience, who wished to listen to them.

There was a spirited round of applause for her, seated as she was at the Amphitheatre with the audience in front. “Getting what you deserve is a reward, but it is your actions which matter more. We do not get answers immediately. Answers will come to you when you are ready”, Ram Narayan ji unriddled, taking individual queries and sharing visiting cards with those interested in knowing about their work.



“Do not get blind-sighted. Move through the day with a heart open to simple wonders. Our hands should carry kindness”, he added.

Tara rushed out of the Amphitheatre to see all stalls from her glorious state one last time before the event wrapped up. Officers from the Mini Secretariat and Nursing Officers from local hospitals accompanying the group participating in the festival helped them wind up their stalls in the evening.

Brilliant voices reached out to a noisy audience, covering themes encapsulating the country’s efforts towards becoming a global hub for innovation.

Pyaari, Tara and Cherry proceeded to the stage, as there were two hours left before the event closed for the first day.

A tourist from Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir interacted with Cherry and shared with her how they roasted corn kernels in summer and stored them. “We boil these with salt in winter and consume in winter, sauteed in oil and spices, she elaborated.” “That is interesting. We use small yams and lotus stem frequently, much like you do as I have read over the past year”, Cherry mentioned.

The fair saw over a million visitors and robust sales of locally made handicrafts, jams, jellies and other produce.

The Solo traveler, who was very chatty, went on to invite Cherry to her town, sharing how sledging down snowy slopes perched on piles of grass leaves, still brought cheer in times of turmoil and terror. “A colleague of mine visited your state and was impressed by breathtaking natural beauty and simplicity of local people. She showed me a video of her local tour guide’s mother and sister making brooms from grass artistically”, Cherry revealed.” “Yes, we have been taught to embrace our authentic self and move through every season celebrating small joys alongside”, the girl agreed. Cherry exchanged



mobile numbers and email addresses with this quietly formidable tourist and promised to stay in touch.

People bought organically grown pulses, pickles, herbs, spices, seeds and oils packed in cloth bags from different stalls.

Steamed Pumpkin cooked in Tandoor became a popular native snack and sold like hot cakes. Cherry found the Cumin, Coriander, Fennel seeds Tea soothing. “This is so relaxing”, Cherry exclaimed.

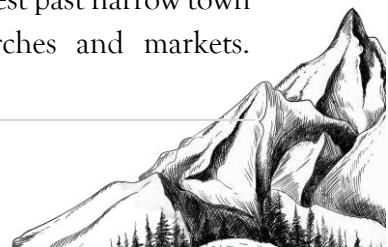
“Please eat the seeds. They are good for health”, the tourist suggested, before leaving the stall and proceeding to the Food tent to try local cuisine, as she intended to. Cherry smiled and happily followed the suggestion.

Cherry’s genuine enthusiasm for restoring irretrievably ruined mountain houses and maintaining the original architectural vision cemented her bond with Pyaari for whom every visit home was nostalgic. Walking familiar roads around her quaint hill town, Pyaari herself went into a nostalgic ride.

“We would toss pebbles into the air, make pyramids from stones collected over long walks and sprint out of the house to play”, Pyaari narrated. “As part of a non-profit organization, we create quiet spaces for both the youth and the elderly to explore self-reflection, nature, spirituality and deeper connections. Working adults and homemakers are also welcome”, Cherry called out.

Pyaari’s interest was piqued and she enquired, “Where are these spaces?” “We are nurturing a community garden where people can rest, recharge and feel nurtured. Forest walks are also undertaken to enable participants to tune into their natural rhythms”, Cherry answered, happy to see Pyaari showing interest.

“That is amazing”, Pyaari quipped, taking her guest past narrow town roads flanked by temples, monasteries, churches and markets.



Wearing a chiffon skirt, oversized glasses and a sunny yellow blazer paired with flared jeans, she was instantly reminded of her hometown when she noticed young people gliding across ice skating rinks at an amusement park surrounded by mountains wrapped in a white blanket.

“We will take you to our College in New Delhi, Cherry”, Pyaari prompted. “Sure. I look forward to the same,” Cherry replied, her petite frame belying her age. In Tokyo, her neighbors still thought she was in school even as they praised her parents for nurturing such a hard-working girl.

“The present and the past combine in the most magical way”, Tara preened, taking Cherry, her Japanese friend around.

“I will introduce you to SwarnPushp Madam. Like your name, her name also takes after a native flower,” Tara filled in. “The fragile beauty of Cherry Blossom flowers has always entranced me. In our country they do blossom in Mizoram”, Tara briefed. “Yes. I wish to visit India for a longer duration and explore the natural beauty and cultural diversity in all its richness”, Cherry exacted.

“Take a peek into our traditional crafts and get an idea about our local enterprises. You could share these experiences with your classmates in Japan”, SwarnPushp suggested, retaining her reassuring smile, when she was introduced to Cherry by Tara, at the fair.

“Madam, I hope to compile stories that unite social purpose, cultural memory and aesthetic courage. Growth begins with imagination and I plan to capture the beautiful lives and crafts of the mountains on this short trip”, Cherry apprised. “Well, the quiet mental act of doing something is the first step towards becoming more than you thought was possible”, SwarnPushp conveyed. “Definitely”, Cherry replied, folding her hands like Tara.



“Madam, I look forward to exploring a new side of familiar places and seeing our traditions in newer ways with Cherry on her subsequent visits”, Tara hoped.

SwarnPushp nodded. Friends Pyaari and Cherry grinned. Taking SwarnPushp’s leave they proceeded to savor tangy sweet corn and sweet potato mix from a food stall with a long queue.

Ideas took shape like clouds on a calm sky, for Cherry. She promised herself that she would chart her literary journey reflecting a deep social conscience. “I make Video recordings in Japan as an Influencer on contemporary themes. With an urgent, global voice, I reach out to the world on matters ecological, social and cultural”, Cherry outlined. Tara’s face lit up.

She dialed Ujali’s number asking her and Titli to meet near the stage. Ujali and Titli were perturbed by seeing massive crowds initially but by the second day they got used to it.

“Cherry, our friend from Japan is visiting Tara’s university as part of an Exchange program. She just shared that she makes Video reels on contemporary themes”, Pyaari informed, updating her friends about their guest’s achievements. “We make Videos as well”, Ujali remarked. “We feature our daily activities, farming procedures, festival traditions and give voice to people who are struggling silently”, Titli explained.

Cherry shook hands with both Ujali and Titli excitedly. “It is so wonderful to connect with those in whom we see what is in us. I regularly watched your Video Blogs”, Cherry confirmed.

“It is a pleasure meeting you as well”, Titli responded. “Her initiatives are also anchored in service. Cherry showed me documentaries she made when earthquakes ravaged towns and cities in Japan last year”, Pyaari chipped in.



“We have many earthquake-prone zones in our regions. People face hardships of all kinds”, Ujali contended. Life continues at an unhurried pace with smiling local people at every turn who have fought countless battles within. We have our ancestors’ blessings. Our deities proffer us with courage and protection and that is what keeps us going”, Titli added.

“Absolutely. Let us share our phone numbers and email addresses. I will keep in touch with you. I can see that both of you are taught by example”, Cherry entreated.

While Ujali and Titli returned to their village, Cherry and Pyaari headed towards Buransh Van village, on the second and final day of the festival.

The festival concluded after Day 2 with much fanfare.

The next morning Pyaari came over to Tara’s house where Cherry was staying.

“Winter flowers are so sober, aren’t they?”, Cherry enthused, admiring Tara’s garden.

“We have myriad varieties of flowers here, especially in spring and winter”, Tara emphasized.

“During harsh winters these flowers are a reminder that color still exists and that warmth hasn’t disappeared”, Cherry mulled over. “Yes. We offer flowers during worship. They remind us of life’s fragility, impermanence and beauty”, Tara meditated.

“My parents are custodians of years of medicinal wisdom in our village in Japan, exactly the same way your parents are here”, Cherry shared.

Cherry observed how elders held families together and ran the house with discipline and care.



“In our society, we protect traditions and believe that empathy is a sacred gift which helps us come into our own power”, Cherry unraveled. My parents disseminate knowledge of medicinal herbs and wisdom of ancestors”, she continued, adding nuance to the information she was sharing.

“Medicinal herbs grow in abundance when tended to. Management of herbal garden involves gardening practices where soil drainage and soil texture are focused upon”, Tara enunciated, walking with Cherry, around the make-shift waterfall with recirculating water in brass utensils.

“We use herbs for little known cures, skin therapy and to cure a variety of ailments”, Tara foregrounded.

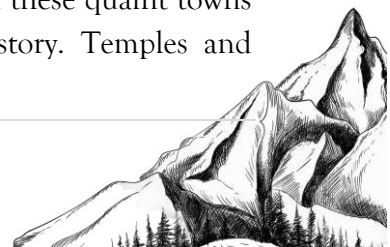
“We dish out a Tempura of herbs and greens”, Cherry accented.

“My children, it is the taste in water, brilliance in fire, penance of ascetics, pure fragrance of Earth and the life-force in all beings that ensure that everything in nature is running on its proper course. Elemental cleansing of mind and environment through spoken incantation blesses us with divine shielding and opens our destiny pathways”, Sita Devi Ji accentuated.

“There is some reason behind the darkest times. You should trust where you are being led and be prepared for the unseen”, she guided, placing hot earthen glasses of salty tea brewed with herbs in front on them on a low-leveled table made by her, from hardened branch peels and leaf straw.

“I like the taste of this tea. Thank you. A universal message that comes out is that while wisdom feeds the mind, nature feeds the body”, Cherry pinpointed, bowing before Tara’s mother courteously.

“Our Centuries-old mountain villages surround these quaint towns and are immersed in the region’s layered history. Temples and



markets encircled by Cedar forests wind past terraced farms. They remind us of the sacred flow between inner wisdom and nature's nourishing intelligence", Tara emphasized.

"Steady grace and quiet strength are what I find when I watch Sita Devi ji carry out household duties and treat local people with care and expertise. I listened in when she was counselling a family of four, on emotional and interpersonal aspects in their lives. It was an extraordinary moment", Cherry remarked.

"Yes. Ram Narayan ji supervises with such nurture that it is difficult for visitors from outside our region to get an appointment for therapy from them. It is your goodness that allows you to see the goodness in others", Pyaari commented. "Her love for all of us and kindness for all creation intrigues me", Tara upheld.

She had brought Cherry and Tara to a tiny mountain café for a quick evening bite before they parted, only to meet again the very next day, on way to New Delhi.

Charred Brussels Sprouts over roasted Red Pepper sauce, Butternut Pumpkin roasted with blue cheese, walnuts and smoked chili oil and Apple crumble were relished by the girls.

A gentle smile played on Cherry's lips at the mention of 'Siddu'. "These remind me of the stuffed dumplings we eat in Japan", Cherry remarked, watching Pyaari's mother prepare this 'Himachali' (belonging to Himachal Pradesh) delicacy when Pyaari brought Cherry to her home, hours before their departure for New Delhi.

"We enjoy vegetarian versions here too", Pyaari affirmed. "Use of rice flour by us is like at your end", Pyaari's mother divulged and smiled. She had learnt this fact from few Japanese tourists who had visited their village last year and accompanied her with a few local women to Buddhist monasteries in nearby villages. Bustling markets



gave a festive and cozy vibe. Cherry, Pyaari and Tara cheered, noticing glimmering holiday lights.

“Cherry, Tara’s parents have always shared kindness with warmth, dignity and genuine care. Traditional medicine has never been a business for them. Whenever my friends and family have interacted with them, they have been taught that this knowledge is a sacred responsibility”, Pyaari recalled.

“Yes. My parents are intuitively active and guide community people on how to meet life fully”, Tara spoke, her gentle voice reaching out on a cold, foggy afternoon. When small children from the neighborhood insisted that she play marbles with them, Tara obliged. As a Travel Content Creator, have you captured disasters in Japan?”, Pyaari asked Cherry, checking the time in her silver colored wrist watch.

“Please have dinner with us before leaving”, Tara requested Pyaari. “Thanks dear. It is getting dark. I will leave after meeting your parents. We have a train to catch tomorrow. I will pack some snacks for the journey. Let’s have a meal with Cherry while in New Delhi. Moreover, we will be back here on our next vacations, so will meet again.”

“Alright”, Tara replied. “Cherry, we will pack our luggage in a while”, Tara shrieked, warding off a wild bear visible from the main door. She sneaked back into the living room stealthily, lest her parents and guest discover what threat loomed over and what she was up to.

“Yes Tara. I was in New Delhi for merely a week before I came here. I am eagerly looking forward to interacting with faculty, students and the people of New Delhi”, Cherry hoped.

“As for your question Pyaari, I have covered relief operations in two Prefectures in Japan when earthquakes ravaged towns and damaged property. We shot moving images of a woman who had lost all her



family members let off a deep, gut-wrenching sob. I saw her hands trembling but how she and hundreds of other men, women, children and the aged who survived such disasters kept their dignity, despite hitting rock bottom. This is what we need to learn. By never losing one's enthusiasm, nurturing a hopeful heart and working hard without worrying about short-term outcomes, civil communities have transformed our towns and cities to thriving centers of progress and prosperity", Cherry delivered.

"Frequent tropical cyclones across islands of Japan cause destruction but improvements in construction techniques, flood prevention, high tide detection and early warning systems have reduced casualties. Search and Rescue Squads are efficient", she deliberated.

Assuring the neighborhood children that they would play in pleasant weather again, Tara, Pyaari and Cherry returned to Tara's living room. Cherry was delighted to see Tara prepare Chrysanthemum tea for her and Pyaari at Tara's house, on their evening before departure to New Delhi.

"We make this tea as well. We worship nature in all its glory. I observed that people here do that as well and have read about your culture extensively", Cherry rendered. "That is right. These days Cranberry powder, lotus powder and dragon fruit powder are also very popular because of their nutritional benefits", Tara enumerated. "Nature is both awareness and nourishment.

Mother Goddess embodies the life-sustaining power of vegetation, grains and natural abundance", Sita Devi ji boosted, taking the conversation forward. Cherry busied herself, capturing everything in her camera. Bamboo dustbins around Tara's therapy hall reminded her of towns and cities of Japan where they were commonly used. "We have also been taught that true knowledge must be rooted in sustenance and compassion for all living beings", Cherry related. Sita



Devi ji and Ram Narayan ji smiled, happy that there was a similar sensibility in a student from overseas as that in their daughter. “Thank you for the Chrysanthemum tea, Tara. The leaves are anti-microbial, Cherry”, Pyaari emphasized, pointing to its leaves gloriously swaying in Tara’s garden, the flowers blooming in many colors.

“See you at my house at 6 AM. We have a journey tomorrow. Relax through the evening”, Pyaari suggested. Then she greeted Tara’s parents and decided to walk back to her house 2 kilometers away. “Be careful dear. It snowed late this time. Roads get slippery”, Sita Devi ji warned. “I will be careful. Thank you”, Pyaari replied, recognizing the advice and left.

Upon reaching home in less than an hour, she called Tara to inform, much to the relief of parents at both homes.

“The Divine Mother reveals that wisdom and nourishment are inseparable expressions of cosmic harmony. When we acknowledge unified grace, creativity becomes service and abundance becomes sacred sharing”, Sita Devi ji sermonized. “I could sense that sentiment two hours back, while I was approaching your house. Our jeep was stuck in snow for nearly an hour. We got assistance eventually, but what was noteworthy were two Himachali women serving hot tea to us and other stranded passengers”, Cherry narrated.

Tara’s parents concerned expressions turned calmer, when Tara assured them that there were no emergencies and traffic was resumed once snow was removed from main mountain roads.

“Yes. People are warm-hearted. Worsened climate indicators through the entire year kept everyone on alert mode”, Ram Narayan ji articulated. “Snow is as important as rain and sunlight. New life started for those who venerate the Sun God. They are blessed with



dynamic strength and enthused with the energy to take leaps of faith through crises. Sunlight activates our circadian rhythm which governs sleep-wake cycle, hormone release and immune function”, he added.

Toasting fingers before a crackling fire, in the dignified and poised presence of Tara’s parents, Cherry and Tara spent the remaining evening in thoughtful conversations.

“I have a friend in Japan who is from India. She has joined a Company which makes sustainable clothes from agricultural waste and textile waste”, Cherry shared. “There is a neighborhood with several Indian families who settled decades ago. They trade in pearl, electronics and precious metals”, she continued. “I have seen that beloved jar of taste and flavor in my friend’s house”, Cherry recalled, referring to a jar of pickle kept on a wooden cabinet in the dining room. “Yes. We make pickles using seasonal vegetables. They add taste to our meals and help in digestion”, Tara reasoned.

“Pickling allows vegetables to survive scorching heats, humid climates, failed harvests and long journeys. Ginger and turmeric are powerful modulators of inflammation”, Sita Devi Ji explained. “We also use colorful vegetables and leaves in our diets. These provide Polyphenols that act as cellular repair signals. Chronic aches disappear and we do pickle a few in mild solutions”, Cherry apprised. “Look. I had taken this photograph three days back when we arrived here. It was sunny. This lady in your village was putting dried red chilies on the roof in the Sun”, Cherry shared, showing Tara photographs clicked by her in her Camera. There were photographs of local children and tourists playing with snowflakes and of the ‘Food Festival and Village Fair’ event.

“She is our next-door neighbor. She gets ecstatic when Sun comes out and gets going with a million kitchen tasks”, Tara recognized.



“Sunny days are always welcome in the mountains. They add a pop of shine to our lives and help nature thrive”, Tara highlighted. Glacial flooding and soil erosion due to heavy rains, damaged our houses and crops this year. “I pray for a safe year ahead for everyone”, Tara pleaded, folding hands in front of the deities in the temple in her home. Cherry observed with fascination.

Dinner by the wood-fired stove filled with warm conversations and genuine hospitality reminded Cherry of the Mother Goddess idol she had crossed on way to Tara’s house, inside a temple, atop a mountain cliff. The same Goddess kept entire families under her guiding benevolence.

Tara noticed the rose garland drop from Mother Goddess’s idol in their home temple. She knew they had been blessed with more kindness, prosperity and opportunities ahead.

“Golden, deep-fried puffed breads were soft inside, crisp outside. The curry and lentil dish were delicious”, Cherry commented, thanking Sita Devi Ji. “Lentils of native varieties are our staple diet, and we have several varieties of grains and millets in our meals”, Ram Narayan Ji elaborated. “For winter, we have specific recipes of grain-free foods which are warming and are preferred because they are light on digestibility”, Sita Devi Ji added, amplifying the context.

“I have another Indian friend who works in an Indian restaurant in Japan. Whenever I meet her there, the aroma of pungent garlic and refreshing ginger used in tempering dishes leaves me relishing a delicious meal”, Cherry divulged.

Tara smiled. “Food is care. Service is sacred in our culture. Family archival recipes hold the secret of longevity and immunity”, Tara admitted.

“That is profound wisdom percolating across generations whether through recipes, traditions, clothes and rituals. Ageing is met with



dignity rather than anxiety in our culture as well. Healthy lifestyle and dietary practices enable that”, Cherry reiterated.

“Allow people to test courage internally, before stepping forward externally. We honor all living beings. Animals in the forest, marine life, in rivers and those part of livestock”, Tara verbalized. “We too have spirit animals guiding us, loyal pets and those residing in the wild for whom our care and concern is always there”, Cherry reacted, happily observing a cowherd on his way with his herd, downhill.

“The honey and pure fat mix I consume protects us from the cold”, Tara intimated, placing a large copper plate with the shiny dollop in front of her guest.

When Cherry let out an easy laugh, Tara felt a little piece of her childhood return.

“Not sure about the fat. I will take the honey for sure”, Cherry confirmed, filling honey from a bottle taken out by Tara from the kitchen shelf.

“My brother who resides in the adjoining village with his family has barely a pocket-sized garden. We have been taught that we plant the seed, wait patiently and surrender”, Ram Narayan ji articulated, pulling down window blinds for the night. “We are happy to see that most of the people we interact with, are responsible and see dignity not as a luxury, but the foundation to who they become”, he concluded.

“Tara is someone whose sensibilities and intent align with mine. Cleaning is not a chore but a sacred act for her. My parents have also taught me to bow to the space that supports our life”, Cherry exclaimed. Sita Devi ji patted her on her shoulder as a gesture of appreciation. “Yes dear. Aspects of the divine feminine power encompass wisdom, power, transformation and cosmic energy. When we worship, we can go within, connect to our higher self, get over insecurities and fears and surrender to the unknown. We thank



for years behind us and for the privilege of growing old. May both of you continue to remain sensitive and attain all your goals”, Sita Devi Ji manifested. The evening enriched by meaningful discussions gave way to a starlit night. Hope bloomed softly, like moonlight on still water, on a mountain lake in the valley beyond.



Chapter 23

Train Ride from The Mountains

Next morning frost crept across the window. Cherry bid adieu to Tara's parents promising another visit soon.

"When we arrived four days back, it felt that winter was retreating. Now, late snowing cheered everybody. There is a lot more for me to discover and for that I would visit your beautiful country again", Cherry realized. "We look forward to your visit again. I am sure there would be a lot for us to learn as well", Sita Devi Ji conveyed, presenting Cherry, vials of fragrant essential oils prepared by her.

Cherry accepted the gift with grace and pulled out a hand-crocheted mat from her handbag.

"This is for you. A Senior citizens women collective who nurture a garden together make these mats and other items from natural fabrics in our city", Cherry shared, presenting the rolled mats tied with colorful ribbons. Then she began counting her bags for the onward journey. "Thank you. We appreciate the effort", Sita Devi Ji replied, marching towards the main porch to remove snow.

"Vehicles were stranded in snow from last evening, a customer who came over to buy a medicine just informed. But all is well and people are moving around", Ram Narayan Ji assured, helping Tara pack her



luggage. Cherry peered outside from Tara's bedroom window. Bonfires outside neighboring hotels and houses burned against the darkness.

When she looked at the sky from the rooftop, unfolding into a brilliant spectacle of stars illuminating a space, untouched by the glamor of cities, she felt blissful.

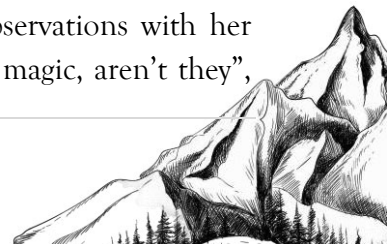
"See you over the next holidays. The event was a success. Study hard", he commanded. Tara hugged her parents and asked them to look after each other.

"Prioritize walking, focus on what food does and cultivate wellness as a positive, daily practice. This message is for all of you", Sita Devi Ji upheld, blessing the girls. Cherry shook hands with the renowned healer. Hands that cook for others before themselves, she noted.

Hill roads were crowded with hundreds of vehicles. On way to Pyaari's house and thereon to the railway station, the girls saw the serpentine road choked with hills, winding up a hill, through sharp turns.

"We collect grass months before winter's arrival for piling warm beds to keep cows warm in their sheds in this cold weather", Pyaari narrated, pointing towards a Cow shed covered with dried grass. "I will show you from inside on your next visit. Look, that girl is collecting snow. Because of frozen water in our tanks, she is collecting snow and will melt it for use at home. We store wood beforehand for these days and cold nights. It is fuel for keeping us warm and for cooking food", Tara unfurled. Cherry shared joy and curiosity through her trip, happy to have made such like-minded friends.

"We saw late and lighter snowfall this winter due to changing weather patterns", Tara traced, sharing her observations with her guest from Japan. "Snowflakes are clear, white magic, aren't they",



Pyaari rejoiced, wiping the wet car window with her handkerchief for a better view.

She visualized snow specks falling on her eyelids just as they did when it snowed.

“Completely. I have always felt a rare sense of calm and connection when I feel close to nature. Worries have felt smaller. Time felt slower and perspectives got clearer”, Cherry put forth. The girls watched families and tourists play in the snow on way to the railway station.

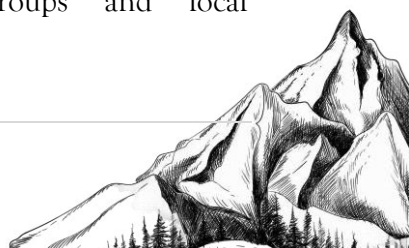
“You would be surprised if I told you that with our extended families we still eat spiced up, salted snow on days when we wish to let loose and enjoy the snow-laden outdoors”, Pyaari unveiled, sharing a slice of her life with her guest.

“When frozen water in taps lead to a crisis we are forced to wash utensils with snow”, Tara disclosed. Cherry laughed and said, “I find it unbelievable but do understand how difficult it must be.”

“Look, that is a Himalayan Wild Pear tree. I walk on this trek whenever I venture out to spot, pluck and collect mushrooms with my friends. Haven’t done that for nearly a year now, since I joined College, though!” Pyaari aired, showing a mist-draped mountain trail to her friends from inside the cab.

They boarded the train on time and thanked Almighty in all earnestness. Scenes of rugged cliffs, wide valleys, frozen springs and rivers which had been carving their way through the mountains for centuries were soon replaced by mundane city visuals though farms and fields scenes enhanced the overall picture.

“I met many aspiring entrepreneurs at the festival. The exceptional organizational prowess of community groups and local



administration functionaries at the event have inspired me to do something similar back home”, Cherry unfurled.

“Faith can shape environmental responsibility is a powerful belief our parents and teachers have inculcated in us. Technological advancements have eased our lives from times when there were more struggles. Good to know that our event motivated you. Do keep in touch so that we could contribute by way of our efforts for it”, Pyaari communicated, pointing towards a long mountain curve, visible from the train window. Both Cherry and Tara were struck by the serpentine tunnel, the train went by and winding mountain roads that were majestic and wide.

Cherry grinned, her subtle features and pinkish-white complexion adjusting to the change in place and weather. “I will invite you to the event and take you around”, Cherry promised. The friends laughed and set her intent to the Universe. A treat of zingy lime soda perked them up thereafter.



Chapter 24

Getting Ready - A Cosmopolitan Fair

Moving through life in familiar, ordinary ways, the energizing moment where the girls laughed till it hurt gave way to New Delhi welcoming them.

“One should build a future by enjoying the present moment and not just living in the present. Thoughts sprout out like branches, and we can observe our thoughts and direct them towards gaining success”, Tara recalled. “Absolutely. Isn’t that why we are here in New Delhi, pursuing education for a better future for ourselves!”, Pyaari rationalized. “Yes. Time begins to change for us when we align our thoughts for the larger good, productively making efforts”, Tara assented.

Tara helped Cherry settle in the Campus guest house. Prof. Manokamna welcomed them.

“We welcome you to our Campus dear Cherry. We hope the next one month is full of learning and enriching experiences and for our students and faculty. We will acquaint you with our Pharmacy course curriculum. There would be events and practical excursions to help you understand the entire natural medicine context taught to our students”, Prof. Manokamna introduced.



“Thank you, Ma’am. Ever since I came to India last week, interesting experiences have been unfolding. I look forward to interacting with students and faculty tomorrow morning”, Cherry replied shyly.

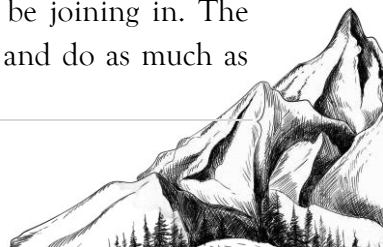
Pyari took leave and promised to meet them in the evening every alternate day and over weekends.

The new city welcomed the Japanese visitor, that carried the soft promise of Spring.

“Red brick walls of the Pharmacy College exude an old-world charm. I find New Delhi to be a historic city with beautiful flower-filled roundabouts, wide roads and greenery all around”, Cherry shared with the College faculty when they were introduced to one another. “Yes. The Capital city is a city of opportunities. People set out in search of greener pastures come here from near and far and steadily work their way up through diligence and discipline. We need to care for the city as much as we expect from it. Citizens have taken upon them cleanliness and plantation drives and there is more to look forward to”, a teacher who taught Tara’s batch, identified. Through packed days and multiple conversations over the next fifteen days, Cherry realized that college students across batches were informed and inquisitive.

A College Professor, who was also a committed social activist, went up to Cherry during the afternoon break and voiced, “It’s been two years since we came up with the meaningful idea of supporting local women’s shelters. Please accompany us tomorrow as we go about distributing sweets and blankets there. The shelter is not far but the area is congested. Volunteers from first, second and third year courses, twenty-four of them would walk together”, she informed.

Cherry rubbed her moist eyes with a spotless, white handkerchief. She felt overwhelmed. “Sure Madam. I would be joining in. The privileged need to care for the underprivileged and do as much as



possible. I am free tomorrow since the Professor who teaches Tara has planned visits for me, the day after tomorrow.”

Visit to the Women’s shelter near the New Delhi College of Pharmacy became a deeply meaningful trip for Cherry. “You all have gone through pain and trauma, but I am sure each of you is extremely gifted in something or the other”, Cherry featured, when she was asked by the College Professor to talk to the ladies at the shelter. Talk therapy conducted by her for half an hour became a ray of hope to pull them out of darkness. She showed them a short film on the Shelter Manager’s Computer, and they saw their own circumstances through the film.

The College Volunteers distributed sweets to celebrate the onset of spring and chatted with the ladies trying to identify their area of interest and core skills which could be honed for employment in future. “Gentle steps will lead you to big leaps”, the Professor preached.

When a lady served delicious, sweet dry fruit balls to everyone, Cherry complimented by saying, “You cook well. I saw roasted sweet potato being sold by a vendor on the way. You could make thin wafers out of it and package them to sell online. I am sure there must be many other snacks you can make.”

Before Cherry had finished, the lady turned to her and the Professor. “Yes Madam. I would do that. I cooked for my family before a car accident shattered my life. We can start a YouTube channel to motivate her”, she suggested. The group cheered.

College Volunteers took videos of celebratory moments, proving that small acts of care spread happiness and light helping both the giver and the receiver find their purpose.



Next day went by with a field visit to a pharmaceutical company and factory. After the visit, Cherry shared her own experiences with Tara's batchmates when Prof. Manokamna asked her to.

"Cherry has carried her skills and compassion far beyond the boundaries of home", Prof. Manokamna brought out, addressing Tara's batch before going ahead with the theory class.

"Madam, I have learnt so much. We are all meant to grow. At Hariyali village, there were stone-roofed houses, wooden houses separated by a wall but joined by a door. Rooms felt warm and lived in when children and elders lived together. Migration has led to loneliness for those who stay back but every member expects to be listened to. In my country, the elderly population is active and independent. Many live in Old Age homes and I hope the younger population realizes that family as a unit remains strong", Cherry disclosed.

The Class bore silence. Tara squirmed in discomfort, recalling the discussion she had with Cherry while taking a stroll with her, Pyaari, Chakrani and Rudrani by the Ridge, the previous evening. Garnished with a white chocolate drizzle, the girls relished Hot chocolate, Apple Crumble, Spiced coffee and Vegetable fritters at a Café in a shopping arcade outside college.

"Over weekend, we will treat you to an Indian meal", Rudrani proposed, while the girls walked back hurriedly to their respective colleges. "Sure. I enjoy Indian food in my city because I have few Indian friends. So, on Saturday evening I will have a North Indian meal with you and on Sunday evening, South Indian meal just like I tried 'Pahari' (regional mountain cuisine) meal at the terrace restaurant overlooking the majestic Rudradhar ranges", Cherry anticipated, her small eyes sparkling in the anticipation of their going out for meals she enjoyed. Tara, Pyaari, Chakrani and Rudrani let



out peals of laughter expressing their joy at their Japanese friend's fondness for Indian food.

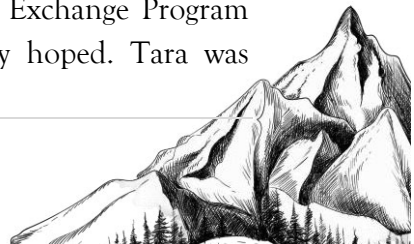
The friends relaxed, looking forward to a new day full of hope. An effortless friendship was forged between Tara and Cherry as they thrust themselves into putting together the Himalayan City Festival.

"Bending over the soil, with effort our gardener makes a circular ridge around the saplings. He presses the soil so that there is no air gap and sprays water as per every plant's individual requirement. He observes its steady progress and meticulously prepares manure", Dhara observed. "All our caregivers are valued for the worth they carry. Primary health center medical personnel, Post office staff, Agriculture officer, horticulturists, forest officers and grocers and private hospital staff are sensitive individuals", she added.

"My grandmother stressed the need for a thriving biodiversity for ecological restoration and a flourishing ecosystem. She stitched quilts by lamplight for her children and grandchildren. These patterned quilts would help them survive winters like rugs woven by her for our livestock have. A purpose must be found in our daily diligence along with nurturing kindness towards birds, insects, plants and micro-organisms", Tara maintained.

"My maternal grandmother who lives in a town near ours, in Japan is recognized as much for her goodness and generosity as for her art", Cherry disclosed. "She is a nonagenarian, just like my paternal grandmother I told you about", Cherry related.

"The herbal garden is tended to by your paternal grandmother, if I am not wrong", Tara enquired. "I would love to meet her. Cherry nodded in affirmation. Laughter filled the room with light. "You manifest what I have been wishing for ever since I met you. Do come to our country. Maybe next year, on the same Exchange Program through which I am here right now", Cherry hoped. Tara was



ecstatic, breaking into a giggle intermittently. “I will. May our intentions bloom”, she manifested. Cherry cheered, preparing tea for Tara in the electric kettle in her university guest-house room. Cherry always wanted talented youth to be a part of a space that brought together writers, thinkers, storytellers and passionate readers. Even as she enjoyed the city’s vibrant charm, she had motivated nearly a dozen students to create a group where meaningful discussions happened and where thinking minds were offered a nurturing space.

“By planting those plants which purify the air, we beautify our spaces and clean the air. Air quality directly affects our health and that of all living organisms. Indoor Plants lift humidity, filter air and infuse calm. We use Matte, metallic or stone-finish planters with gravel toppings to plant air-purifying plants”, Prof. Trishla maintained.

There were Areca Palm’s soft-feathered fronds, Peace Lily with glossy foliage and white blooms placed along corridors lining college classrooms.

The tastefully done terrace facing the staff room had its periphery lined with Boston Fern with its arching fronds, hanging in coir-lined baskets.

Air Plants mounted on driftwood and lush, patterned foliage of Chinese Evergreens uplifted the ambience of the college building.

“Snake Plants flourish in the shadows. Place them accordingly, Rudrani advised. “I we addressed smaller, often overlooked, emission sources that cumulatively contribute to decline in Air Quality, we would breathe better”, she noted.

“Sure”, Pyaari concurred, lifting her forehead resting on growing moss and wiping her hands to open her lunch box. “Thank you for taking us through the various departments in your college”, Cherry conveyed. “My pleasure. Exposure to various subjects helps us unfurl deeper meanings and opens our minds to newer possibilities”, Pyaari



remarked. Walking through nature after hearing about different courses, the five friends understood that following one's purpose did not stop the individual from appreciating those people who are doing things differently.

"We are better able to relate with others, face reality and understand why people behave the way they do", Chakrani deciphered. "We explore many dimensions at once", Rudrani supplemented, proceeding to the college canteen for an evening snack together.

"Agencies and citizens need to proactively implement Pollution Control measures for any visible difference to be made. Directions from the Commission for Air quality management encompass preventive and remedial solutions that need to be enforced. Industrial effluents aren't treated and Power Units release toxic Sulphur dioxide. Sewage drains get let off into flowing rivers endangering lives of humans, animals and marine life, endangering health at every step", Chakrani remarked.

"Several measures were implemented such as ensuring uninterrupted power supply to prevent the use of diesel generator sets, intensifying traffic management and staggering working hours for Government offices in NCR (National Capital Region)", Pyaari answered.

"We need to address issues of forest fires, stubble burning, excessive firewood gathering and uncontrolled soil and water pollution, if any change is to be brought about", Rudrani commented.

"There are natural wonders in our country which must be sealed as overcrowding for a view of these mountains spoils the space around them. Stringent measures that preserve nature are put in place", Cherry divulged.

"That is the right approach. We need to take stock of where we stand. The concept of a glass house in the mountains in our hill villages and towns is the same. My school friends whose parents are in garments



and jewelry business have erected solar- powered luxury glass houses offering spectacular views without disturbing nature. Accessing a slow pace of life in the lap of nature and being a part of it is not difficult if one practiced an ecologically sensitive approach”, Tara dwelled over.



Chapter 25

New Delhi: Himalayan City Festival

Over her one-month long stay, Cherry and Tara realized how their personalities mirrored each other's. They continued to know more about each other. "You are gentleness personified", Cherry effused, observing Tara interact with her classmates. "We sense a healing aura around her. When she is with us, we feel at peace", Chakrani delivered. "Just like both Rudrani and I look out for each other, we realize that with Tara we become stronger and more abundant", Chakrani added.

"I guess so. I am relating to her way of seeing things. We offer mutual support while being able to choose our own reality and own space", Tara unveiled, taking Cherry around her college lawns.

"These college buildings exude a charm, from another time", Cherry reacted. "We will take you around this vast, unfamiliar city next week. Let us see it together", Rudrani proposed.

The girls instantly warmed up to each other's company over snacks and friendly chatter before retreating to their habitats in the capital city of a multi-cultural ancient country on the path to modernity.



The Himalayan City Festival was kicked off few days later in the middle of much enthusiasm and participation from natives of mountains and megacity alike.

The stall at the festival attracted a lot of interest. Narayani and Dhara had brought two mountain women who were brilliant Cooks. They served delicious Foxtail millet or ‘Kangni’, cooked with green gram pulse, to those seeking mountain cuisine. There was Buckwheat noodle soup and for snack Horse gram lentil ground with ginger. “We have added boiled taro root, salt and ‘heeng’ or asafetida as you call it. Place it on butter paper and steam for 20 minutes”, Narayani explained in broken English, when a foreign tourist asked her what was being cooked.

“Horse gram lentil paste is good for knees and joints. The next stall is selling Ragi seeds milk which is very nutritious”, Prof. Trishla shared, introducing herself to the tourists. “We are from Europe and are on way to Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand after exploring New Delhi”, a lady from the group of seven women travelers screamed, loud enough to be heard through the noise. “We will be trekking there. After attending this lovely ‘Himalayan City Festival’ here, we look forward to attending the Tribal and Folk Art Festival in Sunder Nagar in Himachal Pradesh”, another enthusiastic member from her group shared.

“That is wonderful”, Prof. Trishla remarked, “Do not miss the talk on ballads and folk songs in 45 minutes at the Amphitheatre that side”, she instructed, pointing in the direction of the college Amphitheatre. “We will attend”, the lady assured.

“We have advanced warning systems that predict earthquakes, tsunamis and storms. It is like the Remote Sensing Center here”, Cherry explained, when she was invited onto the stage to address the audience. Responses from the audience, ranging from curiosity to



surprise spurred her to talk about relief packages and advanced water treatment technologies in her country. Time seemed to flow gently for her. The Shutterbug in her got her to share her collection of photographs of her herbal garden and of services for society, both from Japan and from the India visit.

Team leader of a Delhi city citizens group stood up to clap for Cherry. Others followed.

“It is nice to learn from you about these programs and how in a lifestyle shaped by fast-paced, gadget-heavy living, you are nurturing an herbal garden and working with and for Senior citizens”, he commended. “Thank you so much. I read Vedic philosophy and resonate with the belief that we should have enough happiness to keep our spirit alive and enough pain so that the smallest of joys appear bigger”, Cherry acknowledged, humbled by the appreciation. Following a round of applause, she alighted from the stage.

“Life isn’t about failure but about growth. Clear your mind, seek forgiveness and see how nature heals back. With increased global mobility, quick commerce has made way for robust trade. But climate uncertainties, pandemic, geo-political conflicts and wars have taught humanity that what is small can be enduring and what is cast aside can be powerful”, Prof. Trishla framed, summarizing the event’s essential theme for the audience, which included faculty from other colleges of Delhi University, students from those colleges and their parents.

“The Skill and Entrepreneurship Development Mission in its Technology-based development initiative would train youth at Drone School in Drone Assembly, Drone Data Analysis and Mapping offering Remote Pilot Certificate Course. Our youth learn discernment in responding to the environment. Over the last one month, I have been introducing to them the process of turning plant



fiber into leather, thereby reducing carbon footprint”, Prof. Manokamna explained, charting her journey with the students towards effective recycling.

A student’s mother from the audience took the roaming microphone to thank her for inviting an expert to the College the previous week and inviting parents and students to hear her experiences.

The Expert spoke about how Cactus and Pineapple plant fibers were being successfully converted into eco-friendly leather.

Self-help group leaders from mountain states shared how they formed grassroot collectives, motivating city folks to understand the benefits of pooling skills under difficult conditions and arduous terrains.

“My brothers and sisters, climbed over walls to play cricket. There were wildflowers in the spring. Those were the days when summers hummed and winter glowed. Circumstances pushed us early into the world and yet we were able to go where others were yet to”, Raseshwari traced, tracking her journey with community Volunteers. Watching Prof. Manokamna and Prof. Trishla interact with Self-help group members, who had accompanied her to the festival to put up stalls, she felt overwhelmed.

“Thank you for showcasing rich regional cuisine, handicrafts and natural treasures of the mountains to city people and students here”, Prof. Manokamna put forth.

“Our youth are coming into their own. They are stronger in the face of adversity, through life experiences and conscious effort. Through the awareness campaign on forestry carried out by your team of Volunteers, I am sure there is a heightened sensitivity”, Prof. Trishla supposed.



“When both the young and old, participate in marches and campaigns, meaningful progress is achieved. A lot is being done but a lot remains. Tree Planting, water harvesting, pruning and covering patches and beds with wooden chips (trimmings from trees) in winters to mulch the soil, our folks do all this offering mutual support and looking out for each other”, Raseshwari highlighted, walking with the Professors towards the stage to felicitate all the participants who had put up stalls.

“Our Volunteers established a Bio-resource center capable of producing Bio-Inputs in the mountains”, Raseshwari pointed out. “Yes. I read about that. Our Eco- Club Volunteers prepare compost in the college garden and use it in the kitchen garden”, Prof. Trishla shared. “We learn from such constructive initiatives and are able to direct the inspiring energy of our students in the right direction”, Prof. Manokamna continued, taking the interaction forward.

“We eat fermented legumes and grains like ‘Natto’, a soyabean-based breakfast preparation. They are steamed just like these steamed rice cakes (‘Idli’) are”, Cherry chattered, relishing mildly flavored ‘Sambhar’ (yellow lentils cooked with vegetables and flavorful condiments) and coconut chutney at the guest house restaurant with Chakrani and Rudrani.

“I had a delicious spinach and lentil local delicacy for dinner here yesterday”, Cherry conveyed. “We have a variety of such recipes. They have mild flavors and are still delicious”, Chakrani added. “Yeah, Rudrani, the treats made by your grandmother you shared yesterday, tasted just like sweet candies made by my mother from dried apple”, Cherry confirmed.

“Try this sesame and jaggery treat made by me”, Gaura offered her Aunt Raseshwari and friend Kishori, extending a snack made by her



before them. It had been a while since they had met each other even though they lived few kilometers apart.

Time had passed but familiarity returned with surprising ease, at least for Gaura and Kishori whose daughters were best friends. Taking a bite, nurturing Aunt Raseshwari hugged her niece Gaura and evinced, “This is so authentic. You have made it just like your mother would make.”

“Thank you, Aunty”, Gaura replied, jubilant in the downpour of appreciation. “These are delicious”, Kishori remarked. “Teach our daughters how to make these”, she urged. “I will learn how to make those lentil-paste fried recipe snacks from you Aunty”, Gaura wished. Smiling, Raseshwari replied “Surely. Use rice flour, millet flour and jaggery for making nourishing treats for your family using different varieties of millets. I will wait for you.” “Keep in touch with each other. In these times when friendships do not last, it is all the more important to retain the warmth and care of relationships”, she reminded, ensuring that her near and dear ones never forgot to stay connected. “Yes Aunty. You are so right about us rediscovering our bonds that time and distance often loosen”, Kishori acceded.

“We will come to eat ‘Makrodu’, Dubde’, ‘Babru’ and ‘Bevdi’ made by you”, Gaura enlisted. Raseshwari attentively listened to her niece, let out a loud laugh and quipped, “Yes, yes. Do come over anytime.”

“Yes Aunty. The college students and their parents are taking an interest in these natural products”, Gaura replied. “Yes. Small details give us big shifts. Come let us eat together now”, Kishori enjoined. The three spirited mountain women savored Delhi’s famous ‘Papri Chaat’ together, knowing well that each moment was a sacred gift.

Raseshwari started a conversation with few children, visiting the festival, when a young schoolboy spoke about catching up on some exercise when really stressed. “Foundation is getting ready for you,



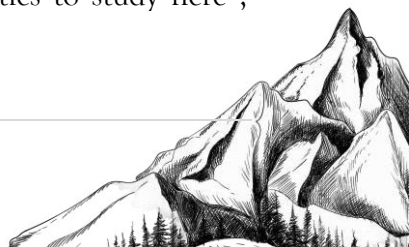
my child. Start growing small trees, in the open space around your house, if you have a courtyard or alongside vegetable farms if your friends have one”, she suggested. “Yes. We have a kitchen garden on our terrace. My classmate has a farmhouse, and he visits it every month. It is on the outskirts of the city. He showed me photographs of Papaya, Amla, Moringa, lemon and Guava trees”, the schoolboy specified, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

The Youth corner where a group of five boys whose fathers were farmers were demonstrating how they prepared natural pesticides drew much attention.

“Multiple nutrients in this prevent plants from cancer-causing Arsenic, reduces water consumption and cuts air, water and soil pollution out”, Gaura explained cheering the boys’ group’s efforts.

“I have made a cost-effective weeder using my old bicycle”, a student attending the festival from a South Delhi school shared. Rudrani found it oddly fascinating and pulled Vaikunth and the group to witness the Youth corner and hear them speak. Chandan led in clapping for them and said, “Keep it going. In-house innovation is the right way to address community issues and find solutions.” Giri made a short video featuring the youth who spoke about how they were motivated by their parents to make devices which helped them in farming using rhythms aligned by nature. “May you explore distinct experiences and keep serving the society at large, productively”, Giri wished. He captured the College building in the backdrop, a dense hedge of Bougainvillea roofed over it. The moment turned surreal reminded as he was of his college building in Shimla with the same vibrant pink and red canopy.

“Our schools and colleges in the hills are world-famous. I know many family friends who came from metropolitan cities to study here”,



Gangadhar brought out, helping Giri put his equipment back in the bag.

“Human experience lessons evolve you in a way you require for your next level. On the sidelines on the global conference being held in Central Delhi felicitating Women entrepreneurs and Women farmers in Agriculture based food systems, we are happy to welcome parents and students to the ‘Himalayan City Festival’ at University in the city of New Delhi. We welcome Students, Development Professionals, Volunteers, Enterprising men and women from various districts across the state of Himachal Pradesh who are using natural treasures to prepare snacks, wellness products and traditional fashion with modern utility. Self-help group participants and Startup founders who breathe life into old traditions to create products and services for consumers, help one another find their strengths and deserve a special round of applause from our side”, Prof. Trishla delivered, addressing the lively audience.

A general sense of unpredictability in world order prevails. The resplendent ‘Semal’ or Red Silk-cotton tree stood decked in red, on the lawn, its deep red blooming flowers standing out. The Mountain folk had put up their products in individual stalls erected for them by organizers at the University. They interacted with a gentle, laidback stance as was their demeanor, laughed loudly within their own groups and interacted with the parents and students in Hindi and broken English.

“I feel like being surrounded by the loving kindness, as I did when we visited Buransh Van village”, Peter aired, sharing thoughts with Prof. Manokamna while showing her his report. Fans hummed lazily, turning in slow circles in the staff room. Prof. Manokamna’s bangles jingled softly as she signed certificates for those from Himachal Pradesh who participated in the ‘Himalayan Festival’. Peter and Fun assisted her. Folk tunes drifted through open windows with visiting



folk artists familiarizing the visitors with Mountain tunes on traditional instruments. Flowers constantly fell off the Silk Cotton tree and the vibrant Golden shower tree or ‘Amaltas’ tree caught the eye of many a guest from a distance.

Folk music, lively stalls and stimulating discussions among visitors added joy to an already heady, fun, glorious afternoon. A city built on multilayered history and bustling malls co-existed with old movie halls. Many students interacted with visitors from the hills sharing about hidden gems in the capital city, with them.

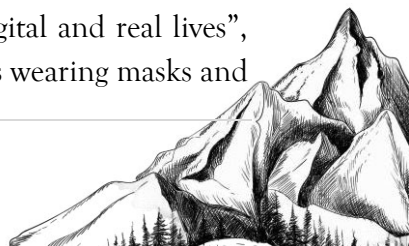
“Advanced robots carry out monitoring tasks today. Students in Universities are experimenting with it and testing their limits”, Giri commented. “Let us organize a Reader’s Festival in Jwala, Ujala or any prominent town, for school children, college children and their parents across all blocks in the total of twelve Districts”, Vaikunth proposed.

“That is a brilliant idea. We can invite faculty from colleges here to our town. Literature has a quiet power to connect minds, spark conversations and nurture imagination across generations”, Chandan deliberated. “Yes. Let us plan this out after reaching home”, Hari accepted.

“The hill community will be able to engage with fellow bibliophiles, discover new voices and deliberate on the future of human agency and responsibility as I see it”, Chandrashekhara anticipated.

“It will also enable the common people to be part of a space that brings together writers, thinkers, storytellers and passionate readers”, Gangadhar entrusted.

“Great. Let us put this together. I hope our children are able to balance their lifestyles by this stimulus, aided as they are by their parents, in bringing a balance between their digital and real lives”, Chandan advised. A tribal dance with characters wearing masks and



posing as colorful animals and trees mesmerized the city audience. Hari who was a devoted musician, vocalist and prolific composer, lent his music to a performance by school children from his town who enacted spirits and mythical creatures, epitomizing the belief that storytelling can take many forms.

Vaikunth and Chandrashekhar felt so moved listening to the music composed by Hari that they lifted him up in ecstasy, audience clapping for Hari and the student performers in front of the stage.

A gathering of music-loving strangers changed into a circle of friends for Hari, in no time.

Touring around the College, Moksh recalled frenzied days leading up to final exams during his graduation days. “We will plan another visit to New Delhi soon. I am particularly keen to take the Old Delhi Heritage walk and watch in awe how street vendors around the city are sustaining the city’s street food culture by enduring hostile summertime days”, Surya expressed.

“We would explore gardens, new townships and commercial districts defining the city as well”, Moksh suggested. “Sure. The Culinary Institute from where I graduated also had an air-conditioned reading hall”, Surya recounted. “Sir, we also have a digital library which is a repository of resources for students preparing for competitive exams”, the student Volunteer taking them around revealed. “That is good. The sky is the limit for the youth today with career opportunities abounding every step of the way”, Moksh concluded.

Raseshwari, a steadfast voice in women’s movement towards empowerment, thanked the University faculty, organizers, parents and students for turning the journey of our Mountain entrepreneurs from a passion project into a meaningful cultural movement.

“Practice low-fat cooking and walk more”, Surya conveyed to a group of students walking with him, past the stalls.



“Seamlessness between thought and action is what we have grown up absorbing, watching mountain-dwellers protecting their truth and tapping the vast treasures from the plant kingdom for their Micro-kitchens”, Surya, the Chef with a big heart, added.

“Soak millets for 8 hours as it eases digestion. Make ‘Chapati’ (roasted wheat flour breads), ‘Halwa’ (sweet dessert) or ‘Kheer’ which is like milk pudding. Sorghum Millet Milk has no lactose”, Surya insisted, halting at the stall put up by Rudrani’s grandmother’s self-help collective.

“This is RAGI/NACHNI/ MANDUA (Finger Millet), here is JOWAR (Sorghum Millet), that is BAJRA (Pearl Millet), the one here is KODRA (KODO) and that one is SANVA/ SAMAK/ JHANGORA (Barnyard Millet)”, Gaura demonstrated, drawing attention of the students and a few parents to the packed pouches of various millets followed by a short speech on their health benefits, enhanced by visuals and texts on millets brightly displayed on an illustrated Poster.

“Yes. By sharing knowledge, we give new impulses to strategies in coping with life. A friend of mine who lives in Shimla took me around when I visited her last summer. There was a specific plant leaf growing in the wild which we plucked and once I consumed the paste, my liver disorder got cured”, a student’s mother exclaimed.

“Definitely. The small, thorny Thistle plant is called ‘Kandal’ in the local language. It cures Piles. Leaf powder makes skin glow, and its roots are fed to cows and buffaloes to cool stomach heat”, Kishori enounced.

“Mountain ranges and hill ecosystems are a treasure trove of knowledge, life lessons and blessings. I find it fascinating to see how they come to me whenever I come to the Plains”, Moksh conveyed.



Enlightened parents bought hill products ranging from flower juices to lentils and essential oils to fragrant teas.

“Strength wrapped in calm confidence of each of our mountain guests is contagious”, Prof. Manokamna remarked, while making the announcement to invite them for lunch with the College faculty.

“The wider landscape around the University is closely linked to the Delhi ridge and spreads across the northern extension of the Aravalli ranges. We will invite you in Spring so that you can enjoy the beauty of life in perfect weather and around natural spaces”, Prof. Trishla voiced, over lunch. “We sense within all of you more than kinship, a sentiment of admiration and reverence for one another. We look forward to having each of you back here next year and knowing for ourselves, how to make sense of worlds that suddenly shifted after natural disasters struck”, Prof. Manokamna rendered.

A bright speck of joy floated around cherubic faces of hardworking mountain folk eating lunch together. “We should know what we want to learn and do”, a woman Sarpanch accompanying the group urged. “We would love to be back again and talk about nurturing plants, making compost from disposed of piles of fallen flowers and reusing fabrics and natural fibers”, Raseshwari called out. “It is about empowerment of low-income communities, as I see it”, Kishori touched off. Chakrani noticed a sparkle in her mother’s eyes when she spoke about looking forward to seeing Delhi’s monuments, gardens and buildings in leafy neighborhoods.

Fragrant white tuberose vases on circular lunch tables made the lunch break a pleasant city affair for guests, who enjoyed local street snacks and North Indian meal delicacies. Resplendent Bougainvillea flowers draping lawn walls in hues and tints of pink fell continually on the ground.



Before heading for lunch, the friends roamed around the University premises and discovered permeable grass grids to retain water placed over open patches between department buildings, an innovative method for maintaining ground water levels in scorching summers. Birds soared in the skies. Gentle Summer breeze scattered the dry, dead leaves.

“Let us go back to the guesthouse. We will know the city of New Delhi better after tomorrow’s outing”, Chandrashekhhar unraveled. “Looking forward to that. I will meet Sanskar and Neelkanth and bid them goodbye”, Hari chirped in. “I will tell them about our train for home the day after tomorrow and wish them a happy bus journey back home”, Hari continued.



Chapter 26

Cherry Experiences New Delhi

“I observed that terrace farmers here using drone over crops and spraying pesticides while on a trip around town with Pyaari”, Cherry unveiled. “Yes. There is a retail outlet run by women collective in every district”, Kishori remarked. “Sustainable food, fashion and home décor. There is a strong participation of rural women in bringing about these businesses through meaningful collaborations across our mountain districts”, Kishori narrated.

A group of parents of students from nearby colleges who had been interacting with Kishori since the festival began clapped on hearing the conversation.

“I feel that a beautifully personal journey is unfolding exactly as it is meant to, for me”, Cherry walked up to Prof. Manokamna shyly and softly said in her ear, “As I see families gathered close here to attend the event, I noticed how plurality can be celebrated as within the Northern region itself there is such diversity, the mountains, the plains, cities and towns. This is amazing.”

“Yes Cherry. We would like you to make a report about your experiences here in India and submit it to your university as well as to our college. You are multifaceted and I hope you continue your



varied pursuits. We will send our students to your country for a similar interaction where they observe local culture and make travel educational while on an exchange program, soon”, Prof. Manokamna mapped out.

“Seeing life with a new vision is important for each of us. I am glad that the visit has been enriching for you. Kindly hand over these certificates to all the Volunteers and participants who put up stalls and made this event possible. Make your parents explore your respective College campuses and the capital city”, Prof. Manokamna directed, turning towards Chakrani and Rudrani. “Yes Madam. We will give these certificates right away. Our parents are here for two more days so we shall be taking them around”, Chakrani abided, informing her about her plan at the same time.

“Alright then. See you in Class tomorrow”, Prof. Manokamna concluded and proceeded to hand over Certifications of Participation to all the mountain people who had put up stalls.

Chakrani and Rudrani made their way through massive crowds to give certificates to worthy college volunteers who had worked hard to make the event a success. Cherry and Tara walked alongside Prof. Manokamna. “Madam, I will compile a report soon”, Cherry pledged. “It is a learning experience for me to see people softened, without breaking in the face of challenges. We welcome students to our country”, she conveyed. Then, placing her hands on Tara’s shoulder, she jested, “Light coming from inside helps move things towards you. This is what just happened, isn’t it?”

Tara clapped in excitement and quipped, “Yes. We manifested our visit to your country. The Universe listened because of our pure intentions.”



“Tara’s sincerity paid off and so did her efforts. Get going and help the participants in winding up the stalls. An hour from now, it should be through. They would travel with us tomorrow.

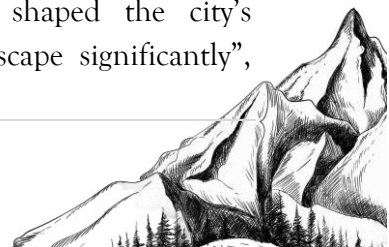
Eat something first”, Prof. Trishla supervised, listening to their chat. “Yes Madam”, Tara obeyed. Cherry abided and off the girls went about, following their mentor’s directions. Passion and courage were indeed rewarded, the friends realized and proceeded to do what their teacher had asked them to.

“Air filter humming inside city homes deepen our understanding about where we stand as far as responding to the environment is concerned, not to forget our responsibility to it”, Chakrani appropriated. “Miraculous changes usher in when we take leaps of faith. We need to take risks but also overcome automation-induced losses”, Cherry attested. New friendships were quietly forged.

“By choosing emotional intelligence over impulse, every situation naturally aligns back into harmony and balance. AI runs complex tasks but we can say that human roles these days, increasingly center on creative problem-solving, strategic thinking and collaboration”, Sanskar warranted, walking along with Neelkanth, Gaura and Kishori through the corridors, over the course of a day filled with Sight-seeing in Delhi and a tour of Chakrani and Rudrani’s College precincts.

After seeing their daughter’s Department and taking a tour around the campus, Sanskar commented, “I noticed how the dry, rocky extension of the Mountain range has transformed into a hub of institutional and infrastructural growth. I visited New Delhi many years back.”

“Yes. Town Planning over the years and a recent make-over of Lutyens Delhi’s Government Offices have shaped the city’s administrative, educational and cultural landscape significantly”,



Neelkanth reacted, when Sanskar called him to share his impressions.

“My classmates from the city enjoy delightful lunch parties and garden weddings in Delhi winter and spring. It is only when summer simmers into blazing June afternoon days that the wait for rains begin”, Chakrani told her parents, opening her hostel room for her parents. “You could welcome in more sunlight by opening the window more often”, Kishori suggested. “The study table looks sturdy. Use a brighter bulb, dear”, Sanskar advised, inspecting his daughter’s room, through the furniture, up to the walls.

“Sure Baba. We have shops here or I buy whatever is needed online”, Chakrani informed addressing her father. Walking along the Campus lawns, Sanskar and Kishori spotted a party of Peacocks and bright sunflowers in full bloom which stood in a perfect, unwavering row on the University lawn flower beds. “Collapse of glacial lakes due to melting and intense warming have reduced winter temperature impacting cities, towns, villages, countries and continents altogether. Interacting with faculty and other students, I realize that collective strength is working wonders here too”, Sanskar avowed.

“I agree. Cool temperature and sunlight are needed by Sunflowers to flourish. I have grown these too in our garden. They are rich in Polyunsaturated fatty acid which is good for the heart. I use the foliage for livestock”, Kishori rejoiced, springing into a dance with a flower as she posed for a photograph of hers being clicked by her daughter.

“Our girls find small, quiet anchors that connect them to the Earth here, when the mind feels lost in a tide of noise elsewhere”, Gaura exulted, joining Kishori in the garden.



“Rudrani and Neelkanth are coming. They are exploring the vast library at leisure”, Gaura told Chakrani.

“Alright Aunty. Let us have tea at the Canteen. I will send a message to Rudrani to come to the Canteen. You need to return back tomorrow, so we would like you to relax at the guest house after an early dinner”, Chakrani advised. Gazing at trees and groves as they walked up to the Canteen, Chakrani, Kishori, Sanskar and Gaura sighted a pandemonium of parrots on tree branches and capturing the sight in their mobile phones.

A quiet sense of fulfilment seeped into the hearts of their parents regarding courses and colleges their daughters were enrolled in.

Next morning, Cherry and Tara took a walk together before attending classes. Cherry listened to the chattering of the birds under the canopy of a large Mango tree near the swing. Roar of constantly plying vehicles through arterial lanes and main roads around the Campus area was a constant for every urban area inhabitant.

“All is well except for the smog, I guess”, Cherry assumed, enjoying shade under a lush green tree’s dense shadow. Sharp, biting heat was on its way with Summer entering their lives gradually.

“We need a breakthrough here. The city has green spaces and awareness is being raised about planting trees. Sun rises over a horizon of steel, glass and a veil of smoke in what is called urban development”, Tara reckoned, offering Cherry, water-soaked Chia seeds. “Thank you”, Cherry replied, holding the glass, she was carrying around.

Tara carried her flask all the way from her campus accommodation.

“Madam has planned our batch’s visit to an Ayurvedic Center in Central Delhi today. Let us get ready. The bus leaves at 9.45 AM ”, Tara updated, jogging towards her room.



“Alright”, Cherry assented, noticing an elderly woman dressed in a multicolored saree, roam around the lawns collecting plastic waste and sweeping dried leaves off the paved stretches.

Aboard the College bus, on way to the Ayurvedic Center, Prof. Manokamna shared how by facilitating such visits, the Department fostered urban ecological research, encouraging student-led fieldwork. “Madam, I would prepare and present a special report on the relevance of such centers preserving and carrying forward ancient wisdom to cure ailments by using natural medicines”, Cherry declared. “That is a brilliant idea. These centers have evolved into living laboratories for learning, innovation, ecology and culture. We have to nurture innovations and expand our field of knowledge in indigenous systems of medicine”, Prof. Manokamna stipulated. The students group rejoiced as they saw a tulip garden in full bloom on way to the Ayurvedic (Healing practices derived from ancient texts) center.

“It is the time of the year for us to refresh ourselves with scenes and sights of beautiful flower shows organized, in different parts of the city. We will visit one of these, with Chakrani and Rudrani over the weekend. What do you say, Cherry?”, Tara queried, when the bus swerved around a round-about bursting with Gulmohar blooms. “Multiple job opportunities, self-control and discipline, this city has it all”, Pyaari listed.

“That is so true”, Tara accepted, noticing dozens of pigeons clustered together in one shaded section of the side-road, leading to the Ayurvedic Center.

“Surely. We will take Pyaari along”, Cherry reaffirmed. “Of course. We will”, Tara vouched. The visit to the Ayurvedic Center turned out to be a wholesome, learning experience for the students.



An Octogenarian couple managed the center with their son's and daughter's families. The students and teachers accompanying them interacted with plant medicine specialists and observed how they grew herbs and prepared medicines.

"Thank you everyone. It was an extremely fruitful trip for me to visit the Ayurvedic center (Center for Traditional medicine) today. Setting up of a National Medicinal Plants Repository and developing of more herbal gardens and medicinal nurseries to strengthen biodiversity conservation would help those entering this exciting field, in reworking within tradition", Cherry emphasized.

"We look forward to reading your report soon, Cherry", one of Tara's batchmates intended.

"Sure. It would be out as soon as I settle back in Japan", Cherry replied.

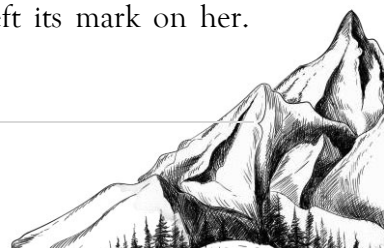
The journey back to college saw the 30 batchmates metamorphosis from disciplined college students into singing and giggling classmates.

Tara and Cherry skipped the post-dinner walk that evening and rested in their respective rooms.

The next morning when they met each other for the morning walk, Cherry could not help but ask Tara about the old lady, sipping tea with a younger woman who pruned the lawn hedges, under a bench in the lawn.

"She has worked as our college gardener for over forty years, I have heard. The young woman is her daughter-in-law who is employed here", Tara answered.

Cherry looked on, crossing them while walking and heard the duo talking softly in the rural dialect. Time had left its mark on her.



Wrinkles mapped her face. Heavy glasses on her nose slipped down frequently.

“She retired five years ago. But to honor her need to feel useful and preserve the quiet dignity she carries in her heart, she is permitted to collect scrap like plastic waste, discarded metal and broken glass using gloves. Look, she is wrapping broken glass picked out from the bin in old newspapers. She will give this to scrap dealer for recycling”, Tara explained. A lesson in human dignity arrived quietly for Cherry.

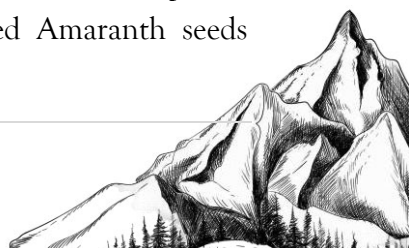
“That is profound. We must create inclusive spaces for emerging voices and create visibility on themes of recycling, reducing and reusing waste. There is a dire need to introduce technology-driven sustainability solutions and youth innovation into nurturing parks and open spaces in both Japan and India”, Cherry realized.

The girls entered the classroom on time and attended theory classes, Practical sessions and field visits together for the rest of the day.

“The University has spearheaded transformative initiatives in academic excellence, culture building, policy innovation, strategic engagement with industry and Government. It is for you students to have the courage to be authentic and utilize technology for the greater good”, Vice-Chancellor of the University proclaimed.

The zeal with which the event was conducted rubbed off on Chakrani, Rudrani and Tara’s classmates with many vowing to visit the friends they made among hill folks managing the stalls soon.

“Could we tour around your beautiful state with Chakrani and buy shawls, scarfs and mufflers with you, Aunty”, Chakrani’s classmate enquired. “Sure. You must visit. We will take you around”, Kishori relented. “Good quality wool wrapping in warmth with patterned weaves and embroideries, a beautifully cut jacket, there are options galore for you”, Gaura added, offering roasted Amaranth seeds



(‘Chaulai’) consumed as dry fruit, she was carrying from home to the girls.

“Summers smelled of fresh grass and sunlight for me. In my childhood, family dinners were sacred. My siblings and I have moved to towns and cities for studies and jobs. The warm embrace of a large, colorful family comforts when we get a chance to meet our grandparents and extended families in the village, now”, Cherry remarked.

“I work as a Volunteer for an organization which offers online and in-person gatherings, workshops, monthly brunches and arranges forest walks for women. All activities guided by natural rhythms take the members closer to nature. Book Clubs hold regular book talks and readings”, she continued, introducing herself to faculty and students at a Session held at the New Delhi College of Pharmacy. “I look forward to stimulating discussions with the learned faculty here. Youth energy around is already motivating me to learn more about the curriculum here and what skills are being nurtured”, Cherry hailed.

“It is a pleasure to have you here Cherry, as part of the Exchange program at the New Delhi College of Pharmacy.

Staff and students of our college are looking forward to learning from you about your course, culture and country in the next few weeks before your departure”, Prof. Manokamna commented.

“I am waiting to see how students face challenges with such daring energy as witnessed at the Community Festival, held here at the Delhi campus, over the last two days”, Cherry admitted.

Chakrani shared with the audience about her course and college after the event when the audience staying back for interaction were requested to occupy the Amphitheatre.



Kishori felt overwhelmed when Chakrani spoke about her Granny with reverence.

“I salute my grandmother’s resourcefulness. Age is a measure of grace for her. Even today she meets every day with joy despite age-related physical pain. Her quiet labor in making ‘ghee’ (clarified butter) from butter matches my mother’s quiet responsibility in managing her career, home and precise planting schedules.”

Sanskar’s eyes welled up and he sent the Video footage of Chakrani’s speech to his parents.

There were resounding claps from the audience.

“We understand how to value reflection over reaction from your speech because the youth who are Text savvy today, need to realize what it means to work hard. Livestock management, custodians and practitioners of indigenous healing, handicrafts artists, bank officers and Defense officers. Watching the young generation bring complete awareness within themselves and charting new territories in diverse careers is encouraging. All the best to all our students. Thank you, parents, for attending the event today and supporting us in helping our students reach their full potential”, Prof. Manokamna thanked, closing her concluding speech.

“Thank you, teachers, for guiding us through”, Chakrani aired, before alighting from the stage.

“The festival was a grand success because of the efforts of teachers and students, our hill folk and visitors who came from the National Capital Region in large numbers. Thank you, Madam, for inviting us. We went around this neat, clean, buzzing, model Campus and are impressed”, Sanskar yielded, when invited by Prof. Manokamna to say a few words. Tea and snacks were served to Sanskar, Kishori, Neelkanth, Gaura, Cherry, Raseshwari, Chandan, Vaikunth, Giri, Hari, Chandrashekhar and Gangadhar.



Cherry, Sanskar, Kishori, Neelkanth and Gauri proceeded for Delhi Sight-seeing while others they knew from neighboring towns left for Shimla, with the entire group who had participated in the festival by bus. Road trips were fun.

Singing loudly and joyfully, together they returned to their mountain homes which cradled in the 'Land of Gods', from where it all began.

Traffic grew heavier by the time Neelkanth, Gaura, Sanskar, Kishori, Cherry, Chakrani and Rudrani had reached Qutub Minar, the five-storied world-famous minaret made of red and grey sandstone, during the reign of the Delhi Sultanate. It was nearing afternoon when the Tourist guide took them through the Art district, Red Fort and wide-canopied landscapes and blossom-laden roundabouts of Central Delhi.

“Change is visible in safety, infrastructure and connectivity within the national capital region. Roads are busier than when I saw them five years ago when I attended a conference here”, Sanskar recalled clicking photographs. “Yeah. Market Complexes and Coaching Centers hum with activity. Colorful murals keep the heritage of the streets alive. I have heard stories from our elders, of our multicultural history, layered heritage and these ancient monuments, told over cups of tea”, Kishori articulated. Like a toddler looked on with wide-eyed wonder at images flitting before her during the tour, several tourists visiting for the first time stood awestruck.

“In our mountains, there were evenings that were largely silent, punctuated by distant traffic, but not anymore. City-dwellers residing in these densely packed neighborhoods have no idea how harsh the cold could be. They grapple with multiple identities like we do and move through different seasons of fast-paced living”, Neelkanth rued. “They need to pause, breathe and respond rather than react, I guess”, Gaura marked, admiring the marble floor of a temple porch. It was



carpeted in yellow petals dropping off a vibrant ‘Amaltas’ (Cassia Fistula) tree, which colored the city’s Summer and gave shade to many a weary traveler.

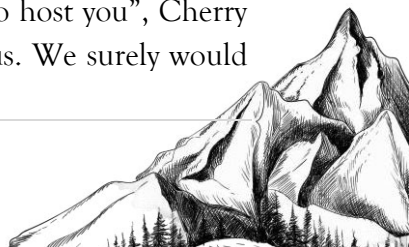
“I know. Let’s plan another trip soon. I wish to walk the crowded lanes of Old Delhi to capture the perfect visual language. You know, the enormous class divide, buzzing commercial activity, old buildings leaning close, new concrete towers blocking the Sun, scores of eateries, old havelis, the works”, Kishori delineated.

“I am in. Both of us will come. I also want to experience the flavors and richness of old cuisines and try out street treats”, Gaura uttered. “Sure. We will be back soon. Some lanes carry the aroma of tea, shop shelves hold fragrance bottles while winding lanes carry their scent”, Kishori rendered, sketching an image of a future visit to this glorious city.

“Echo of a dream would soon turn into a reality for you”, Sanskar observed, articulating his acknowledgement. Neelkanth signaled a thumb-up for the ladies’ travel plans soon.

“Robinia flowers, blossom around end April-early May and form a cloak around our trees in a pulsating purple. Do visit again”, Gaura said to Cherry, offering crunchy, lightly spiced, home-made millet biscuits from her snack bag.

“Thank you. I will come next year. Let us hope you make it to my country and take in the allure of nature’s treasures. Cherry blossoms, after whom I got my name, are known for their fragile beauty. Stunning violet-blue flowers of Jacaranda tree signify rebirth in our culture. They are also believed to usher in prosperity and grow best in well-drained soil, blooming in winter after a sufficient rain, in Spring and early Summer. You can get totally lost in art-filled paths in urban areas and it will be a pleasure for us to host you”, Cherry hinted. “Thank you, dear Cherry, for inviting us. We surely would



visit your country someday”, Gaura replied. “The love we share has fostered this connection between us. Isn’t that great”, Kishori ranted. “In search of a certain kind of pace and experience of a new country and culture, we do hope to visit soon”, Gaura reacted, cementing the bond for years to come.

“We have never wandered around on our own like this generation does with ease”, Kishori realized. “Yes, and I am happy to see them do so confidently”, Gaura amplified. The ladies stepped gently aside to walk towards the stage where a folk play was being staged by folk performers who had accompanied them.

Traffic had slowed as the weekday evening brought a chance for the visitors to chat in the Cab with the Tour guide sharing nuggets about India Gate, National Museum and other building they crossed on way back to the guest house. Shoppers thronged markets and restaurants were busy with fragrant aromas wafting in the air even as new Malls glittered in bright lights. “Thank you for taking us around a city, both ageless and new. It was a delightful experience for us”, Neelkanth expressed, thanking the tour guide and Cab driver. Upon alighting from the Cab at the guest-house lawns, they captured the setting Sun in their cameras, painting the clouds in soft hues of gold and pink.

The Tour guide and Cab driver took their leave promising to take them around the glorious city, familiar yet full of surprises, again on their next visit.

After bidding goodbye to their parents, Chakrani and Rudrani joined Tara and Cherry in tasting snacks prepared by one of Tara’s friends.

“It is so nice to see you delivering food from the back of a van in this popular spot of the market frequented by both University students



and local residents”, Tara praised her friend, who was also her batchmate.

“Yes. I belong to the North-East as you know and discovered the popularity of these snacks here. So, just thought of starting this in the evenings. It is only adding to my experience and income”, her friend shared, serving them and others in queue with a smile.

“This is delicious. Well, I wish to explore the North-Eastern part of India to explore its natural beauty and know how it has built its own identity”, Cherry appreciated, complimenting Tara’s friend. “Definitely. You must pay a visit and soak in the wonders. Thank you for appreciating my efforts. Compassion creates alignment and defines our actions. It enables us to handle situations politely and attract new opportunities. Have a great time in our great country”, she said, proceeding to serve other customers waiting for their orders. Tara then got on to sharing video coverage of the University event to Ujali and Titli who could not make it because of exams.



Chapter 27

Cherry Blooms in India

Experiences subtly left their imprint on Cherry. Over the next weekend, Tara took Cherry to another friend's accommodation where her South Indian friend dished out delicious home-cooked Rice and lentil Crepe ('Dosa'). Together, they attended an Inter-College Lawn Tennis Championship where the players and their team members shone just as bright despite an injury.

"I understood the pressure they were feeling because we play and watch sports in Japan as well", Cherry unveiled, showing photographs of the tournaments she had participated in from her mobile phone.

"I agree. Everyone is exceptional at a few things and ordinary at most others. The exceptional things that feel like second nature to us also quietly determine how life unfolds for some of us", Tara conjectured.

Over the next few weeks, Cherry attended several workshops conducted by a carefully curated panel of Subject experts, packed with eager, informed attendees. Panel discussions, workshops and a book launch blended intellectual exchange with artistic expression for Chakrani, Rudrani, Pyaari, Tara and Cherry.

Cherry's month-long internship was nearly complete. A week before her departure, she presented a summarized report written by her to



a jam-packed student group. There were few faculty members, who were following Cherry's initiatives and academic association with the University with interest.

"Establish Citizens Nature Hubs to promote environmental awareness and community stewardship. I observed across the villages and towns I toured here, how communities take the onus of conserving their natural treasures because they know they would utilize them for their needs. Empathy is the foundation of responsible leadership and sustainable change", she summarized.

Expert sessions that addressed pressing urban challenges like extreme heat, flood-resilience, nature-based infrastructure, circular food systems and innovative financing for green cities were held for students' batch-wise over the next one week, at Tara's college. Students from other colleges were also invited.

Durga spoke about the Tea Museum she was invested in and about her journey from being a 25-years old Village girl wanting to join Defense Services to the Entrepreneur she was today. Transforming the open space into a cultural classroom, sisters Saraswati and Durga shared how they had quietly walked their journey after their parents' demise. Simple Village life attracted them. "Madam, choosing to stay away from city lures, understanding each other and healing and growing together again, requires a different kind of courage", Cherry remarked. "Yes, dear Cherry. Our deep devotion for local Gods and Goddesses teaches us to love through discipline, service and showing up every single day. My maternal Uncle who retired from the armed forces has unparalleled expertise in high altitude search and rescue. He has served as a Search and Rescue Ranger at a National Park. He will address the audience on Careers in Biodiversity Conservation and share experiences about his work in Safety Advocacy through Mentorship", Saraswati chronicled.



The Tall, energetic man inspired the University students for over an hour raising awareness on wildlife conservation. Students asked him about his journey; he guided them on how they could explore a career in this field.

Palm leaf plates and bowls, a refillable water jar, tablecloth made from left-over fabric and upcycled bottles handed over to the students at the Snack counter became delightful surprises for the Japanese visitor.

“We have a recycling unit in all our colleges and the students run it”, Prof. Trishla reported. “That is wonderful”, Cherry responded, noticing her smile and greying hair representing her experience beyond years.

“Our ancestors have faced storms they never saw coming. Despite unpredictability about how ageing will unfold and though their steps may have slowed, our parents and grandparents have always consolidated shattered things that needed holding together”, Cherry described, her disposition rooted in her cultural ethos. “I understand. Watching Chakrani and Rudrani’s mothers put a small folding table near their entrance gate with home-made honey and farm fruits and vegetables for passersby and then distributed to employees, welcomed the few days we spent with them, wrapped in calm, scented with hope and blooming with simple joys”, Pari characterized.

Cherry’s eyes widened with a kind of astonishing joy.

This trip has inspired me to make another visit soon. You all must come to Japan. Traveling brings different worlds together”, Cherry asserted. “Sure. We will. Our country is big. Road trips in any direction open up a world of experiences for us. We look forward to many more travels within India and overseas”, Fairy represented, perked by the idea of making new friends through travel.



Chapter 28

New Delhi Sight-Seeing

Diplomatic boulevard of Shanti Path was dressed up with tulips. Fairy, Pari, Peter and Fun raised their heads to take in the full glory of small clusters in Lodhi Garden, Central Park and other roundabouts, from the hired travel agency car that took them around the city of New Delhi.

Enjoying the city's vibrant charm under the sharp Spring Sun, they visited Qutub Minar, India Gate and the National Science Museum.

“Our tour guide was a historian who was regaling us with stories of unimaginable riches of ruling dynasties in the past”, Fairy told her mother over a phone call.

“The National Science Museum had interactive displays and sections spanning a wide range of inventions and discoveries”, Fun exchanged with his father over a phone call before sharing his train details for the journey back to Bangalore, the next day.

“We will definitely go to the Nursery and landscaped park we crossed on the way. It houses ancient monuments within its premises, but Tara had told me that every Sunday, farmers from urban villages nearby, organize a HAAT (market) showcasing and selling local produce”, Pari laid out, sharing her plans. “That should be fun. We



know that so well now that we have taken the experience two times over”, Fairy testified.

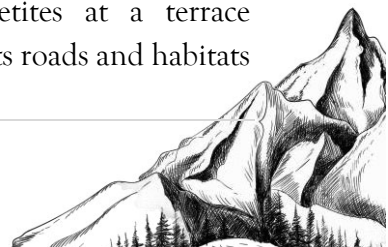
Pari winked and folded her hands in gratitude. The friends visited a famous temple in Central Delhi, its marble walls with beautiful inlay work and inscriptions, along with the guide who explained the meanings in rich detail. Visitors who looked anxious calmed down after entering the Sanctum sanctorum.

Petals of flowers from ‘Semal’ or Red Silk Cotton trees and ‘Gulmohar’ trees colored the air in vibrant red and orange hues before getting pressed between paved roads. The flowers entangled with fallen, heart-shaped leaves with long, tapering tips of the ‘Peepal’ (Sacred Fig) tree and made a matrix-like pattern outside the temple. The bustling metropolitan city presented a glimpse of devotional fervor through chants by devotees and glimmers of the one eternal truth, through hymns.

The beautiful Sunset view compelled them to capture their last evening in the city. There was time left for some shopping at the grand old Connaught Place where they went in circles buying clothes and souvenirs for family members and college teachers. The Markets exuded an old-world charm, shouting vendors and murmuring of a thousand languages swirling together in the warm evening air strengthened their tour guide’s belief that with the passage of time, landmarks in the fast-changing city remained the same.

Over their last dinner together on the trip, the four students from Bangalore promised one another that they would continue to work on college projects together and plan trips to towns, villages and cities which would make them know their country better.

Prior to the departure next day, a delicately flavored and exquisitely presented lunch awaited their anxious appetites at a terrace restaurant that presented aerial views of Delhi, its roads and habitats



interspersed with greenery and distant monuments in the background.

“We will visit Old Delhi on our next visit”, Peter pledged. “Is that the place where lanes twist inward and sunlight doesn’t penetrate into its most cramped alleys?”, Pari queried.

“That is right. Winding lanes redolent with a rich past and a shared present fascinate those who are comfortable there. Tourists go there for the experience around old ‘Havelis’ or vintage style houses, tasty street food and shopping with bargaining possibilities”, Fairy answered.

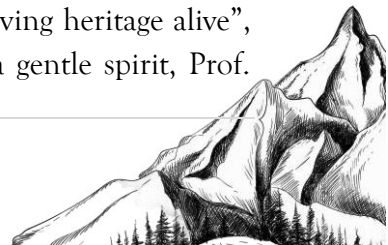


Chapter 29

Farewell! Hill Folk: Visit New Delhi Again

“We thank the industrious, soft-spoken, attentive, instinctively nurturing Hill community for sharing their expertise and products with our city audience at this Himalayan festival organized at the University”, the College Director announced during the departure ceremony for all attendees. “It was an enriching interaction for the parents, students and teachers”, she represented. “I am sure our students’ gained insights into their own opportunities and personal potential by looking at the way challenges are overcome by enterprising men and women from the mountains”, the Director stated. The students seated among the audience let out a loud ‘Yes’ in chorus. “War expresses the fragility of human pride. It is the extraordinary kinship the institution instills, that assures us that our child is on way to a bright future”, a parent communicated, thanking Prof. Manokamna for organizing the lively festival.

“Our intent was to nurture confidence, curiosity and kindness in our students. The students worked in teams and coordinated with the hill entrepreneurs all the while. They planned for their accommodation and got the entire event going. We will host them next year in our college which is a kilometer away. Hope the festival will return next year keeping the spirit of our living heritage alive”, Prof. Trishla wished. A devoted teacher with a gentle spirit, Prof.



Trishla always encouraged her students to contribute to communities around them with skills, efforts and resources.

“Thank you, Madam, for believing in us and forging association between the hills and the plains”, Chandan affirmed. He accompanied sixty middle school students.

“The ground is always shifting. Our children are taking in the Campus experience. They are our future environmentalists, scientists and doctors”, Raseshwari observed. Her steadfast voice floated along with the school children’s bubbly chatter.

“Thank you for inviting us. Ours is a well-organized community. We look forward to more such events where thematic explorations are encouraged and a platform offered for collaboration on addressing challenges relating to climate change. It is time for us to start recalibrating, reassessing and rebooting our efforts towards a secure future for humanity”, Raseshwari reaffirmed, eliciting a big round of applause from the audience.



Chapter 30

Friends Have Fun

The road trip from New Delhi back to the mountains was good fun for friends Cherry, Tara, Rudrani and Chakrani.

There was a lot to look forward to from a new day, where these sprightly girls would blossom into empowered women who understood their inner and outer worlds better.

Next morning, the friends saw the same dawn together. Walking past Plum, Peach, Apricot and Apple trees in terraced orchards decorating the valley under dancing clouds, Cherry paused to wonder if she was in her own country. Nature was pristine anywhere, glorious and bountiful. “I wanted you to see our hills as they are before you return to Japan. Biting into juicy fruits, with no hurry and noisy chatter with friends you met, has been a fun experience all through”, Tara effused. Cherry smiled. She realized that a deep friendship had been borne between her and Tara going by the joy she felt listening to her musings on matters that held significance for both of them.

“Both of us are nature-lovers”, Cherry acclaimed, capturing a photograph of trees around. “Yes. Each tree has its own marks, a quiet identity and a simple role- to stand, to witness, to remain”, Tara



reiterated. Fine violet and white flowers shot up on the riverbed beside them. The grass stalks were long and glistening with the moistness of the river. “Many varieties of grass are edible and also used to make handicrafts, brooms and furniture”, Tara elaborated. “Plastic waste decomposition leads to methane gas polluting soil and water. Involve local people in Ecotourism, Conservation efforts and Sustainable tourism”, Cherry suggested.

Noticing plastic packets strewn around, Tara justified by sharing, “Public awareness on waste management has intensified and efforts are on through multiple channels to foster heightened civic sense among locals and outsiders.”

Their chemistry had evolved by now, enough to ensure that they knew a lot was being done and a lot more needed to be done, in this regard.

The friends enjoyed refreshing drinks and some snacks at a Café facing a lovely courtyard with a grand tree. “I will show you temples which are revered with great devotion”, Tara put out laying her intent.

“I am so looking forward, ever since I read that many traditions or should I say the ethos and sensibility behind many of our traditions are similar”, Cherry remarked, her oval face darkening under the bright Sun.

“Yes. Ancestor worship, nature worship and conveying messages through spirits and protection by guardian animals are some of the common threads that connect us culturally. Their representations may be different, but the idea is the same”, Tara corroborated.

The bus arrived roughly, when expected.

“Thank you, Tara san (‘san’ is a term used to communicate respect to a person). I feel grounded walking through nature”, Cherry



confided, rejuvenated and refreshed. “The pleasure is all mine. We lived in mud houses like those earlier. We lingered in their dim coolness, through long Summers with ease and now concrete has entered our buildings”, Tara asserted, pointing to a row of mud houses outside, visible from the bus window. Spring Sun warm on her skin did not stop Cherry from treating her eyes to a feast of summer flowers visible in hotels, temples, cafes, houses and markets.

Zinnia, Balsam, Sunflower, Cosmos, Gaillardia, Salvia and wild pops of color erupting from bushes jutting out of crevices.

She felt that the forests spoke to her. She felt like she was witnessing a different kind of intelligence at work. “As winter recedes, these hilly towns undergo a poetic transformation”, Tara gushed, her eyes betraying her fascination for all things bright and beautiful. The girls visited four temples. Tara explained their history and importance to Cherry. Cherry’s eyes sparkled with joy when she saw rows of bells and red pieces of cloth wound around temple railings signifying wishes and desires of devotees seeking their fulfilment. “We have paper slips, locks and ribbons communicating our wants and dreams to deities at shrines”, Cherry described. “There are good blessings and curses”, she explained.

“We turn to fortune-tellers with hope much like you turn to Astrologers”, Cherry divulged.

“I read that many of your crafts and gardening techniques boost the healing process”, Tara voiced. Cherry nodded in affirmation.

“In the temples you visited today, purification and light are symbols of fire, which remove ignorance and darkness from life, bringing in knowledge and limitless patience. Nature speaks softly, yet powerfully. It is in mountain temples that we comprehend about the power of collective prayers”, Tara vouched. Carefully, she placed the temple food offerings, received from Saints in a jute pouch, she had



carried from home and told Cherry that they would eat these sweet sacred offerings after reaching home and upon washing their hands.

A soft, constant prayer carried boundless humanity, the girls realized, watching long queues.

Rain lashed enlivening nature all around. As light began its slow return, a cocoon of safety and protection beckoned livestock grazing in the wild, back to their habitats.

“I need another trip to see and know your place more. I will show you natural wonders and glorious flowers in my country when you visit us soon. Darkened light makes the pink petals of ‘Sakura’ (Cherry blossoms) flowers after which I got my name look purple. Rows of trees create a vibrant spectrum of blossoms”, Cherry revealed. “I am sure it will be a novel, invigorating experience with lots of learning as well”, Tara reacted, excited about the idea. Stopping by to buy woolen shawls from a shop along the mountain road, Tara also took Cherry to the adjoining shop selling raw turmeric pickle, red chili pickle and pickles from various varieties of lime, made in small batches.

“I liked the organic food with tasty seasonings and local flavors of the food served at your home and the Café. We inhabit culture differently but the way we protect our herbal gardens is the same”, Cherry mused.

“This is ‘Phegu’, a small, green edible plant. We cook it the traditional way, plucking it whenever we spot it growing in the wild. We use carminative spices such as Ginger, Cumin, Fennel seeds and Cinnamon”, Tara explained.

“That’s wonderful. We use herbs and plants the same way. When we boil lime, red onions, garlic, ginger and cinnamon and then drink the extract, we eliminate mucus from the lungs, also removing inflammation from the respiratory tract”, Cherry enunciated.



“After completing my education in the city, I am back to the countryside, with my parents who have always taught me to prioritize consistent effort and long-term thinking. Two bowls of fruits on mist-draped mornings by the soft hush of Pine trees help me start my day”, Cherry conveyed.

“It is the same for me. I will work for the people, from right here, my village, my home. Between an anxious heart or a modest life, I choose the latter”, Tara put across.

The friends giggled and laughed. Mist rose over Earth just as Cherry sighted vibrant Pink and White Lilies thriving by the road bend, as they approached Tara’s home. Tara’s parents who had wrapped up with healing consultations for the day welcomed the girls with tasty evening snacks before they sat in the special ‘Beehi’ room meant for kitchen tasks, listening in to Cherry’s experiences with Tara through the day.

“Standing on the riverbed, by the softness, tenderness and light emanating from these famous temples, we could hear whispers of a time when humans lived by the river hunting, fishing and foraging”, Chakrani recognized, reminiscing her childhood memories with Cherry.

A spiritual unfolding began when she gazed around with eyes of wonder, with divine curiosity lighting her eyes as she circumambulated the Sanctum sanctorum with Chakrani.

“It has been a beautiful day. Sun felt piercingly bright on my first day and air bitterly cold the following day. I captured first Sunrays falling on a mountain peak, high along the rugged slopes of the Himalayas, happy Rhododendrons coloring the scenery of misty Pine ridges in the foreground”, Cherry attested, showing photos and videos captured by her.



“Life is tough here. A quiet rhythm slows the day. Guardian Goddess of the region in his dream, asked a King to build this temple and erect her stone manifestations. The King obeyed. She blesses the region and its inhabitants ever since. Or should I say local deities and an Absolute Higher Power always bless those who protect nature, help others and tread the right path”, Chakrani elaborated.

“Livelihoods by the lake, ancient songs sung by women grinding grain, songs of goat herders, each of these colorful domestic rituals fascinate me. I will write a detailed report on these”, Cherry sensed. “These traditions offer a sense of continuity in these somber times”, Tara heeded, laying out Banana flowers dry recipe with boiled Black Chickpea for guests, back from a short trek and temple visit.

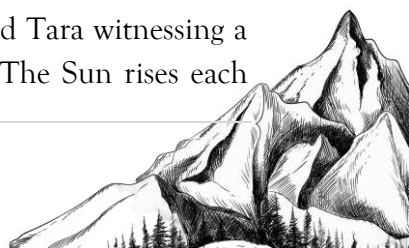
“The dish is delicious. Please come over to my house in the evening. I will make Sea buckthorn tea infused with honey. What do you say? I will call Rudrani in the morning. We could take Cherry to the Botanical Garden and Rock Garden before she goes back to Japan”, Chakrani planned, placing the Rhododendron juice flask at the center of the dining table.

“Thank you for such warm hospitality”, Cherry responded, taking the dish in small servings with a wooden spoon.

“I think that is a good idea. Let us go ahead. I will reach your house with Cherry at 9 AM tomorrow morning. You speak to Rudrani in the evening today and finalize the plan”, Tara ascertained.

“My flight for Tokyo is from New Delhi on Monday. Tomorrow is Saturday. All is good. I have Sunday to complete the remaining packing, primarily of native, dry street eats I bought, before leaving for New Delhi”, Cherry informed, relishing a mildly spiced preparation lovingly made by Tara, for her.

The subsequent morning began with Cherry and Tara witnessing a magical Sunrise together from Tara’s garden. “The Sun rises each



morning, but it is special because of you here with us today”, Tara expressed, arranging contents in her purse. “It is the same for me. I need several trips to this incredible country to really understand the history and rich culture. I am sure our affection for each other would bring you to my country soon”, Cherry anticipated. “The stream finds its way not by knowing the route but by flowing, so I think if I put my efforts together, I would visit your country soon”, Tara manifested, crossing her fingers.

The brisk walk to Chakrani’s house was filled with sounds of bird chirping and sights of petals and leaves in full bloom.

Chakrani promptly served all her friends ‘Baadi’ and ‘Bedola’ made from Walnut, wheat or millet flour, spices stuffed with dal and fried. “Thank you so much Aunty. These are delicious”, Rudrani, Tara and Cherry let out with a shrill, in chorus.

Kishori was happy that the girls were relishing the preparations. She presented Cherry a purse made by her, from plant fiber embroidered with woolen threads in colors red, pink and purple.

“Thank you so much. This means a lot. The finesse with which you created this is noteworthy”, Cherry highlighted.

“All the best for your endeavors. Sanskar Uncle is at work, but he asked me to convey our good wishes to you”, Kishori communicated.

“Thank you. I am fortunate to have received your affection during this trip and look forward to more visits”, Cherry acknowledged, carefully placing the purse in her handbag.

Rudrani narrated the incident where a pet dog protected a child from her village when a Leopard attacked them on a hill trail. “There is an explosion of fresh produce in the markets straight out from the farms. Explore the offerings in pleasant weather like just standing under a tree. Our Summer is filled with tasks and the cold offers less



distractions, though we stock up on fodder and groceries beforehand to sail through cold days and colder nights”, she mused, while Cherry halted in front of a vegetable seller, hurriedly jotting down names of varieties of fresh vegetables on display.

Forests began to teach them even before they visited the Botanical garden and Rock garden, as they discovered three types of wild mushrooms through a dense forest. “Pinecones, we call them ‘Shankil’ are used by us, to ignite heat for warmth in winters”, Rudrani exclaimed.

After spending over three hours touring the Botanical garden and the Rock garden next to it, the girls’ gang decided to eat lunch at a tiny restaurant, standing by a tranquil lake. “We know about a lady who spends her own money to travel long distances and motivate people to conserve forests”, Chakrani informed.

“I know. There is a volunteers’ group which has taken on the responsibility of popularizing use of Seed paper as wedding invites. These go back to Mother Earth once they are used”, Rudrani concurred.

“That is innovative and a need-of-the-hour initiative, I must say”, Cherry conveyed.

“Thank you for taking me around. The spectacular variety of plants, flowers, climbers, seeds and fruits amazes me. Rocks and stones in varied shapes and sizes show us how nuanced and marvelous nature is. There is perfect symmetry in creation and a whole lot of logic behind the entire matrix”, Cherry observed.

“Yes. Our vast Biodiversity supports the ecosystem in the most synchronized manner. We are but a small speck in the grand scheme of the cosmos. The sacred texts mention existence of millions of galaxies so understand how meticulously the Universe is planned”, Tara elaborated.



Lunch was mouth-watering. The girls relished Raw Papaya Paratha generously slathering it with spicy chutney. The restaurant owner stood out in sunshine, roasting corn on the side for guests or walk-in customers who wished to buy.

“Salt used in this curd is a mixture of condiments such as coriander seeds, coriander leaves, mint leaves, garlic cloves, cumin seeds, black salt and table salt”, Rudrani specified.

“That is why this curd is so tasty”, Cherry realized, relishing the mildly spiced flavor.

“The Cherry tomatoes, Coriander and Pea salad is tangy because the seasonal, large citrus lime variety was squeezed just now”, Tara particularized, carrying the shallow salad dish herself from the open-air kitchen to their table.

The convivial lunch rounded off with ‘Badaane’ ka Meetha, a traditional dessert made on special occasions.

The girly gang, complimenting the owner on the tasty meal items walked back to their respective abodes.



Chapter 31

Cherry Bids Goodbye To Heavenly Himachal

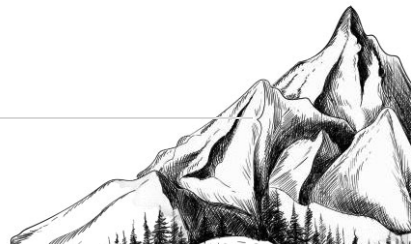
“A shy, silvery veil of mist wraps around the town like a charm today. Thank you so much for the love and warm hospitality. Hope to see you soon”, Cherry held, bidding goodbye filled with gratitude to Tara, her parents, the gang of girls and other villagers who came to see her off.

“Yesterday we had greeted dawn with an ethereal glow, isn’t it”, Tara reckoned.

“Yes. A crimson sky in hues of flame, ochre and gold it was. I captured such a beautiful sky while we were pruning apricot trees last winter”, Ujali reported, packing some nuts and wafers sent by her mother for Cherry in a cardboard box.

“Thank you. I am emotionally overpowered”, Cherry conveyed.

“I brought these toys made from grass fiber”, Titli revealed, handing out a colorful box with a transparent top through which the contents were visible.



“Thanks. Hope to meet all you lovely people soon”, Cherry affirmed, hugging Ujali and Titli before bowing in front of the other neighbors gathered at Tara’s front courtyard.

“Please convey our greetings to your parents and grandparents in Japan,” Sita Devi ji affirmed. “We are assured of your journey to New Delhi with Chakrani and Rudrani and wish you a very pleasant flight from there”, Ram Narayan ji articulated.

“Thank you. I am overwhelmed with all the love and affection I received here”, Cherry replied, lifting her bag to load in the cab. A local villager presented Cherry with a crown made of fresh mountain flowers which Cherry promptly wore on her hair. Titli clicked a photograph of Cherry with the girly gang.

They were bound by an unspoken understanding.

Tara and Cherry chatted during the ride to New Delhi.



Chapter 32

Cherry Travels Back To Japan

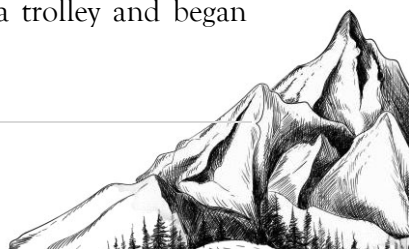
Upon reaching the capital city, the girls quickly went to their respective hostel rooms and kept their luggage.

Then they accompanied Cherry to the Airport for her flight back to Tokyo from where she would take a local train to reach Sako town, where her parents lived. The village by the same name was where she had spent her childhood with them, before they moved to the town nearby and she went to the city for higher studies.

The girls wept and hugged and wished one another the best of health and career success.

“Keep walking beside souls and helping them move from fragmentation to wholeness, Tara san. Hope to meet you very soon”, Cherry aired. “We learnt to choose courage over comfort, service over self and love over fear, from you”, Chakrani brought out. Cherry bowed in acknowledgement. “I learnt that one must choose duty, compassion and purpose without hesitation”, Rudrani sounded.

The girls encircled in a group, holding one another’s arms before Cherry loaded her luggage from the car onto a trolley and began pushing it.



Tears filled their eyes. “Sayonara”, Cherry verbalized. Tara, Chakrani and Rudrani blazed, waving while bidding goodbye to their new friend.

Sakura came to the Airport to receive Cherry. The friends mingled with one another sharing their daily goings on. Sakura helped Cherry settle back upon reaching the apartment.

“Our mothers would visit us tomorrow. Let us clean the apartment, Sakura suggested. “You have traveled. Get some rest. I will manage”, she intoned.

“Thank you dear. You are my well-wisher and longtime friend. With Tara, I feel the same way. Let us hope she pays us a visit soon. I am sure you will like her”, Cherry considered. The apartment was tidied within an hour by both the girls.

“I am looking forward to meeting her, ever since you wrote about her in your e-mails from India. I am sure I would like her”, Sakura intuited.

“I sensed emotional healing and love, when I was around her. She heals, meditates and guides others while her parents use indigenous herbs to make medicine and treat people. People come from near and far to buy medicines and take meditation sessions”, Cherry cognized.

“I bought this shawl for your mother, muffler for your father and the stole for you. The weaves and patterns are representative of the local craft of the region”, Chakrani rendered, placing the presents on the sofa for Sakura to view.

“Thank you dear. These are beautiful. I will wear the stole when we launch my Painting exhibition for your organization”, Sakura replied, placing the gifts in her wardrobe carefully.



“Sure, dear Sakura. Please let me know if I could share any reference material for you to reflect change through your paintings”, Cherry deliberated, unpacking her bags and keeping her work documents on her work and study table.

“I know you being deeply grateful for your privilege”, Cherry said to Sakura. Sakura was her childhood friend. The girls lived in the same village and their grandmothers were best friends.

“Life has been a series of action sequences. Our respected fathers worked in the same automobile company, and we moved to Meyo town, at almost the same time. I hope we continue this friendship for years to come”, Cherry aspired.

Sakura, was an old soul who intuitively knew so much, brewed Matcha tea for herself and Cherry in their studio apartment and contemplated, “Yes, Cherry san. You are older than me by exactly one month, but our names mean the same. The fragile flower that brings cheer and spectacle to the lives of Japanese and anyone who loves to witness their grandeur”, Sakura underlined.

“I would have renounced the trappings of the world and gone to the forest, had it not been for you and the strong bond between our families”, she effected, unraveling threads in the fabric of their growing years.

Sakura was a Painter, who valued clarity over hypocrisy and often did the disappearing act, traversing islands and peaks to find inspiration. Her works fetched her a good sum of money, but she always yearned to meet her grandmother who still lived in the village and grew corn.

“Navigate work, but do not forget to worship nature, my grandfather used to say. Cherry, I can paint the Earth in mystery and wonder as soon as I have prayed at a shrine. Isn’t that intriguing?”, Sakura reflected.



“You are right. Thank you for the Matcha tea. I can understand this better now that I am back from India, the land of sacred rivers and deep mythology”, Cherry claimed.



Chapter 33

Precious Time with Mothers

“It has been six months since I returned from India and not a day has passed when I have not yearned to explore more wonders there”, Cherry contended.

“We would go together soon. You mentioned about Tara who wrote letters full of loving kindness and wisdom to you, didn’t you?”, Sakura asked.

“Yes, I did. She is coming next month for the same Exchange Program as I had gone for”, Cherry informed.

“That is great news. I am keen to meet, having heard so much about her”, Sakura expressed.

“You would enhance your life, after meeting this girl. I dreamt of my guardian angel telling me that last night”, Sakura’s mother Omura pronounced, from the kitchen. She was visiting her daughter in the city as she could not live without seeing her for more than fifteen days.

The girls went quiet, trying to understand what Omura meant.

“Cherry made commendable efforts during her India visit as I understood from her report and the experiences she shared with us”,



Omura explained conjuring a tempura of vegetables and sea- food for the girls. “You bring color to spaces, my child through your exemplary craft. It is time for your work to address half-truths and work for the welfare of humanity by aligning with what is already in motion. Everything is moving towards growth”, Omura prophesized blessing the children by spraying fragrant holy water she had carried from home.

Cherry and Sakura sat still, transfixed by what Omura said and meant. They realized it all made sense and hugged her with reverence.

“Fulfilment comes from compassion, self-belief and the faith that we are enough in our individual capacities”, Cherry’s mother always upheld.

It was a humid afternoon when Cherry who was working on graphic displays for a peer-powered wellness and conversation platform, saw her mother at the entrance door.

“You surprised me. Love you for that”, Cherry verbalized, taking her mother’s umbrella to hang on the stand. “It had been over a week, and I was craving to see you”, her mother phrased.

“Please sit here. I will bring juice for you”, Cherry requested, pulling her mother towards the living room, overwhelmed by emotion. “Your father sent these for you”, her mother shared, extending a packet of varied fruits and vegetables from their farm.

“Thank you so much. I will speak with him in the evening. We will cook tonight and you are going back not before tomorrow”, Cherry communicated, placing the juice glass on a table in front of the sofa on which her mother was seated.



“Alright. Look, this is a good blessing fortune slip I got from a shrine for you. It was a peaceful place I stopped by to offer prayers for us, on the way”, her mother explained, handing out a narrow slip to her.

“Thank you, mother. I have faith in a higher power, and it has got stronger after my visit to India”, Cherry acknowledged.

“At Tara’s home, anyone who came, learnt to hold space for others, to remember their light and embody their truth. Mother, I shall also make my house a zone wrapped in an embrace of pure, heartfelt expressions of art, culture and literature”, Cherry promised.

“Untouched by the clutter of wants and comparisons, your grandparents have lived among things not as possessions but as companions, Cherry”, Cherry’s mother said, swiping through Cherry’s photographs from her India trip.

“Yes. I remember Grandpa telling me last time I visited them, say, “Communication is not about being heard. It is about being present enough to ensure that hearing is possible. Sometimes the most skillful communication is restraint”, Cherry ascribed, referring to her maternal grandfather’s quote. “Every experience shapes your judgement but remember it is the small decisions which leave ripples that extend far beyond the moment. Find new expressions through your work. By seeing the world through a broader lens, you would learn a lot. Helping others would offer a refreshing re-look at multiple truths”, her mother specified.

“Now, put this herbs-infused oil serum I prepared for you on your face and wash it with cold water after 45 minutes”, her mother laid out.

“You are great, mother. You carried this from home for me. Thank you. Much love”, Cherry reacted and uncorked the glass bottle gently.



After applying the serum on her face and rinsing it with water subsequently, Cherry arranged evening snacks and meal items with Sakura.

“Tara and her folks have a compelling camaraderie with nature. People there faced storms they never saw coming. They hold grief without spectacle, in much the same way as we do. Massive crowds were seen at the fair in Ujala town. We went for a trek to nearby waterfalls, and I saw deer graze through fog-shrouded mountains”, Cherry rendered.

Her mother stared at the wall. A gentle sigh left their chest. Even though her voice trembled, remembering the disasters the region had seen in the past, she always managed to remain remarkably sprightly and independent. “Blessings from our ancestors have always helped us walk the path with a lived reality, maintaining a patient, reassuring rhythm all the way”, she unraveled. Cherry held her mother’s hands, sat close to her and they evoked treasured memories of precious times gone by. “Entrusted with strength and confidence, we move ahead in these times of change and uncertainty”, Cherry construed.

Love, memories and the laughs shared through the evening in Cherry and Sakura’s apartment with their mothers by their side, made the day truly special for them.

“Our hair will turn silver. I hope that our friendship remains steadfast through the years”, Sakura wished, holding Cherry’s hands. “May you both keep sharing your joys and making every sorrow a little easier to bear”, Omura willed.



Chapter 34

Cherry Meets Her Grandparents

Twinning in quiet harmony, her grandmother Siatori, at 89 years, was often a friend whose shoulder was home. Cherry spent few weeks in the Summer and winter season with her each year. Cherry just wished she could hold the moment a little longer. She held her grandmother's hand tighter and said, "You mean the world to me. I saw children hugging trees and young adults walk on grass to feel grounded in the company of nature, in Himachal Pradesh." Lying by the shore, watching waves, underneath the silver Moon's embrace, her paternal grandmother caressed her forehead and said, "When you connect with nature, you are being reminded that you are still held. Healing comes quietly for those who curate their environs with the right mix of tradition and modernity. Honor her in all her beauty and you would never feel disoriented." Walking back with Granny to her village home after visiting a local shrine, Cherry engaged with her grandmother lovingly.

"Magic weaves in this sacred space in the crisp, cool night, dear Cherry. My steps have slowed and my children and grandchildren care for me though hurried greetings always find their way. I would say, keep your giving nature intact, always extend patience and let



change come to you”, Granny accorded, taking a leisurely walk with Cherry, back home on a weekend evening.

Siatori’s hearing was fading. Memories between her and Cherry were revived between shared meals. Whatever grandmother said went straight to her grand-daughter’s heart. Siatori remained witty and kind at most times, rarely angry with her grandchildren.

“I saw flowers being packed in between newspaper sheets and cold-water bottles, to maintain their freshness by flower farmers who put them for sale. Flowers were tossed into the air in temples with spoken incantations powering the prayers”, Cherry furnished holding her grandmother’s hands.

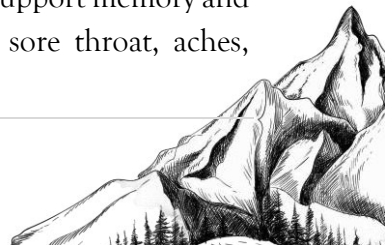
“Walking our way down to the serene banks of a mountain river, we saw carvings clinging to cave walls in a temple underneath, flanked by boulders hidden from the Sun. I felt as if I was being led into a magical time”, Cherry imparted, opening the door lock of her grandparents’ house and greeting her grandfather who was reading in his reading room.

Hundreds of books filled the home. “Flowers are a small offering to a part of ourselves that misses sunlight, softness and the joy of seeing something bloom”, Granny transmitted.

“It is gratifying to know that you made friends with spiritually advanced girls. I appreciate those who spend on family and spiritual travel”, Siatori dispensed, offering Cherry and her grandfather, seasoned vegetable soup.

“Thank you. This is delicious. Aroma of Rosemary lifted its taste”, Cherry tendered.

“Rosemary and cinnamon are antioxidants and anti-inflammatory. Sage leaves are digestive, ease gas, cure bloating, support memory and cognitive function, calming anxiety, soothes a sore throat, aches,



joints and hot flushes”, Granny notified. “Turmeric is widely used as an anti-inflammatory natural root is something I got to know. I saw ‘Ilmoda’ or Arrowleaf Dock growing in the wild. It is a blood purifier which detoxifies liver, improves iron absorption, cures arthritis, skin problems and improves digestion. But one must use it in moderation as overuse leads to oxalic acid formation which fosters formation of kidney stones”, Cherry warned.

Granny smiled, recognizing her granddaughter’s musing.

“Weddings were held near trees which were venerated there followed by a community feast where the invitees ate the meal sitting on the ground. ‘Devta’, or local deity’s, processions take place with a lot of fanfare with locals dancing and folk singers singing along. Fog added a mystical ambience to the temple”, Cherry described.

“I enjoyed seeing photographs you sent me of your hostess showing you how she cooked food, using sticks of wood. I read your report in which you shared how they make detox water by infusing lime and herbs, clarified butter, cashew butter and fermented buttermilk. These are ways to keep the digestive system active”, Granny dispensed.

“Cherry, I read the mail in which you shared your observations on intermittent fasting and simple meals comprising red rice, beans, brown rice, black rice and seasonal vegetables. Fasting detaches the mind and detoxifies the body”, Grandpa noted.

Cherry bowed and ceded, “You have always encouraged all your grandchildren to work hard and chart a path filled with healthy practices. I recognized those and shared few of our practices with Tara, Chakrani and Rudrani.” “Green mountains, clean air and water is all we need. You will get support from the right place and can handle situations”, Granny issued, proceeding to the kitchen to prepare a meal. These precious days stayed briefly, Cherry realized.



Savoring the meal with her grandparents, she thanked a higher power for those loving moments with them.

Initiating a conversation with Grandpa she told him about the arrival of broadband internet in almost every village though certain mountain ranges still lacked roads.

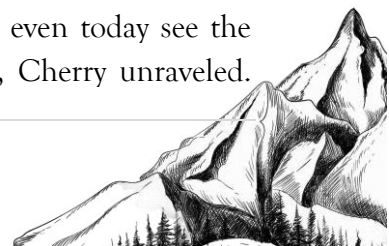
“It is nice to know about your experiences dear. “I read about the growing profile of e-commerce, use of refrigerated vehicles and trucks to transport agricultural products and establishing of local agriculture banks for the benefit of local farmers”, he yielded.

“A tribal home I visited on my India trip, 30 years ago was simple, self-sustained and full of happiness. Tribal crafts fascinate me from around the world. Family connections and devotion remind us of our own spiritual strength and dignity”, he extended, arranging his books in a neat pile after tending to the garden of flowers. “Grandpa, farmers there carry out bio-restoration of degraded patches which need to be revitalized from a state of lack of essential nutrients and increased salinity. They attempt to turn out zero landfill waste by recycling crop residues which are returned to the soil”, Cherry elucidated. “Yes dear. These time-tested practices need to be continued and the recent overdependence on pesticides minimized”, Grandpa advised.

When Cherry proceeded to leave for her home in the city, she bowed before her grandparents who blessed her. Their eyes were moist with emotion. Cherry left with the promise to meet them in a few days.

Before going to rest, she spoke on the phone with her parents and shared about the meeting with her grandparents who told all their grandchildren to retain a mind which could hold wonder and peace.

“My visit to Himachal Pradesh has strengthened the belief we always held that we can let simplicity be enough and even today see the ordinary miracle in the worn and weathered”, Cherry unraveled.



“Dear Cherry. You can unlock deeper flow and presence in your work and daily life, by viewing irreplaceable, visible imperfections around you as part of the overall journey. Our flaws and unfinished edges are fuels for expression. Your grandmother says let brokenness be beautiful and let ageing be graceful, doesn’t she?”, her father acclaimed, while on the call. “Yes. I will come to meet you after Tara returns to India which would be next weekend”, Cherry confirmed. “Take care of yourself”, her parents blessed, closing the call.

“Thank you”, Cherry acknowledged, bowing in reverence as was habitual for her. She gave a long look at cups stacked in her cupboard- Porcelain, glass, ceramic, plastic, elegant, chipped, ornate, minimalist and her mind wandered back to Terracotta sculptures, relics, and utensils she had secretly discovered in a dilapidated and abandoned stone house during a walk with Chakrani.

The old and the new juxtaposed along with each other caught her attention and then she suddenly remembered her grandmother’s anecdotes which were filled with her explorations with Grandpa of a set of rock caves with prayer halls, pillars and chambers, monastery visits and wide-canopied trees which offered both blessings and shade to pilgrims during their India visit.

Cherry chanted hymns she had learnt in her childhood. Her thoughts held for her the possibility of awakening into equanimity and lightness, into the very embodiment of grace, helping her get back to the present moment.

Cherry prepared dinner and slept, before Sakura arrived home.

The next weekend, Cherry’s friend Sakura welcomed her back to the apartment with love and prepared to welcome their mothers.

“The Volunteers I met in India chose duty, compassion and purpose without hesitation”, Cherry revealed.



“We have such a strong Volunteer group who works during disasters. Let us foster increased networking. Let us create a platform for humanity to bring about a difference. I will do my best to propel online solidarity movements and social campaigns to show us the right way to deal with things”, Sakura evinced. “This is the beginning of a long journey dear Sakura”, Cherry’s mother declared.

Sakura bowed to greet her. Her mother also bowed and the four women enjoyed dinner over hearty conversations together.

“Sakura paints residential and commercial buildings and walls in myriad explosions of color. She knows how to make a plain wall suddenly make a stranger feel less alone”, Omura shared.

“That is wonderful. It is so nice to see Sakura transform her natural skill and talent into a passionate occupation through hard work”, Cherry’s mother complimented.

“Our girls create change by empowering others and empowering an idea”, Omura pronounced, grilling marinated food items prepared by Cherry’s mother.

“Aunty, we must increase our productivity and reach out to more people through our work”, Cherry conveyed.

“Young men and women are aware and knowledgeable today. They access new insights and reflect seriously on questions surrounding posthuman conditions and technological transformations of humanity. I make a good amount of money through sale of my paintings. Hereon, I would share a portion of my earnings to raise awareness on significant themes that impact humanity”, Sakura pledged.

“Cherry and I will work on this together. She has been talking about her India visit. I look forward to meeting Tara and learning more soon”, Sakura manifested, serving the snacks to Cherry.



“You know Sakura, I saw people bring their stories to life. We could disseminate information on climate change, earthquakes, tsunamis and cyclones and in the real world motivate thousands of volunteers in our network to contribute by way of funds, skill, time, efforts and co-ordination”, Cherry elaborated.

Cherry shared video blogs made by Tara’s friends Ujali and Titli. Through seasonal farming practices and daily activity coverage they share pithy nuggets of wisdom. “We need to involve them and many others like them to add layers of influences to our online platform, which enrich learning and make an impact worldwide”, Sakura added.

“Yes. I observed that emotions get generated from embedded social practices. The youth today must harness the true power of decision-making for the larger good”, Cherry confirmed.

“This will be a big mission because you would be helping in the fight for rights and justice by holding power to account”, Cherry’s mother predicted.

“Our work reflects our own history and sometimes our wildest dreams. Take up your mission with such vigor and earnestness that smoothly you experience truth through the interrogation of thought and action”, Omura discerned. “Sakura chose open skies and flowing water as her canvas when she started off and has gradually discovered her inner core. Flowing water appeared heavenly to her under full moonlight”, Omura recalled, sharing her daughter’s artistic sensibilities with Cherry and her mother.

“Thank you, mother, for always being by my side and blessing us. When we paint, we walk through the quiet, living terrain of our remembering. Sometimes, colors slip into shadow, and my brush strokes lean into texture and tone. I look forward to working with Cherry in helping the underprivileged and the disaster-impacted



people through my paintings and the proceeds that accrue from their sale”, Sakura proffered. She painted sharp lines, vivid strokes and playful stories on Canvas expressing glories of nature while bringing out alchemy in the lives of the marginalized as well.

The ladies spent the rest of the evening, reminiscing in varied memories ensconced in cheerful nostalgia for those carefree days when their families lived in the same village.

Both mothers settled for the night, planning to leave together the next morning. Quietly, they would seek blessings of strength and protection for their daughters. Now that they lived in the same neighborhood of the same city, the mothers left for their homes together having lived a little, reflected a little, grown a little.

The Monday morning brought with it the chance for Cherry to readjust to familiar surroundings.

“This Pine tree is a deeply beloved sentinel from our childhood”, Sakura observed, cycling furiously alongside Cherry, to their rented office space at Mid-town square, a building in the middle of Meyo town. Sakura referred to a Pine tree standing at the center of the square. “Well, the commercial district came about much later. The tree stands tall and sprawling to give us shade and cheer, all through”, Cherry pointed out.

“Please come and listen to my India visit report, if you may”, Cherry requested, inviting Sakura to her office while they were parking their cycles in the parking space.

“Surely. I am looking forward to that. The painting exhibition wrapped up the evening before you arrived. All got sold. I am in for a painting -for- a- cause initiative, always looking for inspiration. Please arrange an entry card for me now”, Sakura pleaded. She had sailed through an assortment of jobs over the years and was now into painting, though music and dance also always piqued her interest.



“Fine. See you in ten minutes at my office reception”, Cherry agreed. “Yes. I will meet my folks in the Studio and see if more paints and brushes are needed. Will be back”, Sakura replied, darting off towards the elevator.

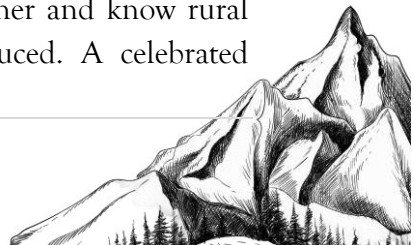
“Things that reach the fragile part of us are universal. Whichever country we may belong to, we are carrying the same stories and memories”, Cherry carried, opening her report with an introductory statement and engaging the audience thereon with her experiences, on her India visit.

Her Seniors and Colleagues clapped and allowed Sakura’s entry just in time for the meat of the story, as they say.

Her audience watched the Slideshow, determined by data, facts and detailed analysis by Cherry where she shared her experience at the Universities, mountain villages, friends’ houses and nodal office buildings. With complete earnestness and ardor, she described the extraordinary experience at the fairs and festivals attended by her where massive crowds were enough to get the novelty in the initiative rolling.

“Almost every home there has an in-house innovation. I learnt that ordinary people and their issues matter. Tara, whom we could invite as part of a University Exchange Program soon, spends her own existence easing the pain of others as do her parents and many others like them”, Cherry proposed.

“Through our work in this consortium, where Professional success is powered by education, there is an urgent need to facilitate rural and urban ecological research through student-led fieldwork. Therefore, I propose to organize Panel discussions, workshops and book launches in universities and development agencies so that students and development professionals can work together and know rural and urban communities better”, Cherry deduced. A celebrated



Educationist who was a part of the Board of trustees helming Cherry's organization expressed the idea about learning from India's terrace farmers how they tackled floods and crop failures due to extreme weather hazards which came about because of climate change.

An Industry expert suggested that the organization could support by introducing technology-driven sustainability solutions into the rural set up. Another expert, who was a Social Scientist felt that youth innovation could be deployed across dairy businesses in the mountains and into nurturing parks and open spaces in cities like New Delhi and Mumbai.

"Thank you. Youth flee the inescapable visibility of caste against terrifying odds and emigrate in search of better living. I saw emerald-green slopes disappear into soft, white clouds, explored waterfalls enhanced by mist and discovered hidden cafés and antique shops. Parents living in solitude are not necessarily lonely. They breathe life into old traditions, and their tenacity-driven lives are a living room for stories. Interactions with people from other countries bring different worlds together and teach us that humanity is universal as is the quest for progress and attachment to one's roots", Cherry brought out.

The Presentation and Report garnered a lot of appreciation.

"I would like to associate my artwork for the cause of communities for which the organization works. Sale proceeds, volunteering, sharing my skills, I am in for all of these. I am inspired by Cherry's presentation and hope to come up with few new paintings in a month", Sakura pledged.

The President of the organization welcomed Sakura's decision wholeheartedly. The entire room was abuzz with chatter and free-wheeling conversations thereafter.



The board members and Cherry's colleagues looked forward to Tara's arrival and interacted with both Cherry and Sakura, blending intellectual discussions and artistic inspirations as themes in their chats that lasted for more than an hour.

Cycling back home side by side, Cherry took in the scenery and city buzz, all at once. Over dinner in their studio apartment with Sakura, she ceded, "Make your dreams real. Trust the process and know your worth. There are charming people in the world who still believe in beauty, purpose and truth. There are places where you can sense the scent of spring and where songs float in the breeze. Songs of Spring", Cherry submitted.

"The way you describe this place, people and life sounds like a summer rain for the soul. I am sure mere thinking about it would bring out a palette of colors for my forgotten dreams. I will visit such places soon. Tonight, I know I can paint a shared journey of a mountain and a valley!", Sakura held out, settling down for the evening.

Cherry and Sakura had shared happy moments as neighbors from a very young age.

They laughed heartily whenever they met and the association continued past their teenage years.



Chapter 35

Tara Goes To Japan

The calendar turned to another page. It had merely been a week since Tara came to Japan and there were quite a few students, volunteers and mentors who worked with Cherry who were smitten by her charm. ‘Song of memories are carried in the music of the winds’, was her introductory line, when she addressed the members who worked in Cherry’s Consultancy consortium. Life took her to a new rhythm of living abroad and she knew she had to inspire many people to spend their time in service for humanity.

“You will receive when you are prepared. Do not get too attached to people and things. See the beauty in divine timing and in waiting while focusing on all your duties”, she philosophized.

Spotless French windows opened out a clear view of pink, papery, scentless flowers littered across the megapolis. She stood inside a skyscraper and saw tall buildings from the room. Her ideas on sustainable health-promoting diets were received with enthusiasm. “Nature favors diversity. Diversity adds to life. I look forward to interacting with you tomorrow on varied aspects of the environment. Thank you”, she concluded in her first speech at university.



“I will hop into Cherry’s office every day to listen to your experiences with naturopathy”, Sakura entreated, enjoying Matcha tea with Cherry and Tara over lunch hour. “Tara has charmed her way into other people’s lives because of her spontaneity and natural ease with conversing on subjects that matter to her, I can see. How do you find the tea in flavor?”, Tara san, Cherry enquired, offering a sugar sachet to her guest from India.

“It is different, I could say. Still getting the taste through. Thanks. Looking forward to trying new things in the next three weeks of my stay here”, Tara replied.

“You are most welcome. Please share your thoughts on the topics we choose with the faculty at University of Tokyo, which has invited me for the Exchange program. I will share many photographs of the Himalayas, life in the Himalayas and myriad flora and fauna with you. You should visit India once and millions of ideas for paintings will come to you”, Tara advised.

A bright orange blaze colored the spring sky. Tara clicked a few photographs from Cherry’s office terrace after interacting with Cherry’s colleagues.

She had gotten around changing two metro trains to reach her university apartment after Cherry had accompanied her on the very first day. It was 30 minutes away from Cherry’s office.

Birds calling from treetops peppered her slow, wandering moments from her apartment to the University building with cheer, the next morning. Tara had taken breakfast in the Café within the Apartment complex and was preparing herself to address the Class who were of the same age on the topic, ‘Mitigating food waste through preservation of perishable, surplus produce’. The students responded to the talk by sharing specific case studies.



University Co-Ordinator Tiashani pulled Tara's cheeks and said, "When you spoke, we realized that Nature's influence on every aspect of life is palpable. We understand the inequalities of power and privilege a lot more."

"Thankyou Tiashani san. I would be speaking about 'Enhancing nutritional security' tomorrow at THINKING MINDS, which is the consultancy consortium Cherry runs. Please come", Tara concurred, turning to invite the students of the batch to which she was registered for the Exchange Program.

She knew she had got a responsibility, even though the Exchange Program was an academic initiative and was careful as what she projected represented her country to the world.

"One of our students from the group will be sharing his project titled 'Embrace AI to improve services and reduce costs' tomorrow. We would like to join you as a group on Saturday and listen to your experiences", Tiashani replied.

"Yes. All of you are most welcome. I will ask Cherry san, to send you an invite on behalf of the consortium. Looking forward to having you all over", Tara bestowed.

"Sure", Tiashani answered, guiding Tara to the tiny Café where a working lunch awaited. Tara watched the unending sky from the Café window and felt time slow down.

Tara observed each person as they were. "We quietly grow through the challenges", she summed up when she was asked what kept her going.

Cherry met Tara the same evening. Along with Sakura, the girls had planned to go to the Museum of Art, followed by dinner together.

"The Museum tour was impressive. Thank you, friends", Tara acceded, admiring colored tree lights along city roads. "I have invited



Tiashani san and the entire class to your office for the talk on ‘Traditional medicine and Spiritual wellness’”, Cherry informed.

Sakura jumped in excitement. “I am coming in”, she screamed. Tara saw in her a light that burned the melancholy much like a water spray washing out dust. “Definitely, Sakura. Your heart needs to connect with the feeling of joy to be able to put out expressions of the inner and outer worlds on canvas”, Tara endorsed. Cherry guided them to a restaurant nearby.

After the dinner order had been placed, Cherry discussed, “Sharp, candid, introspective and objective views of the College students and teachers always leave us with food for thought. It is our job to pick relevant stories for a positive impact on new generations.”

“I completely agree with you”, Tara replied. The three girls relished the meal together and proceeded to the metro station for their rides back home.

Walking home from the metro station, Sakura exclaimed, “Tara, I saw photographs taken by Cherry. Leopards hiding behind bushes, fields of grain, men, women and children filling earthen clay pots from the river, across sprawling farms in the plains and mountains. I must say, I am inspired to paint with dedication and would need your inputs.” Tara smiled and said, “I am always eager to share knowledge with others. Do visit my country and paint there whenever you can.”

“See you on Saturday, Sakura san”, Tara granted. “I will share the Saturday invite for your talk, with Tiashani san. Tara, see you in the Consultancy consortium office tomorrow after our university classes”, Cherry concurred.

“See you, Cherry san. Thank you for the wonderful evening”, Tara assented and bowed.



Cherry bowed and so did Sakura. They retreated to their respective apartments. Gentle grace infused the air with a mild scent of bonhomie and mutual admiration.

Both Cherry and Sakura found empathy and sisterhood in Tara. Cherry knew she had made a good friend for life and was overjoyed with the thought.

The ‘Sadri’ (traditional sleeveless jacket) Tara wore on Saturday morning, drew attention from the teachers and students alike. While introducing to her colleagues online and those who attended the session in person, Cherry said, “This is such a beautiful woolen jacket with a traditional silhouette. We will call our expert fashion designer, Tachi san next week to talk about retail garments and sustainable fabrics.”

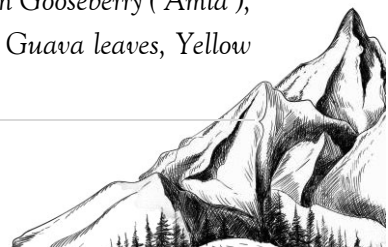
“Yes. I would like to learn more about imaginative upcycling in textiles and know how weaving comes to the forefront”, another student submitted. “Recycling of scrap materials are important components in the fashion industry today”, Tara acquiesced, subscribing to the dire need for following the practice of minimal waste and maximum productivity.

Tiashani and the group of college students accompanying her clapped and expressed their inclination for attending the session.

“I would like to make a presentation on hill people of India I have seen in photographs dressed in elaborate clothes from their region”, a student intended. This time the applause was louder.

Tara’s presentation on enhancing nutritional security saw her sharing about the uses and benefits of traditional herbs and diet recipes in healing, curing ailments and maintaining sound health.

‘Culture is strongly tied to the ecosystem. We use Indian Gooseberry (‘Amla’), Buttermilk, Sesame seeds, Lemongrass, Garlic greens, Guava leaves, Yellow



Himalayan Raspberry which is a superfood or could I say a natural Vitamin capsule with a low glycemic profile and rich in fiber, Vitamin C, Iron, Beta-carotene, Sodium and Potassium. The list is endless. A sharp, grounded preparation made from pounded ginger and pure honey is an effective solution sourced from basic kitchen staples used for clearing congestion and cough.'

"Each choice becomes a vital part of the story you can eventually tell", a patron member from the consultancy consortium rationalized. "Humans survive on nature's bounties and need to serve it as well", said the Senior Manager.

"Yes Sir. Forests are self-sustaining ecosystems. Plants, animals, birds and insects find ways to grow under Nature's nurture", Tara delivered, responding to the comment. The quiet gathering of courage gets livelihoods for the common people, but it is our duty to impact policy which influences the preservation of the environment and development towards progress", she maintained.

"Tara, we are initiating a case-study on how the Public-Private partnership funds and nurtures businesses in hilly regions", Tiashani shared.

"That is so encouraging", Cherry responded. A few students shared their thoughts on cultural practices and nature conservation, before Teatime when topics veered to snacks and individual choices, on a lighter note.

The next morning was spent walking, jogging and cycling. Tara came across woodland paths and dew-soaked grass.

"Overall, two weeks have flown by and exactly two weeks remain for us to take Tara around scenic spots and city hubs", Cherry told Sakura.



Tara was jogging while her friends cycled along, one on either side of the path, on which she jogged. Landscaped gardens and verdant lawns in front of them were frequented by exercise enthusiasts, joggers and cyclists in large numbers on Sunday mornings, right outside the University.

Tara spent the rest of the day in Cherry and Sakura's apartment where they worked on a joint project on the build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and its effects such as raised regional temperatures, worsened droughts and increased rise of fires.

"Grief moves through myriad shared spaces. I was thinking it could be worthwhile if you spoke to the Class about the emotional and spiritual response of your folks to earthquakes, cloudbursts, campfires, mismanaged human activities and lightning strikes", Cherry enumerated, preparing a vegetarian Japanese meal for Tara.

The next morning the friends cycled to the University together.

"Well, we must bear witness to global suffering, prioritizing collective anguish over personal achievement. Each of us sees something shifting. We need to make our systems energy efficient and carbon-neutral", Tara stressed, maneuvering her cycle carefully. "Could I schedule an hour-long session on 'Rewriting the emotional state after Crisis', where you could address three under-graduate batches in one go? Say, 150 students in total and few teachers as audience, this Wednesday", Cherry proposed.

"Fine. I hope I learn more than I offer", Tara wished, getting off the cycle and parking it back on the rent-a-cycle stand.

"Yes. You would learn a lot. We will show you the Nemophila flower which is in full bloom this Spring, at a Seaside park an hour and a half drive down Tokyo city. Mountain peaks, shrines and local culture will surely leave you asking for more", Sakura divulged.



“Yes Tara. Tea tasting, fortune-teller visit, gardens and Science center. There is a lot lined up for the three of us this coming weekend”, Cherry outlined. Murmur of life in all its shimmering serenity, left hope and a lot to look forward to.



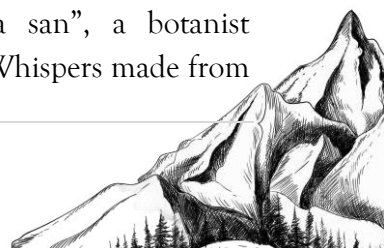
Chapter 36

Nature Matters

The week started on a vibrant note with sessions, talks, seminars and meetings attended by Tara on a variety of themes. At the Consortium, she shared with botanists who came from another University to meet her about the Hanging Valley in her state which was situated at an elevation of 3600m above sea-level. The botanists listened with fascination when she spoke about its vast biodiversity, biological miracles and unique microclimate where 520 plant species existed out of which 498 were flowering plants such as Orchids, Roses and Sunflowers to name a few. The Botanists said they knew about this valley where tourists flocked to take in the splendor of thousands of blooming flowers after an arduous trek.

“The valley was formed by glaciers, and as you know mountains were formed when tectonic plates moved. This zone is a natural Greenhouse because these flowers were surrounded by 6000m high mountain walls. Plants develop alkaloids to survive harsh weather conditions, in what is a natural defense mechanism”, she reasoned.

“We would surely visit this beautiful place soon. There is a lot for us to see in India, as a tourist as well as a botanist. I can sense that your heart moves around encircling valleys, Tara san”, a botanist expressed. “You could say that”, Tara smiled. “Whispers made from



the hearts, drift in the winds for us”, she presented, bowing before taking their leave.

The girls met on Wednesday when Tara requested the students to smear sandalwood paste on their foreheads before taking their seat in the auditorium.

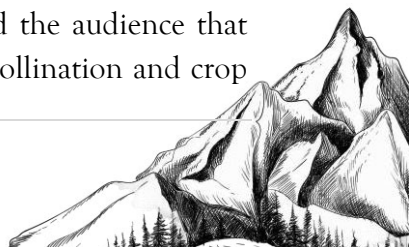
“Sandalwood paste blesses us with calmness, clarity and wisdom”, she accorded, starting her speech.

‘Life is a tapestry of vibrant colors and textures just like nature. But we need to connect to it to access the purity. Cleansing our minds through chanting and prayers is one way of doing this. Embrace the full range of life, hold steady in your truth and let your purpose guide you. We also believe that everything is temporary and we can control our actions but not the rewards for it. Surrendering to the divine is a reminder that we as mortals can only do so much. Much like a farmer ploughs, tills and sows seeds and leaves the rest to the forces of the Universe to show its magic!’

The 150-strong audience listened, clapping every now and then. Running her audience through slides of her hill temple, huts, houses, farms and market scenes, she reflected, “I tell my people. You have grown, softened, strengthened, awakened. Plant trees, use garden waste and store water. It is nice to interact with an audience that reads, watches and communicates” , Tara commented. Cherry and Sakura waved in appreciation from where they were seated.

“Himachal Pradesh was a paradise of fruits, flowers and green abundance, when I visited last spring. Every corner whispered life. The orchards were full and the soil fertile. Air carried the scent of nature’s joy, change in climate patterns did influence the weather and crop yield more evident in summer, winter and rainy weather”, Cherry assayed.

Miashori san, who was a Plant taxonomist told the audience that changes in weather were impacting flowering, pollination and crop



yields in drastic ways around the world because of more heat radiations and faster melting of glaciers.

One hour stretched to two hours as the students and teachers shared their country's encounters with natural disasters and asked Tara about how communities in disaster-prone regions in India dealt with earthquakes, cyclones, floods and landslides.

The auditorium resonated with a youthful exuberance. Cherry proffered the vote of thanks on behalf of the University while Tachi san made the concluding speech. "We realize that by reaffirming truth we can make the connection happen, with ourselves and as Tara san mentioned with Mother Nature", she pronounced.

Tara was honored with a Sash and a certificate of appreciation by the University.

Over dinner with faculty members the same evening, Tiashani shared with her colleagues her thoughts on Tara. "Tara is a union of beauty and bravery. Her quiet elegance lets her blossom into a true version of oneself. Tara san, we cherish and celebrate the light you bring to this world", she expressed, steadily walking up to Tara who was surrounded by more teachers and fewer students. A middle-aged University teacher walked up to Tara and shared with her the truck ride experiences she and her husband had on their India visit, five years back. Her eyes sparkled when she recalled having tasted the most comforting, perfectly brewed cup of tea at a tea stall run by an elderly couple in Uttarakhand, while they were trekking.

Her face beamed when she spoke about misadventures with some loud, feisty and irresistibly funny tourists during their spiritual trip. "Madam. Do visit again. We celebrate, surrounded by our favorite people, nature and incredible food and cherish deep intimate joys of life with those around us", Tara expressed and folded her hands to acknowledge the lady's fond voyages.



“The Mother Goddess appears through people, signs and divine synchronicities to guide us, my mother always believed”, Tara disclosed. “RupManjari ji and Saraswati ji serve the Lord in unique ways, absorbed as they are in devotional service”, Cherry examined, bringing a soft drink for Tara and Sakura from the refreshments counter. “Yes. We trust an invisible source. The idols and statue manifestations are symbols of our many deities, gods and goddesses who we believe reside in every particle and all matter”, Tara apprised.

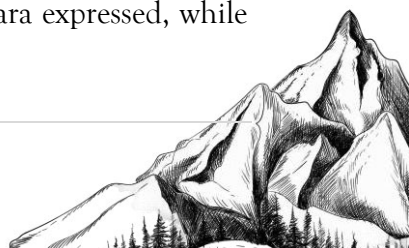
The third week of her four-week long visit for Tara, went by with book launches, talks, seminars and online meets with Cherry’s consultancy consortium initiatives and University of Tokyo events, from morning to evening. The team with whom Cherry worked took Tara to Shamiyachi Prefecture which was known for an enterprise which produced Bioenergy from crop stubble. The same evening, she was shown a youth-led organization where the employees made Paper boxes and cardboard boxes.

On a breezy Thursday evening, two days before the weekend trip they had planned for Tara to see the Baby blue eyes flower gardens in Funaraki, Cherry and Sakura took Tara around town.

“There is a remarkable, diverse visual language to take in, through the walk past these city streets”, Tara marked. “This is a walk, through familiar lanes for us, attuned as we are to one’s daily rhythm in life”, Sakura heralded.

In a matter of four hours, the Japanese girls had shown their Indian friend, a musical based on a form of theatre, an hour-long long tea-tasting ceremony and a brief session with a fortune-teller.

“Thank you so much. I really enjoyed each of them to the hilt. These were cultural themes I feel connected with and you made me experience them in the most authentic way”, Tara expressed, while entering a shopping mall.



“It is half- past nine. We need close to an hour to reach our places of stay. Could I buy stuff for home tomorrow evening?”, Tara explained, framing her stance politely lest her friends feel hurt.

“Let us eat. Tomorrow, we will take you for a shrine visit. We would show you shops to buy souvenirs and gifts for family and friends. Waterfalls, gardens and rivers would take your breath away over the weekend at Funaraki, where we have two full days to soak in fragrant wonders of nature”, Cherry charted.

“Are we staying there overnight, Cherry?”, Sakura asked enthusiastically, filling fresh juice for her friends while Cherry placed the order.

“Yes. I made the hotel bookings three weeks back, the very day Tara arrived ”, Cherry replied.

“Yeah”, Sakura screamed. “We have a seat!” Tara indicated, having reserved a table for them at the fast-food restaurant.

“All’s well since we are eating this after two months which will do well for digestion,” Cherry noted. “I agree”, Sakura complied.

“We have started consuming millet snacks more often back home. Buns, for instance made from pearl millet, porridge from foxtail millet, cutlets from soya granules and our very own ‘Siddu’ from different varieties of millets as well”, Tara specified.

“‘Siddu’, that steamed dumpling filled with walnut paste, was delicious. I ate both sweet and salty variations. Traditional recipe which is tasty and healthy, I must say”, Cherry commented, checking her wristwatch to check the time and the number of steps she had walked throughout the busy day and touring evening with Tara. Half fascinated-half tired, Tara walked to the train station with her friends taking in the buzz of one of the most densely populated cities in the world.



Tara spent Friday morning at the University. She spoke about Afforestation, reinforcements near riverbanks to prevent erosion and the extent of environmental instability created by climate change, deforestation and unsustainable development. “Critical steps are needed to safeguard communities and the environment in the face of an increasingly uncertain future”, Tara perceived, while participating in a panel discussion at a Seminar room at University of Tokyo. “There is an urgent need for adoption of more sustainable approaches to development in fragile ecosystems”, Miashori san highlighted. “Biodiversity loss, ongoing struggle of disaster victims, tracking response of authorities and policymakers and preventing construction on unsafe areas are aspects we need to take cognizance of to build platforms for future businesses”, Tiashani san aired, turning to Tara for her inputs.

“People need to build authentic connections through community-led immersive cultural experiences. These support livelihoods directly, benefit locals and keep actions and activities flowing with the rhythm of nature”, Tara reasoned. Faculty members and students on the Panel discussed specific case studies for nearly 45 minutes before taking a coffee break.

After Coffee break, the Director of the International Student Exchange Program exhibited his unflagging passion when he said, “Disaster strikes, in sudden, merciless and unforgiving ways. The soil that gave roots to dreams gets swept away in a matter of moments. Social Innovation and Incubation Mission sanctioned loans to Entrepreneurs in certain zones”, the Director said.

“I observed that enhanced outreach and partnering with local organizations made interventions effective and relevant. Access to collateral-free credit and streamlined loan processes made access to markets and credit for budding entrepreneurs, easier”, Tara deliberated.



“I have highlighted in my report how by providing mentorship, practicing handholding, focusing on Capacity building, developing mainstream innovation hubs, nurturing young talent and offering firsthand exposure to governance, a lot gets achieved at the onset”, Cherry emphasized.

Many students aired experiences from their countries. The session closed on a solemn note with news of a strong earthquake jolting Tiwaki Prefecture, 300 miles from Tokyo. There was panic and concern but the way the citizens and agencies responded was something to be learned from.

Participants of the International Students Exchange Program parted with the promise of following the best practices once they returned to their respective countries.



Chapter 37

Shopping And More

When Tara saw women dressed in ‘Kimono’, the traditional Japanese dress, she thought about how colorful and vibrant traditional clothes always were. Whenever she wore her traditional attire in the village, she was invariably transported into a bygone era, an era of simplicity and timelessness.

“Visit to the shrine was a surreal experience for me. The ritual of cleansing, use of natural materials and nature worship is a part of how we worship as well”, Tara recognized, bowing before a small ‘Pagoda’ style building they crossed before crossing a wooden bridge that got them close to the commercial district at the heart of the city.

Tara bought Japanese miniature dolls, fans, candies and dry snacks, silk scarves, animal figurines, bows and ribbons for family and friends. “We believe in animal spirits which protect us and ward off negativity”, Sakura reflected.

“I bought many of those for children in my neighborhood. The dry wafers, rice crisps and wafers are for the ladies in my locality with whom I converse on a range of topics very often. The remaining items are for my parents and friends Ujali, Titli, Alokika, Chakrani, Rudrani and their families”, Tara represented.



“Very well. My mother has packed a pot-Pourri of dried herbs and flowers for you to carry home”, Cherry unveiled. “My mother has packed sweet potato wafers made by her, for you”, Sakura revealed.

“Thank you so much. Please convey my acknowledgements”, Tara expressed.

Weary eyes and tired feet did not reduce her curiosity to see and enjoy the world around her.

Milling crowds at shopping arcades, supermarkets and street joints caught her attention as did tourists thronging these places.

“Spring season draws tourists to Japan from all over the world because Cherry blossoms bloom across the country in this season, adding color and cheer all around”, Sakura acclaimed.

“Yes. I saw Cherry blossom decorations in shops, cakes, chocolates and even jewelry designed with these flowers as motifs and flavors”, Tara shared.

Before packing their bags for the Baby Blue Eyes Seaside Park trip, both Cherry and Sakura dished out an exotic vegetables’ preparation for Tara, drizzled with sauces made by them.

The friends ate the delicious dinner together, planning their outfits for the Seaside Park trip to Funaraki, the next morning.

“Sushi for the mouth and Japanese wisdom for work and life for me”, Sakura rendered, when the girls were eating dinner together.

They walked up to Tara’s room with the promise of making the most of nature’s wonders spread like sky- blue carpets of flowers awaiting their arrival.



“Thank you for the delicious vegetarian food”, Tara hailed, when she was been escorted back to her room inside the University premises, by Cherry and Sakura.

“Nourish yourself by integrating meditative aspects into your reality”, Tara answered, when Sakura asked her how she kept herself active through the day.



Chapter 38

Baby Blue Eyes Flowers Seaside Park Tour

On Tara's last weekend in Japan, Cherry and Sakura took her on a trip to the Baby blue eyes flowers Seaside Park in Funaraki Prefecture, 150 kilometers from Tokyo city.

The train ride was fun with tourists and locals carrying backpacks to spend the two holidays taking in the natural hotspot which was a popular spot on the Sightseeing circuit.

"You can sense the scent of spring upon reaching the Flower Park. These flowers are also special because they bloom in the richness of life only during this time of the year, for fifteen days", Sakura added.

"Songs of spring float in the breeze. Seeing people believing in beauty, purpose and truth is reassuring in these times of conflicts and catastrophes", a senior citizen seated on the train seat in front of them, delivered. Her conversations with two other ladies of around the same age as hers displayed their endless companionship and that through the turns and bends of life, they had built a world of their own.

"I am Aachi and I have been to India", the friendliest among the ladies introduced, opening the flow of conversations.



“Mountains and mountainfolk share unique tales, and I kept exploring and finding new wonders in Delhi and Mumbai with my better half”, Aachi unlocked, offering peppermint to her friends and to Tara, Cherry and Sakura.

“I think there is a lot to learn in how Champions in joy for life be, from you”, Tara identified, picking the peppermint from the tray table where the stranger put them and stood up to take a bow before her.

A light, constant drizzle fell. Raindrops clattering on the roof, raindrops drumming on the windowpanes reminded Tara that it was important to also find beauty in what we already have. By now both Tara and Cherry had found out that they were deeply connected in temperament, interests and humor.

“Urban forests have gone through so many stages. It is upon the citizens to keep them flourishing”, Tara pronounced, walking towards the Seaside Park with her friends after alighting from the train.

“To unlock a life of deep connection and unshakeable courage, we need more such landscaped gardens and parks as they promote wellness and serve as a soothing balm for the body, mind and soul”, Sakura recognized, thinking of setting up her canvas before sunlight dimmed and retreated for the day.

Lively faces of children accompanying their parents to the Parks and gardens felt like innocence peeked into the inner corners of her heart, Tara contemplated.

“Children’s world is concrete, immediate and beautifully literal. They are spontaneous, imaginative and expressive”, she expounded, pointing to two large sheets of paper with mountain scenes and tree and flower sceneries drawn and held by a young girl, barely eight years old, jumping and walking up to the Seaside Park gate with her



parents. “Yes. They are full of life and ideas. In times of excessive dependence on technology, such places calm their nerves and help them break their shell of inhibition”, Sakura claimed.

A whiff of fragrant air drifted through sprawling gardens resplendent with baby blue eyes flowers. The glowing lavender-pink evening sky was held in awe and wonder by anyone who visited the gardens and parks in the evening.

Having spent the entire afternoon admiring blooming flowers, Mountain Sunsets, shops and cafes Tara, Cherry and Sakura happened to meet the senior ladies in the Town Square, clicking photographs, dining and soaking in quiet truths together.

There were separate gardens with flowers of many hues fluttering with joy. There were more colors than fragrances and plant enthusiasts differentiating Hydrangeas, Delphiniums and Morning glories for the hope of blue they carried softly in their differing varieties and petal shapes and sizes.

Sakura painted for over an hour, finding a spot by a pond with the view of flower carpets stretching far beyond, in front of her. Sakura, who was a big fan of the stillness and silence, knew that her painting would be affected by the energies of the world. She painted the flowers and a lonely star waiting to sparkle on the horizon after dusk.

The waves of the Sea beyond this buzzing destination for gourmet restaurants and tony stores lashed the rocks with an eager rhythm. One could linger around for hours, with nature teaching humankind that richness of thoughts and humanity are the greatest treasures.

“The painting embodies integrity, empowerment, transformation and transition”, Tara appreciated, when Sakura asked her for feedback.



“This painting will be a tranquil oasis for anybody who views it ensconced in the commitments and compulsions of a city-based whirlwind routine”, Cherry explicated.

Sakura’s face beamed through her tears. She thanked her guardian angels for the wonderful friends and beautiful spaces she was blessed with, watching from above and still making all this happen despite her shortcomings.

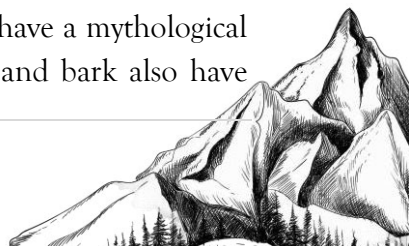
“We pick the pieces of our shattered, ordinary lives in an extraordinary moment”, Aachi’s friend could be heard saying when the girls got to find a seat next to theirs at a Café on the very evening, they had reached this paradise. “Well, we feel stable, grounded and healed. To be able to receive gifts and learn from experiences is a blessing, isn’t it?”, the other friend proclaimed.

“Yes. Change of seasons in life is governed the same way as we all seem to be guided by a mysterious force of nature”, Aachi considered.

Tara, Cherry and Sakura looked at each other because they believed in the same agreement. The gentle rumble of thunder in the distance was an intimation to examine the quiet choreography holding everything together. Visitors let grace transform them and opened their minds to understand stillness. “Guests tend to wander slowly, pause, gaze and sense magic. We have the entire day tomorrow to surround ourselves with happy faces, seek rejuvenation and find beauty in this glorious place”, Cherry observed.

Walking up to the hotel where they were to stay for the night, Tara saw trees standing in solitary splendor and decided to view them in daylight with new eyes.

Bulbs of tulips welcomed them the next morning on way to Flower Park, after a leisurely breakfast at the hotel. Crossing a Jacaranda tree in full bloom, Cherry announced, “These trees have a mythological significance for us.” “Branches, flowers, leaves and bark also have



medicinal properties”, Sakura confirmed. Tara halted, right in front of the tree, bowed and clicked photographs and made videos, though she knew that the Creator’s creations could never be captured in their absolute magnificence.

“Diverse people relate to things, beings, spaces and time in amazing new ways. This trip also brought us visual, auditory and textural stimulation ushering in a mellow sweetness”, Tara unraveled. “Thank you for arranging this beautiful trip for me. It was full of amazement and wonder”, she remarked. “You are most welcome, my friend”, Cherry replied. “I eagerly look forward to maintaining a lasting friendship with you”, she expressed.

“Same here. We need to nurture our friendship and nourish an evolving partnership marked by mutual dedication and resilience”, Sakura declared. There were glimmers of excitement on Tara’s face. Thunder arrived in the morning. Time slowed for them.

Fresh blooms thrived around letting the beholder get swept by their charm. “We will and we can take our friendship forward, despite the long distance. Devastating events relating to the environment are occurring all around. Our actions need to be swift. Let us make efforts together and take our goals to new heights. Embrace new ideas, encounter challenges and invite happiness by being sensitive to the needs of those around us”, Tara affirmed. The yellow flowers looked radiant in a garden they entered before wandering around the baby blues eyes flowers gardens once again, watching co-dependence in nature by way of bees, wasps and insects needing flowering plants and myriad species of plants, birds and butterflies making the Earth more beautiful than ever.

The girls did shop at a Supermarket. Tara bought souvenirs from a shop specializing in selling artificial Baby blue eyes flowers, Morning glories and Hydrangeas, in smaller bunches.



The train journey back to Tokyo saw the old ladies' group and the young girls facing each other once again. Achi briefed Tara about 'Haiku' (Japanese poetry forms) sparking surreal moments for Tara, Cherry and Sakura throughout the train journey.

"Poetry can speak to both the heart and the mind. Wisdom creates a balance, a selflessness and a generosity that lets you speak your truth with courage", Achi identified.

A few words suddenly felt full of layers she had missed earlier, Cherry realized, listening to Achi san's voice that sliced through the silence.

"River Ganges embodies life and is revered", Achi recognized. There was a gentleness in the air when she spoke. Through her words and actions, she impressed Tara so much that she requested her to share her number and email. "Yes. We worship river goddesses. Peace is found in the courage to speak, and we need to be shedding our old selves while also retaining the best from our intrinsic nature", Tara vocalized.

"Each of you have a natural bravado and a unique sense of humor. Continue to remain hopeful and helpful", Achi's friend preached.

"Every start, pause and reset has a purpose. Always remember you have a rainbow for every storm, for every tear a smile, for every care a promise", the other friend quoted, her words garnished with genuine warmth.

The girls helped the ladies disembark from the train and were blessed by them before they parted. 'A quiet act, a gentle word does go a long way', Tara pondered.

Seeing the sea of humanity out in the streets, shopping arcades and train stations, Tara wondered if many among them were struggling



quietly behind a beautiful house, still learning how to see each other again and rebuilding from scratch, if that was meant to be.

Cherry and Tara spent the remaining part of the last evening together in the apartment making Video blogs on miracle superfoods, therapeutic diets and medicinal drinks.

“We would continue to share more such videos hereon. Our last few creative outings first by way of local theatre and then through the events at India and their Video coverage, have reaffirmed the timeless impact of storytelling. What do you say?”, Cherry queried.

Tara felt flushed with excitement and said, “Absolutely, Cherry san. Miracle Superfoods correct impaired immunity. As you know, misinformation spreads faster than fact. People need to be educated more on these topics. That would be possible when they receive the right information and begin to trust Science over myths”, Tara concluded. “Food is not just about taste, it is about memory, comfort and a sense of belonging”, she inferred.

Being truthful to the moment, Cherry made a short video blog which began by Tara explaining how an anti-inflammatory drink using Orange, ginger, turmeric powder, lemon and water is made and then consumed. This was followed by her speaking in English, about the technique of fermentation in a dialogue with Cherry.

“You and I consume fermented rice and fermented vegetables as these are rich in probiotics, bioactive compounds and micronutrients. Fermentation eliminates anti-nutritional factors, addressing micronutrient deficiencies and contributes to prevention and management of non-communicable diseases”, Cherry repeated in English and Japanese language promising the audience the Video blogs reached out to, to be back with more useful tips for healthy living.



Handing over two tiny vials of pure rose oil to Cherry and Sakura, after dinner, Tara shared, “I brought these for you from India but forgot to give you. This fragrance releases and brings in energy from the Universe, transmuting negative energy and ushering in positivity and abundance”.

“Thank you dear”, both Cherry and Sakura hollered together, their voices taking a sweeter tone on a lower pitch.

“I think these acts of positive manifestation and cleansing would help us achieve oneness and tune in to a higher frequency to receive transcendental vibrations from a higher realm”, Cherry assumed. “Yes. These and rituals with water, Cinnamon and Bay leaves aid in positive manifestations while also warding off negativity”, Tara confirmed.

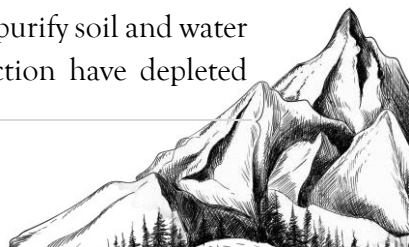
“Listening to these pure conversations lets me experience a sense of completion, perseverance and benign guidance”, Sakura confessed, gently placing the vial bottles in her purse.

“It is time for women to share stories of women. They need to replace sacrifices with balance, guilt with empowerment and allow space for what is already growing”, Sakura concurred, getting in the mode of wanting to talk at length.

A light dinner made by the girls included a soup, seasoned vegetables and cheese toast.

“I hope to visit India and experience myself hill stations wrapped in silver mist and see how valleys vanish into clouds. Breathing techniques and grounding exercises shared by you will be sincerely practiced by me, I assure you”, Sakura vowed.

“Years of learning through trust should lead us to progress. There is a lot that is being done though a lot needs to be done for us to turn back the destruction and rebuild the forests and purify soil and water for the future generations. Years of over-extraction have depleted



aquifers, concentrating Arsenic and Fluoride in the soil. Unregulated industrial discharge has introduced heavy metals like Chromium, Cadmium, Mercury whereas intensive agriculture leached pesticides deep into water tables. Unsustainable development practices damage the environment beyond measure and growing threat of Climate change triggers extreme climatic events. But we do have a fresh opportunity to try something new and find meaning in the NOW”, Tara tendered.

“Do visit India. We will witness the Sun rise and listen to the chattering of the birds”, she added.

“I will. Thank you. Love is a powerful, purposeful force that connects us”, Sakura replied, noticing glimmering skylights on her Apartment complex’s common terrace.

“We would make a conscious choice to reframe difficulties as opportunities for growth and learning”, Cherry assured. She felt mildly exhausted in her own tender, fumbling way. A rare sense of calm and connection enveloped her aura when she was around Tara and Sakura.



Chapter 39

Tara Returns to India

University of Tokyo 's Department of Traditional Medicine hosted a farewell event for Tara and other students from other countries. "We would continue to host the International Cultural Exchange Program, which brings together students from around the world to celebrate and represent their respective cultures and heritage. After the farewell party, please take a tour of the event we have organized in the atrium. The idea is to make students aware of various programs which help them learn skills to reach out to the corporate world and the development sector. Whichever specialization one has graduated from, one can always qualify for various certifications through specific courses for specific skills", the Director advocated.

The speech was in Japanese followed by another one in English. "We wish to develop a skilled, future-ready, creative workforce", Tiashani san stated, explaining the gist of the speech to Tara.

"Thank you. The farewell party was fun and this event informative", Tara summarized, collecting brochures from individual stalls and carefully putting them in a folder.

Tara explored various kiosks with students from other countries who were also going back in the next few days.



There were promotional sessions by Training Academies carrying out courses in design, animation, filmmaking, gaming and digital arts.

“These courses empower our students who take them up to innovate in gaming, designing, storytelling and New Media”, Tiashani particularized, exploring the event with other faculty members. “During this trip I realized, humans can sense truth from stories in countless ways”, Tara brought forth.

“My visit to Japan has helped me understand what it means to make a difference when I observed students from other countries share their experiences in development work. We uncovered a trove of questions”, Tara unraveled, when asked to speak.

“Uncertainties in the world have compounded food shortage. It is time for us to experience truth through the interrogation of thought and action. Reading and interacting with experts offers a fresh re-look at multiple truths helping us understand intricacies around different perspectives”, Tara furnished.

Late afternoon, Tara met faculty members from other Departments, students she had got to know, the guest house Caretaker and Departments heads inviting them to India and assuring them that she would share her Japan trip report with them, at the earliest.

The evening was spent by the Exchange Program students on a visit to the Science Museum.

Exhibits on space exploration, evolution, robotics, Earth Sciences followed by a Dynamic Earth exhibition encouraged curiosity and creativity among school children visiting the Museum.

Sakura, who had accompanied Tara and Cherry for the tour imparted, “The digital planetarium and Time machine ride were not there when I came here last year with my parents. 3-Dimensional shows and activity-based learning and scientific experiments have



transformed Science education”, she divulged. “Yes. My country does host Global Science Fairs, International Robotics Challenge and Technology events, reflecting breakthroughs in critical and new areas of technology”, Tara relayed.

Upon reaching the apartment, Tara, Cherry and Sakura relaxed, cooked and ate a hearty meal together. Tara made a mildly seasoned exotic vegetables dish from Pumpkin, almond and sesame seeds for her friends as they had relished it when she had made it two weeks back.

They reminded each other about keeping in touch and supporting one another, through the long distance.

“I will complete packing now. Good night. See you at the University lobby at 7 AM. I will be there to hand over the room key at reception”, said Tara.

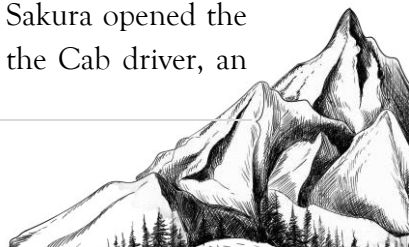
“See you in the morning. We will walk you to your room now”, Cherry replied.

The girls walked up to the University guest house thinking about how time seemed to have flown faster than ever. A love filled their longing for more time together, in the silence of the night.

Summer morning in Japan did break in earlier like it did in her valley back home, than during different seasons through the year, Tara thought and was ready for the path ahead, having woken up at the crack of dawn to embark on the journey to India.

The Cab for Airport had been booked by Cherry, a week in advance. Tara handed over the room key and thanked the receptionist at 6.45 AM when she saw Cherry and Sakura entering the University gate alongside the Cab.

Cherry helped Tara put the luggage in the cab. Sakura opened the door and the three of them were seated when the Cab driver, an



elderly Japanese lady marked out the destination and the route on her system.

The next 50 minutes went by with the lady cab driver sharing her journey from the countryside to Tokyo city, her daughter who she said was 40 years of age and her grandchildren who visited her often. “Body’s strength and spirit is important, but what is more important is our attitude towards life and to ourselves”, the Cab driver held forth, appearing friendlier than any other they had met so far. The girls appreciated her tenacity, and their chatter went on for the rest of the ride to the Airport.

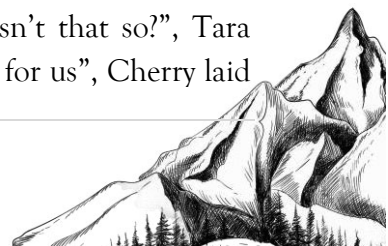
“May you keep creating dignity for those who take guidance for life from you, dear Tara”, Cherry hoped.

“Thank you so much Cherry san. The warmth and courtesy I received from you and everyone I met here would forever remain etched in my bank of memories”, Tara acknowledged, overwhelmed by every moment, each experience and all that was contained in it.

“Sakura, would now share a unique bond of partnership with me, and I look forward to helping her blossom into a true version of herself”, Cherry shared, checking navigation maps in the cab to see how far the Airport was. “I look forward to access new insights with Cherry”, Sakura passed on.

“How we would wander into neighboring homes in your village exchanging familiar jokes with your neighbors, on my India trip last year. Innocent glances of those hard-working families exposing their harvest treats for us to enjoy with them, are nostalgic interactions for me to cherish”, Cherry unveiled.

“May we celebrate the light we bring to this world and decide with a peaceful mind what is best for us. Golden sunrise coming through, we see a new sky at every new place we go, isn’t that so?”, Tara cheered. “Here’s hoping for more trips to India for us”, Cherry laid



out. “I am in”, Sakura squealed, raising her hands and jumping to extend her intention.

Cherry and Sakura were laughing hard checking out cartoon videos while trying to control their emotions. Tears rolling down, they sang joyfully in the Cab in which they were accompanying Tara to the Airport.

The friends hugged one another on the car seat and prepared for their arrival at the airport.

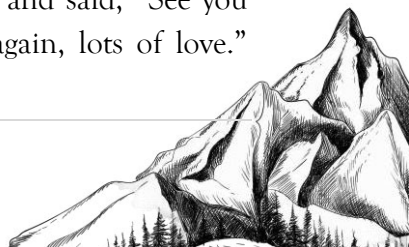
“Make the fairy tale the reality. Be exactly who you are. Life demands that we keep pace. Unstinting efforts are required on our part and as a collective as well”, Tara rendered.

“Embrace your feelings but also acknowledge your struggles. Even while enduring difficult times, we should stay connected to ourselves”, Sakura reiterated. “Stay connected to one another, isn’t that the way forward”, Cherry grinned and winked. “Yes, yes, yes”, Tara and Sakura yelled together, making the most of those parting moments, when the airport was a few miles away.

“Flow of your energy is true abundance. Take care of your land, dotted with mythical tales and miraculous twists. See you soon, my dear friend”, Cherry tendered.

Both Cherry and Sakura helped Tara arrange her luggage after alighting from the cab. Then Sakura pulled a trolley and helped Tara mount her bags on it. With slow, steady steps they moved through, finding their way up to the entrance gate.

Sakura whispered ‘Sayonara’ and her voice gained strength as emotion strengthened, waving even after Cherry had entered the Airport gate. Once her luggage was dismounted from the trolley and counted by her again, Tara hugged her friends and said, “See you soon. Thank you. All the best. Till we meet again, lots of love.”



Cherry along with Sakura went speechless, shaking hands with Tara and hugging her. That same warm feeling was real in their hearts. Kindness and care had changed each of them.

‘Tradition and culture seem to live in every corridor of both these countries, India and Japan’, Tara said to herself, closing her eyes during the flight after taking the first round of refreshments. ‘Our civilizations are built on layered truths, on multiplicity, paradox and content’, she noted in her diary, realizing that her mind was reacting to the adventure she was experiencing, change and uncertainty. She took a nap and when she woke up, she understood that the sense of belonging she felt towards her home emerged by her separation from home and longing for it.

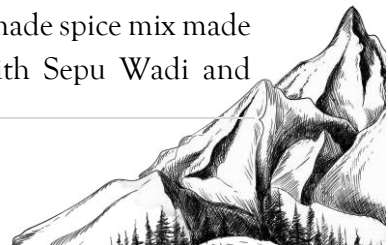
The trip helped her sense that contributions felt real and growth came closer for those who were always willing to learn, worked hard and continued to seek joy in both the mundane and the surreal.

She took out her diary and noted down her thoughts. Through unlearning and a deep remembrance, she charted her journey, paying attention to logic and listening to emotions, all at once.

The comfortable flight back home to India and a refreshing trip made Tara realize that struggles made lives colorful and it was up to the individual to make learnings their lessons.

Tara was accorded with a grand welcome by children of her neighborhood. The boy with large eyes, the girl with a big smile and little braids defining her statement look on ruffled, short, dark locks raised hand-drawn cards, amplifying their voices to say, ‘Welcome Tara Didi’ in the local dialect.

Tara settled into the ways of her sylvan home relishing ‘Aloo Chane ka Madra’ (Chickpea and potato curry) and lentils made by her mother, cucumber yoghurt flavored with home-made spice mix made by her father and ‘Rajmah’ (Kidney beans) with Sepu Wadi and



spinach brought in by their next-door neighbor. Blending her real-world experience with academic wisdom, she forged ahead.

There is one place in the world that will always be mine, she said to herself. The onus of giving children around her small certainties, making them feel safe and teaching them how to sacrifice just enough. Sustainable enterprises have created meaningful employment opportunities for people of the region in food processing, retail, handicrafts, honey-making, juice production and education.

Lives of simple mountain folks continue to light the path of the dazzling divas, through their beliefs, their stories, their kindness, their inspiration and their lessons. Fog rolling over valleys, the first golden leaf, the earlier dusk. The friends continue to echo their wonder to others and inspire change. They heal, grow and celebrate joyous occasions, noticing the small shifts and making the smallest moments funny and bright.



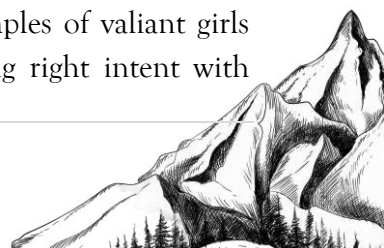
Chapter 40

Dazzling Divas Shining Bright

Through the passage of time, dreams were fulfilled. Despite financial constraints, labor shortages, health crises and extreme weather fluctuations, Moksh and Surya started a 'Fitness Village' which got members booking a year in advance for fitness sessions, healing therapies and rejuvenation exercises. Tourists and local visitors looked forward to revitalizing their physical bodies to their healthier selves with basic breathing techniques. Consumption of natural foods and focus on traditional medicines, exercises, walks and activities channeled them towards holistic treatment for well-being.

Chakrani and Rudrani together started a Company which offered advice to budding entrepreneurs. They also built a Homestay which incorporated the best of high-end amenities surrounded by teeming landscape gardens lush with several varieties of native flowers and ornamental plants. It was a serene getaway, far from hotels offering superficial luxury out of snobbish wealth. The local hospitality sector experienced a surge in demand, and their Homestay received increased bookings.

Employing over seventy trained local boys and girls, true friends Chakrani and Rudrani served as glowing examples of valiant girls who achieved what they wanted, by combining right intent with



community empowerment in tourism initiatives, aimed at benefiting society. They continued to share a healthy bond, spending time pursuing shared interests, meeting, talking and for self-reflection. Being best friends, their thoughts and actions were aligned and in a grim world filled with sharp corners, they explored life with deep tenderness. There were moments when they were hit by a wave of nostalgia.

Bulbs of tulips and red flowers of hibiscus dancing to the tune of the breeze in terracotta planters, gave them a reason to smile.

By the time Tara completed the degree course in Pharmacy, Alokika, Ujali and Titli were on their respective internships and close to completing their courses in different cities. They were younger than Tara by a year but remained connected to each other and to Tara all the time. Technology brought expression of love and friendship so easy to come by, though feelings still needed to be watered and tested through storms and strong winds. Alokika studied law. Ujali and Titli studied Mass Communication and became Influential bloggers. While visiting home during vacations they would make Video footage on various aspects of village life. They used drones capturing meandering roads, alpine lakes and mountain slopes laden with Deodar and Pine trees. To tickle taste buds of their Social Media audience to a new flavor and share with them treasures of local vegetation, they would feature wild vegetables like ‘Kasrod’ or ‘Lingad’ to make ‘Lungru ki sabji’ (Fiddlehead Fern), neighborhood mothers cooking ‘Jangli Palak’ (edible wild Spinach), ‘Bathua’ (Amaranth leaves) and ‘Fafru’ leaves (native green leafy vegetable variety) cooked with lentil or with vegetable fern.

“‘Kachnar’ (Bauhinia variegata or Mountain Ebony) flower buds are cooked in curd after boiling whereas ‘Chilgoza’ or Pine nuts are consumed as a cash crop and a dry fruit. Cherry, Apricot, Peach, Plum, Blueberry trees give us healthy fruits”, Titli announced, in



separate Videos, inhaling fresh air suffused with floral and aromatic earthiness in her surroundings, simultaneously.

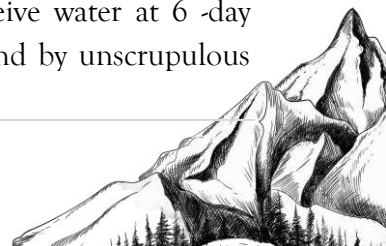
“Digital divide is wider for women. But they have the choice to be authentic, show up and be real. So, keep the belief strong, share your bounties and let your true selves be seen. People in big cities also need to know where we are leading. This would be possible when you share about developmental activities in our region. Good job, friends”, Tara exclaimed, appreciating Ujali and Titli’s attempts to make the audience aware about their local context and ecology, recognizing multifaceted nature of restoration efforts.

They covered women climbing down into a well struggling to access water, of hardships they faced while farming, of new varieties of seeds and their impact on crop yield and how sudden weather changes spoiled a good harvest. “Your Videos on seedless lemons, strawberry and zucchini farming are streaming across platforms. My neighbors watch. They are particularly fond of the one where you made a birdhouse and fed grains together”, Alokika revealed, complimenting Ujali and Titli. “Thank you”, Ujali acknowledged. Titli playfully tickled Alokika.

“We created Live and Pre-recorded content and posted podcasts on gender inequality. Women need to share stories of other women. Women are aware, knowledgeable, independent and grounded. We undertook 16 weeks of training in Digital Media and Information Literacy, made a Photo Story and were accepted as Fellows based on the quality of these productions”, Ujali emphasized.

Her face was glowing with passionate interest in what fueled her ambitions.

“I was overjoyed to see your videos as they brought renewed attention to the situation when certain villages still receive water at 6 -day intervals and farmers were stripped of their land by unscrupulous



agencies. I observed that through your work you have tried to find your artistic language and also investigate the female experience. You have depicted convincingly how farmers have been encouraged to expand the growth of Cash crops”, Tara attested.

“Thank you so much”, Titli and Ujali cheered. Thereafter, Titli recorded a video blog of her mother motivating her before she joined College. “Cultivate deep relationships with your family”, her mother reiterated. The ‘Joji’ (traditional cap worn by women as a mark of honor) and ‘Shangili’ (silver ornament adorned by women as a hair accessory) her mother carried, added to her grace.

Ujali played out a video blog of her father she had recorded two days back saying, “Courage is not giving up. The strongest flowers grow from ruins.”

Alokika and Tara clapped, expressing appreciation. They recalled preparing ‘Apple Coolers’ drink in Summers from freshly harvested apples, their restless energy cooling their creative urge only to refresh their tired selves onto new pranks.

The four friends reveled in unmediated conversations, in the warmth of affectionate hugs. Exploring new possibilities, they embarked on their own individual journeys to realize their true worth.

“Titli displays a strong and independent spirit, and I realized that her experiences shaped her creative vision. For you Ujali, I understand that as an active global collaborator you can contribute a lot in this Content and Media revolution”, Tara indicated. The girls blushed, happy that Tara viewed their work with such interest.

Joy that sparkles like sunshine on water when in one another’s company, shone more.

Unwavering determination and an inimitable perkiness still connected them. After one year when their courses were completed,



Alokika, Ujali and Titli would be back home and would again meet one another and themselves in newer ways having made their own discoveries. They had grown up seeing lasting friendships from their families who were shining examples of resilience and self-acceptance and friends who taught them to truly live by showing up for every moment.

At the crack of dawn the next morning, Ujali sprayed disinfectants made from neem leaves all around her house as a mosquito and insect repellent lest her friends suffer from itching and mosquito bites, through the day.

Their eyes gleamed with abundant joy when they gathered at Ujali's house. "How we would while away summer afternoons after long walks across meadows", Ujali recalled, happy that the get-together had materialized while reflecting upon their childhood friendships.

They were aware of wild bears and monkey gangs hanging around in the wilderness and had been asked to be careful and come together in a group. They would keep on tables fruits for passers-by, rich harvests of fruits they reaped as a gesture of goodwill.

Birds pecked fruit on trees in her garden.

"Ma, did you keep the plums and 'Timru' fruit for distribution to neighbors?", Ujali asked her mother, gazing at the forest road, to check if her friends had arrived.

"Yes, I have kept them on two tables near the main gate", her mother answered. "Now come and help me in the kitchen", her mother enjoined. She held the walls of the house together with her hard work and quiet wisdom making their family the first in their village to use free sunlight for rooftop solar panels and thereby reduce carbon emissions.



Ujali rushed into the kitchen and in about half an hour everything was in place. Passersby picked fruits laid out on tables as a gesture of goodwill. “Ma, the video we uploaded yesterday where you are sharing with Social Media audience about Government subsidies and Green loans available for solar panel installations has got nearly a million views”, Ujali announced. “Really!”, her mother exclaimed in astonishment. “Hope more and more people take to it as well”, she called out excitedly, laying the spread of traditional snacks on the table.

Tara, Titli, Alokika, Chakrani and Rudrani greeted Ujali’s mother and hugged Ujali one after another, the valley reverberating with soft squeals and sharp giggles.

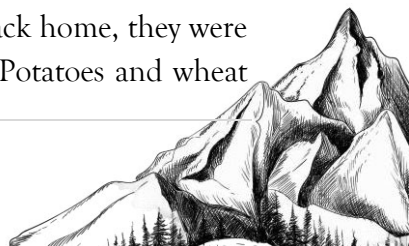
Together they circumambulated and prayed at the local temple to thank Mother Goddess for bestowing on them the Gift of hope that goodness truly is more powerful. On special occasions and during festivals, sacred places witnessed massive crowds with parents bringing young children so that the seed of devotional service germinated over time. Green mountains, clean water and pure air were the real treasures.

Cosmos flowers in dark maroon and deep burgundy colors represented fleeting moments of grace.

These were Nature’s powerful yet transitory creations symbolizing mystery and spiritual transformation.

As the bells chimed, the four friends felt a message from the benevolent Goddess blessing them. It echoed in their ears, minds and hearts like soulful music. “May you grow into responsibility, self-awareness and confidence!”

Upon their return from the temple, trudging up the hill, they laughed together enjoying a beautiful Sunset. Back home, they were served ‘Aktori’ (Himachali Pancake made with Potatoes and wheat



flour) and ‘Babru’ (deep fried wheat flour pancakes filled with a mix of black lentils, herbs and spices) which they relished. Ujali’s mother distributed plums and ‘Timru’ fruits in small cloth bags to the girls to take to their homes. Finding joy in little moments and seeing past their own comfort zones, they had imbibed a spirit of harmony and kindness observing the quiet lives of industrious parents who led simple routines and had learnt to unlock a life of deep connection and unshakeable courage. Cool mountain air radiated happiness as they held each other and received small bags of fruits.

“New technologies, new services, new knowledge and new jobs are emerging. Let us move forward to a renewable economy”, Alokika indicated. “I plan to do this by starting a forum through which I would propose transition from unsustainable business practices to sustainable practices”, she added.

“That will be good. I am fascinated by the intersection of culture and technology. celebrated with art, food and social gatherings. Every local fair and festival symbolizes new beginnings and fresh perspectives. Through social gatherings which are a cultural spectacle of art, food and tradition, I will help communities find new expression, offering a refreshing re-look at solving uncomfortable situations by balancing indigenous and modern methods and turning a questioning gaze at unwarranted selfishness”, Titli vowed. Alokika, Ujali, Tara, Chakrani and Rudrani clapped heartily for Ujali.

Evening made way to a night, filled with celebration and bonhomie.

On the open sky-facing terrace, birds kept up a drowsy monotone, atop trees on the hill above Ujali’s house, farm and garden. The six Mountain Divas, by each other’s side through thick and thin, received confirmation and direction from the Universe when bells outside the Sanctum Sanctorum of the hill temple nearby started



chiming even though the doors were shut. Evidently, the breeze conveyed blessings by making the bells ring.

They promised to remain beside one another. The joy of the reunion surpassed any expression that could be described in words. Studies and Career saw them step out of home and pulled back in, through the years. Young hearts full of wonder, curiosity and innocence were deeply touched whenever they saw tears in those shriveled eyes of elders in the village and family.

With destiny unfolding magically in front of them, transforming their aspirations and efforts into that dream life they always wished for, they realized that one shows one's worth with what one seeks. Timeless companionship awakened the grounding held within them, taking them towards success.

*THE REAL HAPPY ENDING WAS FALLING IN LOVE WITH
THE SIMPLEST PARTS OF LIFE.*

