

THOSE FIFTY DAYS

*An Eyewitness Account of Humanity's
Toughest Walk*

PAWAN BHAGAT



BlueRoseONE.com
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Pawan Bhagat 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7825-402-4

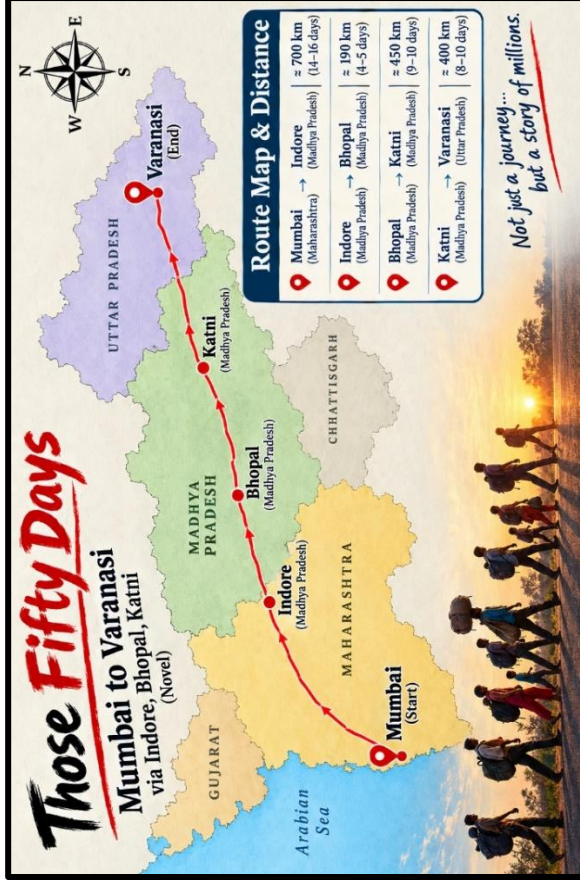
Cover Design: Deepak Katheria

Typesetting: Manisha Rawat

Translator: Sharmila Inamdar

First Edition: October 2026





CSMT Mumbai → Thane → Kalyan → Titwala → Kasara Ghat → Igatpuri → Nashik → Chandwad → Malegaon → Dhule → Shirpur → Bijasan Check Post → Indore → Dewas → Bhopal → Vidisha → Rahatgadh → Sagar → Garhakota → Padiya → Raipura → Rithi → Katni → Patwara → Subhau → Kherwasani Toll Plaza → Ghunwara → Maihar → Lakhampur → AmarPatan → Bela → Rewa → Mangawan → Mauganj → Sinaha → Hanumana → Bhalsor → Durjanipur → Rajpur → Lal ganj → Mirzapur → Bharuhana → Mirzapur → Chunar → Parsodha → Narayanpur → Katariya → RamNagar → Varanasi

Dedication

To the cherished memory of **Late Eknath Gaikwad (Mumbai)**, whose unwavering faith and encouragement gave me the strength to find my voice and stand firm.

To **Dayanand Kanakdande**, without whose steadfast support this book would never have come into being.

And in loving memory of **Gopal Naidu, Veera Sathidar, and Eknath Salve**—your lives, friendship, and enduring inspiration continue to illuminate these pages

How can I remain silent?

Barely two years ago during the lockdown, our country underwent weird and bizarre experience in living conditions.

For thousands of years we have struggled for equality, for freedom from slavery. Humanity did absorb some of these egalitarian values.

However, what we plainly experienced during the “Covid” lockdown was how the dominant forces made attempts to erase even these values. Even though the workers’ living conditions were being destroyed, some of the state governments did not hesitate to repeal the very laws protecting them.

The ruling classes view the adversities like epidemics as means for further exploiting the oppressed.

The calamity which occasioned the lockdown was viewed as another opportunity for exploitation. The slogan “Opportunity in Disaster” made waves.

Bigger than the calamity of the pandemic, the upper classes who already have enough and yet continue to crave for more, cut themselves off from the rest of the world which dream of equality and progress. What remained in the rest of the world was confusion and devastation. The slogans “two feet distance” and “social distancing” purportedly to prevent the disease only added to the ripples of negativity.

During this calamitous period, humanity was literally murdered – each and every person severed from the other. What happened, what I saw and experienced in our multi-caste, multi-lingual and geographically diverse country India is truly terrifying.

This was not the first time that the epidemic gripped the world. Even earlier, the world dealt with such crises and patiently rescued itself.

The people saved each other then and took care of each other. But this time, quite a different picture emerged before us.

The present epidemic was the outcome of Mother Nature's wrath. Nonetheless, something indeed new was the tyrannical ruling capitalist classes capitalising on the disaster and brazenly using it as an opportunity to take hold.

All to a greater or lesser extent had to withstand the worst of this epidemic. However, for the hardworking workers and toilers, the oppressed and victimised, this experience turned out to be devastating. The abrupt announcement of the lockdown forced the labourers to relocate. The labourer wandered the streets starving, fearful of death. Looking at closed doors and windows began walking back towards the native village. After the lockdown was announced, labourers, students as well as patients who had come for treatment started trudging towards their native places and homes helplessly. How could people like me remain silent at such a time...? The true artists, poets, writers, and intellectuals cannot remain silent. In this spirit, it was inevitable for me to say something being an artist!

This is not a rebellion or a definition of the role of an artist. I reacted to the situation by writing about it which can be considered more of an action.

Whenever an exploiting power plans a conspiracy, the artists, poets, and journalists who look forward to the creation of a fair, just and new society must oppose it. That is exactly what I did.

To accomplish this, I travelled with groups of labourers, took notes, developed some insights, and finally ventured to present my writing before you.

I am in no way glad presenting this before you. In truth, nobody should profit from the tragic journey of these labourers, marketing the torture they endured. But I did it. I do not expect mercy for this act of mine! I know I do not deserve it. On the other hand, if I do not reveal their suffering and distress, would anyone else record their torments? Being an artist, I consider it my duty. If I do not fulfil this duty, will history ever forgive me...?

I wrote what I saw. As Kabir once said: “Tu kahta kagaj ki lekhi, main kahata aakhan ki dekhi” ^{1(*)} I have written what my eyes have directly seen; not from books or hearsay.

To serve as an actual eyewitness, my friend Pritam Bulkunde, editor of Awaaz India channel, appointed me as a special correspondent to move freely during the pandemic lockdown. This enabled me to record the journey on the road to Banaras.

My companions Nagesh Ratnaparkhi, Anand Ramteke and Milind Gedam and I could roam freely on the highway during the strict lockdown period. We became fellow travellers with the labourers and saw their misery. I am thankful to Pritam Bulkunde and my colleagues.

I am thankful to all my friends who encouraged me to put this journey of labourers on paper.

It would be better not to be enticed to call this book a novel or a story, a travelogue or nothing at all. More importantly, I have put my disquiet on paper, and it is being published. This writing may upset you, make you raise your fist, or force you to do something novel. Of course, it is up to you, my reader, to decide how much of my agitation I could manage to convey.

In anticipation of a new day, a new creation, I present this account of suffering today.

My life partner, Bhavana, allowed me to leave home while the rest of the world stayed inside. For this brave act of hers, I prefer to be in her debt rather than thank her. I am proud of her.

- Pawan Bhagat

Dr. Zakir Husain Nagar, Ballarpur
District - Chandrapur
Maharashtra, India - 442701
Mob: +91 9067611890

The sun rises and sets daily and the night ends as usual. For Ramswaroop Maurya, however, this was a different dawn after the previous night ended as usual.

Ramswaroop Maurya, on the cusp of completing thirty years of age, returned home from work with aching bones. Nothing resembled like home where he lived. It was just an address to receive letters from the village and that was why it was called home. Could anyone call it a home? It was nothing but a hired scrap hole. His home was a shack that could barely fit a small mat, not more than the size of a train berth. The space provided one to sleep and a small space for stacking utensils. His daily chores of washing his mouth and bathing were outside. Cooking inside was senseless; there was no space. It was pointless having groceries and bins to store them. He bathed outside, changed his clothes, and went directly to work. On the way to work, his usual breakfast was two vadapavs ^{2(*)} and a double omelette pav, his “brunch” in elite parlance. This was his lunch today as well. He took his meals only once and that was in the night. This way he could save maximum amount of money to send home to his mother. He would do all the sundry work he could get. His entire life was to do whatever work that was available to him. Such is the life of lakhs of workers in the city of Mumbai.

He had returned from his native home just a month and a half ago. He had a few belongings given by his mother. A plate, a bowl, a tumbler, and his grandfather’s lota ^{3(*)}. Homemade linen and a box of pickles were also a part of these sundry belongings. While returning to Mumbai, his mother always persuasively filled the pickle container. The last time she had filled some dry edible items in a bag. There was a packet of dry mutton and another of dry chapattis made of jaggery and peanuts – all given to eat in times of difficulty.

Ramswaroop was neither a government employee nor a private company employee getting a monthly pass for a bus. He was not a worker in a corporation and neither a driver nor a conductor of the

BEST bus company. Like millions of other labourers in Mumbai, he was also a “redundant” lacking a stable job. No stable job meant no stable income. In the apartments of Mumbai, usually in the morning, newspapers are scanned with a sip of hot coffee or tea while pondering over Paytm shares on the market. This is also when husbands watch Ramdevbaba jiggle his stomach on TV while waiting for their tiffin to be packed by their beloved wives. But this is the time when Ramswaroop would rush to Madakebuwa Chowk in Parel. His destination is Mazdoor Adda - in other words, “the labour market” located in Madakebuwa Chowk. This market teems with a vast number of labourers. There are not many jobs and abundant workers vying for a single job. This is the usual scene. One must accept whatever work is available without delay, or someone else will get it. However hardworking one may be, once an opportunity is lost, the possibility of getting another job is not feasible and is as improbable as a commoner would get rich like Ambani, Adani, the Tatas and Birlas. The labour contractors and the brokers rule this place. Whatever the job, commissions must be paid to them. It is a market where the bidding of labourers takes place. Once the bidding begins, the price can go from fifty or hundred rupees to up to eighteen hundred or two thousand rupees. These highs and lows of uncertainty shock the labourers to their core. The minimum wage law is non-existent here and the labour prices could hit rock bottom or rise like a roller-coaster in the share market. This is a stock exchange but of a different kind indeed! The labourers are the stock in this market.

It is a well-known fact that Mumbai is the financial capital of our country. The stock exchange located here is a hub for major financial transactions in our country. During the British Raj, the Wadia ships laden with opium sailed to China from Mumbai on behalf of the famed opium trade. Besides, Mumbai crowned itself as the financial capital of the country for speculating in cotton. Alongside, the Hindi cinema industry also began in this city. The elites wearing English perfumes call it Bollywood mimicking the Hollywood of America. In the early days, Mumbai spread over

seven islands. Originally, there were villages belonging to the Koli and Bhandari communities. The village goddess was called Mumba Aai ^{4(*)}. The name Mumbai can be traced to this, and it endures for the modern metropolis of today. Today, in these dire circumstances, it is almost impossible to find the natives of Mumbai. It is like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Ramswaroop Maurya, an ardent fan of Sant Kabir was a student doing his Master of Arts degree in History from BHU ^{5(*)}. He hardly remembered his father's face. His mother raised him all by herself with utmost struggle by working on someone else's farm. His family was entirely doomed to abject poverty. He dropped his education halfway to help his mother, for their livelihood. This is how he reached this flashy Mumbai city in the hope of selling his labour and getting some money. He came here just to earn some money. He had no intention of attaining stardom in movies, drama, or anything else nor earning a name in literature or journalism to author spicy stories of struggle. He wanted to finish his education with whatever money he could earn. This was his motivation towards hard work. In brief, he was a labourer even before he was born. To work as a labourer was etched in his bones which gripped him like a vice. Regardless of whatever nature the job was, he had to work hard to survive with the least amount of money and to save a little.

Ramswaroop once won a "big" bid. His joy knew no bounds. The job he got was to bathe an elderly paralysed person, an officer's father. His job was to change his dirty, soiled clothes and clean his room. He washed and veritably polished the stinky room stained with urine and poop. He washed the poop buttocks of that old man and gave him a clean bath. All the time, the wife and children of the old man covered their faces with large scarves. The officer himself lay down leisurely on the sofa in another room reading a novel by Amish Tripathi holding a glass of beer in his hand. Everyone avoided the stinking old man. Ramswaroop used three to four room fresheners. No one bothered whether Ramswaroop wore a mask, or he followed any safety measures. Although the agreed

amount was two thousand rupees, after the work was over, the officer haggled over the amount and placed a mere 1750 rupees in his hand. Ramswaroop accepted it without uttering a word. Just the same, he never had an opportunity to get such a big amount outright. After waking up

After waking up in the morning, Ramswaroop went to Madakebuwa Chowk as usual. He saw that all the shops were shut. Not even a vehicle could be seen on the road. The deserted streets gave the impression that something terrible had occurred, as though death had just taken its toll. Hurriedly, he entered a narrow lane and asked the first person he came across: "What happened? Why are the shops not open? Where are the hurrying taxis and autorickshaws, the fruit stalls, vegetable carts? What about them...?" The man instead gave him a strange look and stiffly responded: "What? Don't you watch TV?" startled at what the man said, he glanced around in astonishment. All he could see were people surreptitiously carrying 'vadapavs' as though these were liquor being bootlegged. Realising something was amiss, Ramswaroop straightaway ran and bought three vadapavs. He asked the fellow selling vadapavs in a muffled voice: "Bro, what happened? A bigwig died or what?" "I am scared, tell me...have riots broken out?" The fellow covered his vada pavs and instead asked him a similar question he heard just before: "Why? Don't you watch TV?"

"I don't have TV. Yesterday I came home exhausted and slept. But since morning I am seeing this..." Ramswaroop responded. At this moment, the fellow explained to him: "Oh bro, PM declared Public Curfew last night. From today, not only Mumbai, but all of India is shut down! At 8 o'clock in the evening, lamps must be lit, and pans clanked..."

Ramswaroop swiftly turned back. He held the vadapavs packed in Bharat Samachar newspaper close to his chest. He walked quietly by the side of the road. The barricades could be seen all around, and hoarse-sounding sirens could be heard. The usually crowded

Tiranga Chowk was now full of police helmets, sticks and khaki uniforms. Some sat and some stood at every corner. The moment he reached the corner and before he could realise anything, his back was met with a punitive barrage of blows from police batons. Curses and vulgar expletives directed at his mother and sister spewed from their mouths blasting his ears. Despite his wretched state, Ramswaroop clung to his vadapavs even tighter and ran down the street for dear life.

He somehow managed to reach the place where he lived. Reaching the place, he immediately ate one vada pav, bolted it down his throat. When his throat stuttered, he took a couple of sips of water kept in an earthen pot in the corner. His legs ached in agony after his marathon run and police lathi-charge. The welts from the police lathis were clearly visible on his back. They festered and his swollen legs hurt. He sat down on the floor and rubbed his sore feet himself. This time, his mother was not around to dab him with warm cloth. He lay on the mat. The village memories of his younger brother, mother, and friends haunted him. His college days and the beloved Banaras Hindu University flashed in front of his eyes.

Banaras Hindu World University is the size of a small village; a beautiful, attractive university spread over an area of five and a half sq. kilometres. His mind jostled with numerous memories – students, almost thirty thousand in number, three to four thousand professors and the staff, the attractive grand gate of the university, the hostels, the professors' colony, evening campus flocked with student groups from all over the country, like-minded, poor but promising student friends, the award given to him by the university on the occasion of Ambedkar Jayanti ^{6(*)}, the lively discussions on various topics under the statue of Madan Mohan Malviya ^{7(*)}, poster exhibitions, Bhojpuri Study Centre, Sant Kabir Hall, passionate discussions about Bhikhari Thakur's ^{8(*)} impact on the cultural movement, the famous Launda Dance ^{9(*)}, Public readings of Mahapandit Rahul Sankritayan's ^{10(*)} books like 'Volga Se Ganga', 'Bhago Nahi, Badalo' ^{11(*)}, intense late-night debates

which followed after, the guiding professors, all this came alive in his mind. He fell asleep in a semi-conscious state, his whole body ached from the police beatings.

At seven p.m. in the evening, he was awakened by the sound of festivities. The special festival of public curfew had begun playing its catchphrase “Thali Bajao, Tali Bajao” ^{12(*)} - Clang plates, Clap hands.” Somehow, he managed to stand up and splashed water on his face. Already terrified by the morning thrash from the police, he came out to the street in panic. Young boys were shouting “Rashtra Ke Naam, Jai Shri Ram” ^{13(*)}. They beat drums heavily and with each beat, their voices rose in a frenzy of excitement. The high-pitched sounds were thundering in the chowk. The police force with batons and helmets who had come crashing down on him in the morning now were standing mutely and passively in the corner.

The people lit candles and lamps on their buildings. The buildings were illuminated with decorative lamps. Young girls and women were dancing garba ^{14(*)} to the tune “Go Corona Go.” The young and the old, all were holding plates in their hands and banging them loudly with ladles and spoons. This was their unique way of displaying their respect for the powerful Prime Minister of the country. Some burst firecrackers in excitement and some lit up colourful sparklers. The festival of the curfew was being celebrated. There was frenzy at every corner as though celebrating Diwali.

He remembered a horror movie he once watched. One of the songs in that movie popped in his head.

This city, the city of peace

The wind here carries a different air

The entirety here echoes peace, peace, and peace...

The excruciating back pain did not let him sleep at all in the night. Of the remaining vadapavs, he gave one to the old man next door, named Gundappa. Gundappa could get nothing to eat throughout the day. Gundappa, originally from Vijapur, the drought-prone area in Karnataka, also had come to Mumbai to work as a porter. Mumbai had squeezed out all the juice from his strong iron body and turned him into an old man at only fifty. Throughout his life, Gundappa carried heavy sacks full of spices on his shoulder working as a porter in the spice market of Masjid Bunder though he himself never had any of those spices in his meal other than chilli powder. With one vada pav left, Ramswaroop managed to gulp it down with water. Gundappa even offered to massage his aching legs! Ramswaroop humbly refused. Could he accept such a service from an old man his father's age?! He continued to lay on the mat aching all over, unable to sleep. He got up early in the morning and went out. It was a relief to see the whole city awake at dawn. The vegetable sellers brought handcarts filled with fresh green vegetables from the vegetable market. These vegetables reminded him of the landlord of his village. The landlord hired labourers to cut new brinjal crop and at times Ramswaroop too accompanied his mother for this work. Whenever the market price went down, the landlord's wife put green vegetables, brinjals, chillies, tomatoes in his mother's bag. In return, she would ensure that all the extra domestic work was completed by his mother. It has been a long time since he ate such fresh green leafy vegetables. Whenever his eyes turned towards the vegetables on the carts, he thought: "The village labourers must be busy now cutting the crops, and mother would have joined them." The details of the farm appeared in front of his eyes – the well, the effluent water fountain from the pump, the fenugreek trenches, neatly arranged piles of green vegetables, brinjal, radish, green chillies and vines of bottle gourd running down their pandals, the bitter gourd vines on all the four sides of the fence, cold wind blowing through, the path leading to the field, farm labourers walking in a line along the path, the landlord standing on the embankment with his umbrella, his bookkeeper, his guards standing by holding clubs in their hands,

the manure in the tin sheds on farmland, bags of seed, farming tools like pickaxe, hoe, shovels, plough, etc., oxen roped to a peg, fodder in front of them... all these were part of the scene playing in front of his eyes.

Suddenly, his thoughts shattered, and he was jolted back to reality by the screeching horn and brake of a taxi. “Mother fucker!! Go and die someplace else!” The taxi driver screamed. Ramswaroop ran to the side. Before he realised how he got to the other side of the road, he had already crossed it. He was in front of an Udupi tea stall. He had a cup of hot tea and left for work. For the next one or two days he got to do some odd jobs but soon the demand for labour dwindled. Supply was high and the demand low. Soon, the theory of supply and demand became clear. Anyhow, Robin Smith, Adam Smith prevented him from moving forward. The statue of Madekebuwa stood motionless in the square, his gaze fixed on the sea. Arun Kale, the restless poet of this city of wailing sirens, had said it all.

In the city, you are nothing more than a refugee.
Is there anything this city has given us?
Whoever gave us anything,
Weren't they Krantiba and Krantisurya? ^{15(*)}

- **Arun Kale**

There was a time when labour agitations stormed Mumbai under the leadership of this very Madakebuwa. Mumbai was built and raised by workers with their hard work. Narayan Meghaji Lokhande organised the first union in this city at the behest of Mahatma Phule himself. In 1892, when Hindu-Muslim riots broke out in Mumbai, it was the same Lokhande who took the initiative to subdue the riots. During the United Maharashtra struggle ^{16(*)} workers displayed great strength in their solidarity to keep Mumbai as part of the Maharashtra state. Babasaheb had played significant role in this battle. Madakebuwa was an important leader of the Independent Labour Party ^{17(*)} set up by Dr. Babasaheb in 1936. He was also Babasaheb's bodyguard when Babasaheb went to meet

and discuss with Gandhiji in Yerwada Central Jail at Pune. And today, at this same Madakebuwa square, his work had no value, and the hands had no real work to do. One was forced to sell one's labour at the lowest possible price without any choice. He came to offer himself in this labour market, but his labour was not needed at all.

Ramswaroop had only one meal each night at an eatery run by a UP ^{*(18)} person. He was a regular at this eatery. The owner, waiter and chef all knew him. Sometimes he got added vegetables free of charge. No matter how much the price of lemons and onions went up, he always had onions, lemons, and pickles on his plate. This eatery became his rightful place. Even though he had no money, he was guaranteed a plate of rice. It was agreed without question that today's debt would be paid tomorrow.

There was a portable TV at the diner in front of the counter. The news channels played continuously on the TV screen. Whenever the ad appeared, the owner at the counter changed to some TV serial using a remote. The reason was simple. When members were dining, Akshay Kumar in the ad showed how Harpic cleaned the toilet. He changed the channel soon enough to come back to playing the news. Today too, he did the same. When he played the news routinely, breaking news began in the midst.

At that time, they had no idea that today was their last night in this inn. Nobody could believe that this was the last time they were sitting at the table where they ate.

A few years ago, the PM of the country, the country moving towards becoming a superpower, had announced in Tughlaq-style that five- hundred and thousand-rupee notes were scrap paper. This sudden declaration came like a widespread storm in peoples' lives. It made a divide between pre-demonetisation and post-demonetisation periods. The memories of hardship endured by the common people during this period of demonetisation were still fresh. So, whenever he, the PM, announced something, it usually came as a shock to the common people. The owner too had barely recovered from the shock of demonetisation. Already distraught by the declaration of Janata curfew yesterday and the day before, Ramswaroop now keenly listened to what the PM was announcing.

In his usual, cold manner, the PM quietly declared that there is a country-wide strict lock-down post 12 o'clock midnight. The announcement that the entire country has been shut down caused a

stir among the people watching TV with their ears pricked up. The members like Ramswaroop who had come to eat were stunned. The owner became worried. The waiters, cooks, and all the labourers who worked there all were turned numb into stone. The food could not be gulped down and stuck in their throats. There was a simultaneous grave silence and an uproar.

When Ramswaroop came outside the hotel, the people on the street were scurrying home by any means, whatever vehicles they could find, and wherever they could find a way. The crowds of people on the street had turned into a horde. It did not take long for the news to spread by word of mouth. There were people all around. Everybody was in a state of panic to reach home before 12 o'clock at night. Fear gripped the city and made people run frantically. What went wrong with the people, even the stray dogs on the street could not understand and were confused.

A virus named Corona had turned the world into a frenzy. The experts in various fields claimed that lock-down should be imposed as a last resort. But the governments all over the world began to impose the lock-down hastily. The government only gave empty assurance that all efforts would be aimed at taking care of each person's life. Today's lock-down was announced without prior notice. All traffic was to stop in a moment. Would the lock-down last just for 21 days or extended further, no one knew.

Ramswaroop had well tasted the first Janata curfew. He walked to his room thinking how he would survive the coming 21 days, what he would eat, where and how he would stay. "If the lock-down gets extended, we would surely be dead!" he muttered to himself. His worried steps turned him towards a grocery shop but stopped for a moment. It occurred to him, he had nothing to cook with, no gas, no grill, no pans, or pots. He grumbled and bought items like biscuits, toast, sugar and returned hastily to heap it inside his railway berth-like scrap hole.

The announcement made by the PM worried the entire city. In every hotel, the crowd thinned out gradually. The crowds in shops

decreased. The big malls became deserted quickly. The shops selling clothes began to close while the crowds in roadside liquor shops increased. The people left for their homes in taxis, autorickshaws, whichever vehicle they got. The local buses saw an upsurge in crowds.

Ramswaroop could not sleep at night no matter what. He lay thinking all night. He was unable to reach a conclusion. “The benevolent government would do something; would it throw the poor away to the winds? It would carry out the responsibility of feeding the labourers who live from hand to mouth. The government would certainly not let them starve, would not hoodwink its people” so thinking, he fell asleep.

The deserted main road today
Lay under the blazing sun,
Ruminating idly like a python
In chilling fear,
The birds trembled under the eaves.
The daily cattle and dogs strolling in traffic
Vanished into thin air
As though extinct

Sirens sounded like sneezes
Emanating out of wounds
From ambulances, fire brigades,
Police vans, crickets, and all

Bounded by four-shifts sirens
A tradition of peace and order

This city
Now seems siren's...

Somehow all the people pulled through the 21 days lock-down. The middle-class who lived in apartment blocks were petrified during the first four days but then were inured to a routine of doing nothing. A new routine of cooking variety of foods, curling in bed and watching movies on Netflix or Prime, slowly took form. The labourers like Ramswaroop had to bide some days keeping mum. Some owners doled out rations to their workers. Ramswaroop had earned a pretty sum of money before the Janata curfew, to a degree. Using this wherewithal, he bought sugar, tea powder, packets of Parle-G, Maggi, etc. In the mornings, a Bihari ^{19(*)} used to sell milk at the chowk. Some needs were met with items he had brought from the village. He survived for a few days on tea, biscuits and food packets which were distributed by some organisations. But the food was not easily available in those camps as there were long queues. One had to jostle ahead to obtain food, remain in the queue for three hours or longer and despite this was not sure to get it. Besides, the police rained their batons on the people standing in queues in the name of discipline. During the first eight to ten days,

Ramswaroop did stand in the queue to try and obtain some food. But when the police also beat a pregnant woman standing behind him, he stopped going. That day, he gave away the food packet he had received to that pregnant woman. “Heck with it all! Mustn’t one think before starting such lockdown! What about women folks expecting a child? And kids! and sick and old people! Who will care about them?” The lock-down began reeling in his brain.

The sirens could be heard throughout the day. The number of Covid patients were rising, it said. The 21 days were ending. He reached the landlord’s house to hear the news hoping that the PM will give some relief. After the announcement, the PM had vanished but now it was the owner’s turn. “Get out of the house! Covid is increasing and the lock-down has been extended.” The owner gave the ultimatum without taking off his mask and hurriedly closed the door.

He woke up early in the morning and called out for Gundappa who was living next door. However, Gundappa and others had left for their villages in the night itself. There was no choice left other than vacating the place. Ramswaroop took as much stuff as he could. He left the room taking the bundle of dry snacks his mother gave. On the way out, he counted the money he had in the wallet by rote and groped in his pocket for the photos of Babasaheb and his father who died when he was a child. He wore his sandals and walked towards CSMT, the famous Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus. The only thought in his mind was to go back to his village by whatever means of transport. Wearily, he trudged ten to twelve kms on foot towards CSMT. All the streets, narrow and wide, leading to the station were full of people. Lakhs of people thronged the station. Hordes of restless thousands were scattered in the area. The police were beating them with lathis, and people were scurrying around. A general bogey was converted into a special by the government. But one could not get a ticket without reservation. A goldmine for the touts too. Many trains were cancelled. No one were allowed entry even in those halted trains. There were discussions about the extended period of Bharat Bandh ^{20(*)} and shutting the state's borders in outlying districts. Within moments, the crowds dispersed and gathered repeatedly. Huge crowds of people thronged the platforms. There were small children, women, youngsters, elderly, disabled, sick including the cancer patients on their visit to JJ hospital for treatment. Young boys who came for job interview, someone who came for a glimpse of Shah Rukh Khan in Mumbai, someone who came for some work in the Ministry, some who came for an exam, contract workers, all sorts of people converged there to reach their hometowns. It seemed as though all the station employees simply vanished. The situation was such. Chaos reigned like the Ashadhi Yatra in Pandharpur ^{21(*)}. The regular lady announcer of the train timings, the TCs, stationmaster, none of them could be seen. Commotion pervaded. Rumours spread like waves among the sea of people at the station. Wave after wave of rumours surfaced. Some said that the trains would leave in the evening, some said that the trains

would leave in the afternoon. However, the government and the administration did not utter a word. All their lips were sealed. How come that every tongue was paralysed? Why doesn't anyone speak or say? Nobody knew.

The people were holding luggage on their heads with one hand and leading their children in the other. Some were carrying two to three bags and some none. A person was seen visibly riled enquiring persistently about the trains going as far away as Faizabaad, now renamed as Ayodhya. He was saying: "Came from Faizabaad to meet children, but there are no trains now. What can be done bro?" the listener was also lamenting, "How we spent the last 21 days Bholenath ^{22(*)} and I only know! If this goes on, what can one do...the Govt says, stay home stay safe. But no work, no food, sit and eat the wall, eh? Damn! If that belonged to us, it would be a different story. The house-owner kicked us out and the company owner from the company..." Among the people there were pani-puri ^{23(*)} sellers, laundry workers, construction workers, labourers, students, pregnant women, women working in the city, and so many others. Their clamour filled the air like a dense fog. Each and everyone wanted to go back to the village, and all of them were certain that this city will not give them shelter anymore.

A distraught Ramswaroop went to sit near the drinking water basin opposite the CSMT. Many people already squatted there. There was no place left to lower oneself and squat on the floor. Somehow, he managed to sit in that cramped up a place. Where are you off to? Which district? Asking these questions about the village, he got acquainted with the others. To be heedful of each other's belongings such recognition of each other is necessary. Among them he met a Brahmin wearing tilak on his forehead and a typical hair knot at the back of his head, Pandit Brij Mohan Mishra. Another person was a thirty-five-year-old Sheikh Arif. Including Ramswaroop, all the three were from Banaras. All of them were from the same state and district. They wanted to go to the same region. They sat together and discussed the situation. Despite being from different castes and religions, they had to reluctantly work out

things together. They talked about departing trains. When talking they stole glances and were suspicious of each other. They ensured to keep a distance amongst themselves.

Pandit Brij Mohan Mishra was a person in his late forties, six feet tall, fair, and blue-eyed. His big forehead flaunted a big sandalwood tilak on it, his long hairs were tied in the most typical way of a sacred knot behind his head. He wrapped a saffron coloured towel around his neck and wore a loose kurta. A cloth sack hung loosely under his armpit. Both his kurta and the bag were saffron in colour. Pandit Brij Mohan, obviously, was a Brahmin from Banaras. He had left home with just two pairs of kurta-dhoti, a cloth sheet to cover himself at night and a sack in the armpit, which was all. The sack under the armpit was his identity. All his life belongings were contained in that bag. It was his life's passport. The bag held all sorts of torn religious books like Mahamrityunjayamantra, Nagbali, Satyanarayana to Garuda Purana, old greased parchments of Hanuman Chalisa and other sundry religious items like Rudraksha rosaries, Sandalwood, a vertical bar for applying tilak, a bottle of Ganges water and a small diary of accounts. When introducing himself, Pandit Brij Mohan Mishra always made it a point to add "Ji" as a suffix after his name. He did not like to be called just Mishra but as Pandit Mishraji. Panditji's personality was of an original North Indian Brahmin, narrow minded, but clever enough and intelligent who has imbibed the waters of the famous Banaras ghats.

Panditji had come to Mumbai through a big-time agent Pandit. Pandit gangs from UP are quite active in the metropolis of Mumbai. For years, these are the people who perform and practise various religious rituals like shraddha, pooja path, satyanarayan, vastushanti, ghrishanti, janmashant, abhishek, kaal sarpayog, etc. They also appoint commission agents for their businesses. Nowadays their popularity has a wide reach and are quite in demand. The Mahapandits ^{24(*)} who have already established themselves, are their chiefs. These chiefs take commission from newly recruited pandits like Pandit Mishraji and in turn offer them

work on daily wages. Pandit Mishraji was a new pandit who lately entered the fray. The rates for pandits and priests are also not fixed like the labourers, like Ramswaroop. The business of religion exploits them too. On festival days like Panchami, Dashami, Lakshmi pooja, Chaturthi and on special occasions like cremation, shraddha, etc., they earn considerably. But sometimes they too are without work. There is a lull in business sometimes. At such times, they would beg for money near the Gateway of India anointing the foreign and domestic tourists with tilaks on the forehead. They must pay commission to the big pandit from these earnings too. Just as someone would buy Ramswaroop's labour, some agent would bargain for Pandit Mishraji's labour.

Mishraji's condition was not good either. He did not have his own house to live. He went broke as a youth, paying off his father's and ancestors' debts bequeathed through their indulgence. He could achieve nothing else other than giving birth to his progeny. The intense competition in his trade of performing rituals on the ghats of Banaras propelled Mishraji to come to Mumbai. Ever since he arrived in Mumbai, he had to pay a commission to an agent for a place just to sleep. All other circumstances were the same as that of Ramswaroop. He paid for all morning ablutions right from going to toilet, which was outside.

These pandits from Banaras are so clever that they can discern people from afar. Once a believer falls into their marketing trap, he is done for, without any chance to get away. Occasionally, they even extort money from an atheist. These Brahmin pandits are quite fond of boasting about their so-called knowledge in a shrewd manner. "We have spent our lives drinking water from each and every ghat of the Ganges." This merely showed that they had all the necessary vocal skills required of them as businesspeople on the ghats of the Ganges. Apart from this erudition, the rest is vanity. Mishraji was a pure vegetarian. He strictly followed all norms of caste hierarchy. After questioning Ramswaroop about his whereabouts like his name, village, and district, he straightaway

asked which caste he belonged to “Which caste, brother?”
Ramswaroop looked at him and recited Kabir’s couplet:

“Never ask a saint his caste, Ask about his knowledge,
Value the sword, Ignore the sheath.”

Arif Sheikh was around thirty-five years old, five and half feet tall, fair complexion, hair on the head dyed red with henna with few traces of black and white hair. He wore a colourful thread with an amulet around his neck given by a Sufi pir saint of some Dargah ^{25(*)} to fulfill a vow. The turban showed his religious identity. Because of the excess kohl in his eyes even his eyes looked slightly black. His ears were plugged with cotton balls scented with Majuma attar ^{26(*)} and his clothes too were scented with attar. Even among the crowd with so many people around, the odour of attar wafted all over the place. Arif Sheikh was also from Panditji's village of Banaras. Panditji felt that the smell was like of the attar sprinkled over a corpse. He never wanted Arif to be around him. The smell of perfume on the dead body was just a ruse. Panditji's mind concealed the actual reason. Alongside the Brahmin education received from Ved-Pathshala ^{27(*)} and at home as well, hatred of Muslims was implanted in his culture. In his mind, the Muslims were untrustworthy beefeaters. Panditji's notion was that even if one carried a Muslim on the shoulder, while getting off, the Muslim would curse "Saale, let me down safely" and would piss inside the ear. So Panditji maintained a distance from Arif mumbling to himself "Saala, what a state I have come to! Making friends with a roundhead...!" Considering the crowd, the lack of space and Arif being from his own area Panditji had no other choice before him.

When the city alienates and makes you helpless, your identity becomes contrasted as a Nagpuri, Banarasi, Rampuri, Bihari, Madrasi, etc.' ^{28(*)} This again cropped up in the form of Panditji. Repeatedly, Arif used to go to the railway station to get information about the trains. The current situation in the country, the number of people who died of covid, where and how many positive covid positive patients have been found that day, which celebrity became infected with covid, and who so-and-so died in Bollywood, which minister was covid positive, which writer or celebrity journalist was being treated; in short all sorts of information updates about cinema stars, sportsmen, politicians, Indians stuck abroad and

other news reached Panditji off and on through Arif. However, Panditji had to endure the smell of perfume that reminded him of a corpse. He had to repress his hatred of the Muslim at best.

Arif was not new to Mumbai. Even earlier he had come to Mumbai for work. There was hardly any job he could not do. From fitting faucets to gas grills, repairing bicycle punctures, cooking Chinese food, burjipav, pavbhaji on handcarts, he could do all with zest. Such multiple skills enabled him to survive in Mumbai as a toiler. Whatever job he could get, at whatever wage, he would commit himself. Of late, he worked on daily wages as a cook at a biryani centre in the red-light area of Kamathipura ^{29(*)}. He would prepare paya, keema, kaleji, korma, etc. ^{30(*)} The place provided him with livelihood, a place to sleep and stay.

The owner of the place was found covid positive and the hotel closed. The 21 days strict lock-down also began by then. Without any other choice, he also had to start for his home in the village unwillingly. He went to the prostitute whom he delivered food daily to say goodbye “I am off to the village, take care.” The prostitute neither had a home nor a place to be called her hometown. “I must spend my days here somehow. You at least have a village, a family. Glad you are going home. I feel better just listening to that.” she said. Her husband had died within a year of marriage. Her brother-in-law used her, and when he became apathetic, abandoned her at the ghats of Banaras. A pimp spotted her, took advantage of her condition, and kept her with him for a few days. As soon as the opportunity arose, he sold her to a brothel-keeper. After being shunted around in two to three brothels she finally landed at Kamathipura. She gave two thousand rupees to Arif saying: “Keep it. It may come in handy. If it doesn’t, then give the money as an offering to Laatshahi Baba’s Mazar. ^{31(*)}” Laatshahi Baba was a famous saint of Banaras. Hindus and Muslims both worshipped him dearly. His real name was Qazi Mukhtar Ali. As a commander of Chet Singh Raja of Banaras, he defeated the British thrice between 1782 and 1786. He was a favourite Qazi-e-Shahar ^{32(*)} of the people in Banaras. “Baba’s

Mazar falls on the way” said Arif and taking the money added “I will make sure to give the offering...

His sack had a lungi ^{33(*)}, two short pyjamas and some other small sundry items, which his younger brother from Delhi had given to him. His younger brother worked in a cloth shop at Chandni Chowk in Delhi. The sack too, was given by him. Nothing else except going home was on his mind. From time to time, he made his way through the crowded platform making enquiries and returning with bits of information.

Somebody told him that the trains would leave from Dadar that night. He came running and told Ramswaroop and Panditji that some trains would leave for Banaras that evening from Dadar. In an instant, the people who were sitting there tired, rose up like balloons and started walking towards Dadar in a frenzy. Arif insisted that Mishraji and Ramswaroop should go with him. Arif picked up his luggage and both went with him. The three of them left on foot. Reaching Dadar took them nearly five hours. Even during this short span of five hours, at least ten times they received blows from the police. The police did not allow them to go in the direction of Dadar railway station, as the station and all the lanes going to the station were already swarming with people like ants. There was hardly any place for anyone even for one’s feet. The people holding their luggage were seen throughout. Every nook and corner, every square was flooded with people. The hotels, shops, kiosks selling tea, vada pav carts were all closed, and the people wandered famished looking out for vehicles to go home. All were in agony. The three eventually reached the railway station when the railway announcement hit their ears: “The train services have been suspended indefinitely from today. The passengers must vacate the station premises at once or action will be taken against them.” Immediately the police took upon themselves to charge at the faceless crowd of labourers, women, children, disabled persons, old people who were already worn out and utterly helpless. The police rained lathis on them. The three of them ran helter-skelter. The backs and legs of all the three were struck with

blows. Now there was nothing new in receiving blows from lathis and hearing swear words from the police. They would be blessed with thrashing any time from morning to evening until the nighttime. Not a single soul was left in this metropolis who would think of helping others. Even a dose of humanity was unavailable. The ever-supportive Mumbai which came to the rescue in times of crises, today stood dumb and aloof. The Mumbai that always lends a hand to the needy, always loves its people, proved to be a myth. In this troubled period, Mumbai again was estranged from the people. Mumbai, which spoke against injustice and atrocities, had fallen silent.

“Rather than staying here getting thrashed by the police and starving to death, should we leave for our village on foot? Should we begin to walk to meet our parents and live with our family? In case we are unable to find some means of transport, should we walk until then? Many have left since morning...,” asked Ramswaroop. “Even if we die it is better to die among our people. Even if we eat dry rotis and salt, we will be at home at least.” said Arif. Panditji agreed with what Ramswaroop said. “If we starve to death in our village, it will be among our people. We will not stay here,” they averred and taking life in their hands, began their long march towards their village uttering “We will see what happens.” In fact, they had no choice. Each year, during heavy rains, Mumbai and its beloved sea meet, flooding roads and railway tracks. During that time, the miserable, helpless Mumbaikars walk 25 to 50 kms to reach their homes. They have no choice. Rather some people call this misery “Mumbai spirit.” Similarly, they decided to walk home out of necessity. Just that everybody wanted somebody else to say this blatant truth.

All three of them were certain that they only wanted to get out of Mumbai no matter what. The very Mumbai, to whom all are attracted to, who takes the poor and the hungry into her fold. She is like a mother to Anna Bhau Sathe, like a merciful whore to incredibly zesty rebel Namdev, and dear to the poets. But today she evicted and treated them rudely. They spoke to themselves: “We love Mumbai more than Mumbai loves us. We forge her wheels in her journey, conserving her beauty. Whenever she gets a tiny bruise, we feel sad. We care about and deal with her cleanliness. And today how much does the very Mumbai make us unwelcome...”

“Whatever happens, we must leave this city and must walk till the Mumbai express highway. Then we could catch a truck, bus, or any other vehicle.” All the three agreed to go ahead as much as possible despite their suspicion and hatred towards each other. They left together. They were not alone. With no trains, no buses and sacked from work without any inkling how long the lock-down would last, saddled with worrying phone calls from home, with no facilities whatsoever from the government, there were countless others like them in that pathetic condition. Just like ants leaving their mounds, people emerged out of each lane in the city. The people turned out not only from metropolises like Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, but also from towns with industries large and small. The desperate unarmed soldiers who were the guardians of the cities were moving on foot with the sole purpose of reaching their own villages. Evicted from the city, the thoughts about where to stay, what to eat, and when to reach home, were beginning to occupy the minds of those three. The people who came to the cities in the hope of a better life were now going back to their villages only to survive.

The streets in all places were full of people. The people came walking with their belongings. Some of them walked carefully with their children walking alongside and others walked with small babies transferring them from one shoulder to the other. Not a grain of food was left in their starving bellies. Small children cried and

convulsed for milk. No one listened nor said anything to each other. As though it was a never-ending funeral procession. It became difficult even to breathe wearing those masks and covering their mouths all the time. They huffed and puffed. Many of them had money with them. But neither food nor food items were available. Some had a little food with them. Wherever possible they ate a little bit in fright and walked on. The police vans moved around blaring sirens. It was impossible to halt even for five minutes anywhere. Any attempt made to sit for a while in a vacant place was met with a thrashing. “Walk, keep walking” was their destiny – Walk, keep on walking, confined to the road set by the authorities...only on the highway...!

These three shared only a dialect in common. The food, manner of living and speaking differed greatly. The outlook of all the three - their way of thinking and living, the practices all were separated by a chasm. There was a rift between their mode of living, their caste, and their religion. So much so that there was a difference even in the way they urinated. One did not urinate without fastening the sacred thread on his ear, the other did not urinate without a stone or a brick in the hand, and yet another did not take even a sip of water without washing hands and feet.

They sported fake smiles yet smirked at each other's customs and walked with each other as companions with discrimination in their minds and mocking within. They did not even eat each other's food. By twelve in the night, they crossed Thane and stopped at a closed dhaba ^{34(*)}. There was a bore-well and many travellers like them were washing their hands and feet, sprinkling water on their faces. Exhausted by the long walk, a few labourers slept with their families with their legs sprawled. All over people were piled up. As it was impossible for them to move ahead now, the three of them stopped. After resting for about four to five hours, they had to move on. Until the morning sun rose, they soundly slept.

They woke up at eight in the morning. Only the three of them remained at that closed dhaba. The assembled mass of people lying around had disappeared. As though the garbage cleaners had swept the garbage away in the early morning.

Earlier, the trucks, containers and trolleys used to queue up on the highway. But presently these trucks, container trolleys were stuck and the drivers and cleaners, about fifteen in number, kept sitting in their vehicles on the roadside. Vehicles hauling on long routes usually carry rations with them. So, the drivers and cleaners were cooking inside their own trucks. But some truck drivers and cleaners sat starving in their trucks. In their daily journeys they ate at the Sardarjis' dhabas on the roadside. In a way the sardarjis of the dhabas, commonly called Pappeji, were their parental figures on the road. Since these dhabas were closed, the truck drivers and cleaners were restlessly turning and tossing in their trucks. They tried to sleep only by drinking water.

Since it was the last week of March, the sun was gradually warming up. The police megaphone constantly screamed "stay at home." Those who had a house would stay in the house, but the wanderers and nomads, tent dwellers, those sleeping by the roadside, those who sleep like wrapped bundles of yarn in big pipes, those living on railway bridges, where would they live? Where would the labourers who walk on the street live? What would they eat? How would they survive? Or would they wriggle and die? Their hearts pounded when the police car neared. As of late, even the police kept a distance when beating up the people with sticks. Now even the arms of the police ached constantly beating the people up. They transferred the task of beating up labourers to the Home Guards. These pitiable home guards used to lash one or two sticks shouting at the labourers to drive them away as fast as possible and then would sit quickly in their vehicles. The long stretch of tar road and the groups of the itinerant workers formed an eternal bond.

The three of them always looked at the milestones while walking to gauge the distance. In any case, they had to pass Kalyan by noon.

At Titwala chowk one fellow was selling tea at his shack surreptitiously. He also gave bread along with tea. The three of them had three cuttings ^{35(*)}. They ate bread as well. Ramswaroop wanted to eat some more bread, but the shack fellow declared it was over. Instead, he bought matchsticks, Bidi bundles ^{36(*)}, tobacco packets from him paying three to four times more than the usual price in the market. It was not long before they realised how the traders were running a black market holding back the stocks. Not only the travellers, the workers on foot were being looted, but also the common people across the country. They all were enveloped by the black market. Articles that would have cost a paisa were sold for a rupee. The packet of tobacco which otherwise cost five rupees was being sold for twenty-five rupees. Essential commodities such as oil, sugar, pulses, rice, flour, etc., were priced arbitrarily on the black market. The administration had no control over anybody. Only beating up the destitute, weak, and unarmed, poor people on the streets was the sole activity of the administration. By keeping the people under siege, for whose benefit the government worked, nobody could fathom. Tired of walking all day, the trio decided to stay under a cement shed, supposedly a bus stop, on the highway.

Arif and Panditji were completely exhausted. But Ramswaroop still had some strength left in him. Ramswaroop had taken many things to eat and had extra sugar with him. He would eat a little sugar each hour while walking. Panditji used to ask Ramswaroop if he liked sugar a lot. Ramswaroop used to reply yes. But Panditji never understood that ultimately the body uses sugar from the food we eat. To combat fatigue and tiredness while walking, sugar came in handy to keep energy. So compared to others, Ramswaroop was in better shape as he always ate sugar.

Ramswaroop offered the dry mutton his mother had given him to Arif. Arif refused to eat it fearing it was not halal ^{37(*)}. Panditji was a pure vegetarian and he too, could never commit such religious profanity.

“By any means we must reach Igatpuri or Nashik. Trucks run on that route. Once we get on a truck, we could cover as much distance as possible, and then see what we could do further.” This was the idea they devised. A Bihari truck driver whom they met on the street had told them that such a means of transport could be made available from Igatpuri and had even sorted verbally with a truck transport owner on the mobile. This gave all the three more energy. The transport office was on the Nashik bypass and that too outside the city! Access to the city or villages was forbidden for the migrant workers. They could not go directly to any village. It was as though they were not citizens of the state. If at all they had to go to the village or city, they must hide like infiltrators. Even if they managed to enter somehow, on the way back they would be beaten to pulp. Those who tried this venture came back beaten and limping; no guarantee that they would return safely.

Today, they were Indian pariahs in this federal country. Their citizenship, their basic rights were like crumpled pieces of paper. They were suspended citizens. Their citizenship was revoked. They came forth as a new tribe like the “heto” ^{38(*)} community living outside the village. The system saw the immigrants and the dispossessed labourers in the same light. They were denied even the basic rights of refugees in their own country. With the promise of good conduct, they were allowed to walk only on the main roads. So much for their freedom. Since they were not allowed to enter any village, settlement, or any city in their own country, they were prepared to infiltrate. As the shops were only found inside the city or the village, they could not readily buy the necessities. Mishraji’s bag ran out of food. Arif’s case was the same. Ramswaroop still had some dried mutton and enough dry chapatis ^{39(*)} of jaggery and groundnuts that could last until Nashik and even beyond. Ramswaroop was at least without worries for now.

“In two to three days when we reach Nashik bypass on the outskirts of the city, we would be free from worry and troubles.” They felt. “The transport owner would take care of the next course of the journey. Once we get on a truck or a trailer, we can at least reach

our state. Once we reach our state, we will go to our district and once in the district we can go to our village and our homes alive. We will get plenty to eat. We can see our parents and other relatives.” The images of the village, the village square and its public office, the wide cement bench outside it, tired friends resting on the bench after daylong arduous work on the farm, came floating in front of Ramswaroop’s eyes.

Some youngsters stood on the road, beside Shahpur with masks on their faces and handkerchiefs. One sported a blue flag with Ashoka Chakra on his shoulder. One held a Panchsheel flag ^{40(*)}. Some of the youths were holding up pedestrians. On seeing them, all the three were perplexed and scared. When one of the boys asked where they were headed, they mentioned Banaras in trepidation. One youngster took out three packets from a bag of his and gave it to them. Each packet had two chapatis and aloo-bhaji ^{41(*)}. Arif at once gobbled it up. Ramswaroop glanced at Mishraji. Mishraji appeared confused and hesitant. When Ramswaroop gestured Mishraji with his eyes, Mishraji accepted the packet but dared not to eat it. Arif and Ramswaroop noticed it. Thoughts flooded Panditji’s mind making his head spin.

“How can I touch those chapattis made by Dalit hands, let alone eat them? We are authentic Brahmins, worshippers on the banks of the Ganges, believers in the traditions and the caste system, religious adherents. We are the followers of custom, guardians of Sanatan Dharma ^{42(*)}. Our scriptures forbid us to eat from the Shudras. Even their shadow is anathema to us. How can we eat food from their homes?” Ramswaroop could guess what was going on in Panditji’s mind. He straightaway said “Aren’t you starving? Which caste is above hunger? What Sanatan tradition, what religion and what scriptures!? Hunger does not discriminate. Humans do, religion does, caste does. Hunger does not spare anybody. One who has a stomach gets hungry. Hunger does not see high and low, nothing at all. Hunger’s relationship is only with bread and bread alone. Lofty is bread. Hey, eat it. These people are also God’s children, right?”

All I can say is,

Hunger is the eternal truth.

The rest a lie, damn!

Mishraji's eyes shifted back and forth from the Ashoka Chakra on the blue flag and the packet of chapatis for quite some time. Finally, Ashok Chakra's twenty-four spokes won. Mishraji's eyes welled up, and his tears dripped wetting his kurta.

At any rate, they had to cross the two thousand feet high, forested, serpentine, steep Kasara ghat. Kasara Ghat in Sahyadris is quite high. While climbing, they were getting cramps in their legs. Not a single village was visible even at a distance. They began to climb one hill after another, looking down at the winding ghat, the valley, the dense forest, and the expanse of Kasara lined with tall trees and hill ranges. Usually the trucks, trolleys, buses dotted the route like ants on the ghat, however, today it was the infantry of defeated people marching on foot in their quest for survival. Today, hordes of people walked in row keeping themselves on the shaded section of the ridge.

Little children, those little chirpy birds, quietly clung to their mothers submissively with pitiable faces. The small waterfalls of the rainy season had dried up by the onset of summer. The old people appeared withered, dry like the barren hills. With wrinkles on their faces, their sweaty bodies were like dry heath. The sick walked a kilometre an hour taking short breaks. They squatted, crouched, crawled, and panted in exhaustion. The hoardings lined the road with words “Lose your attention, lose your life” erected by the public department of road construction. It seemed as if these were erected to mock the starving workers.

There was no trace of water on the road. The water in the bottle, already nearing the bottom, simmered in the heat, turning it insipid. Some of the people lacked even this. When someone requested water, one would get as much as a polio drop in a lid. The throats of old people went hoarse and dry crying “water, water.” Kasara ghat is none other than the “Thal Ghat” ^{43(*)}. A railway line went under the ghat. Some labourers walked on the railway track. From above, they seemed like ants moving in a row. Walking on the railway tracks was tedious. Ballast, stones, iron keys lay on the railway line. The labourers suffered injuries when they walked on the railway line. Their feet bled. They left the railway tracks and tried to climb the ghat; striving to make their way through the valley. The people above tried to help by grasping their hands to

show the way. From where? How far? How many people? They enquired. They comforted and supported each other.

An elderly man among the group of workers from Madhya Pradesh walked gasping for breath. Distraught, he kept asking his companions for water. The water he had was over and there was no sign of water around. There was no village in the vicinity. All of them somehow had walked about ten kilometres. The old worker collapsed. Despite the heat of summer, his body had turned cold. His lips were dry. Only his eyes remained open. Water...water...these were the only words that came out of his mouth.

Meanwhile, Mishraji's and Ramswaroop's attention switched to a hut on the hill. That there was a hut meant there was some water nearby. Asking Arif to wait, both ran up to the hut. There they saw a middle-aged woman. The woman gave them a bucket with a rope tied to it. Taking that bucket, they loudly called out to Arif. They displayed the bucket and gestured that water had been found. Arif gathered some empty bottles in the bag and ran towards them. Seven to eight labourers ran behind him with their bottles and pots. A short distance away, an ancient structure caught their eye. The upper part of the structure was a dome, shaped like a stupa and under it was a well of pure sweet water. Rani Ahilyabhai Holkar constructed this ancient well.^{44(*)} to serve water to the passers-by on the ghat route so that they would not go astray in search of water. It was a perennial well of water. A circular stupa-like roof was built over the well to prevent wild animals and mulch falling into the well and that the water remained potable. This was the reason the well could be spotted from a distance. Now a worker carved an arrow sign that could be visible from a distance and tied a water bottle on a bamboo stick nearby. All were happy. The three brought water to the old man and fed him. The old man drank water, gently closed his eyes, and breathed his last.

Ramswaroop recited the couplet of Saint Kabir:

Seeing the gardener coming,
The buds call aloud ...
You plucked each flower that bloomed,
Tomorrow it is our turn ... our turn...

- **Saint Kabir**

There was not even an ounce of food in Mishraji's stomach. Arif's condition was not different. The sun set gradually. The ghat, the forest, nature always take a distinct form in the evening. The sound of birds which could be heard throughout the day, gradually diminished. The "tiv tiv" sound of the lapwing continually signalled like a siren. The high valley still glowed a little. As the sun set, the light played hide and seek for a while as usual. A grave silence enveloped the Kasara ghat. Their own sounds echoed. The strange loud noises of the howling jackals could be heard from far away valley. The screeching sound made by each jackal one after the other gave jitters. The sound of barking wild dogs also followed. It seemed as though there was a competition going on between the wild dogs and the jackals. It was now impossible to travel ahead.

As all the mobiles ran out of charge, all their phones shut down one by one. Though the drinking water issue was resolved for the moment, the issue concerning hunger loomed. Their bellies were on fire. Now, what to eat? This question knocked Arif and Pandit Mishraji. All met the same fate. Some ate puffed rice and were ready to sleep. Others decided to walk briskly in groups in the night saying they would rest in the daytime. The companions of the old man from Madhya Pradesh who died could only sit and cry helplessly. They were asking each other what to do next and how...? How to let his family at home know?

It did not seem right to abandon the corpse of the old labourer uncle. The police, the administration had to be notified; but how? Who will do it? If informed, they were afraid that they would be entangled in a new hassle. All the labourers were displaced and cut off from the world. Gradually the night fell. The dense forest, deep valley, the sound of the prowling wild dogs in the plateau was getting louder and closer. The howling had intensified. They finally decided to bury the body or cremate it there itself and then move on. Since they had no implements like pickaxe, spade, and shovel to bury the body, they had no alternative except to gather wood from the jungle. The branches broken by the storm, some

dead wood were lying around on the ground. But they had no axe to chop them. Since they had bought enough bidi bundles and packs of matchsticks from the shack earlier, at least they had something to light the fire with.

Ramswaroop was not at all inclined to spend any time with the matter related to the corpse. He took Arif and Panditji aside. He opined, “if we stay back to deal with the dead body, we shall be late in reaching Nashik and once we miss the opportunity of meeting the transport agent, we will have no choice but to travel the thirteen hundred kms again on foot. In case this happens, one of us would become the next corpse – one of us would be seen lying on the road dead.” Arif responded, “We will immediately leave after setting the corpse on fire.” Panditji insisted that they should go ahead only after performing the last rites. Since both did not pay heed, Ramswaroop began to shout in anger: “O Brothers, at every turn, on the road, in the forest, under the bridge, on the riverbank, in farms, in all places on the way many such uncles would be seen. Wild dogs will be gnawing at them, we will see their skeletons rotting under the bridge, some we will see in the river. Idiots! You will die and kill me too...!” Shouting in anger, he too set out to gather dried sticks. With enormous effort, they could gather some dry sticks. Since a large size wood was unavailable, a discussion ensued whether to carry uncle’s dead body to the nearby dry broken tree.

Arif collected the mulch and lit a fire. A dead tree was lying around. They lit a fire on it. When the dead tree caught fire halfway, they split the burning wood into pieces with another stick. When it smoked, the broken wood was piled up. They placed the old man’s body on it. The wind blew gently towards the Sahyadris. Soon it caught fire and without any funeral rites, the pyre finally started to burn. The labourers of Madhya Pradesh wailed loudly. Their eyes were devoid of tears. Only the sound of wailing could be heard. A twenty-one-year-old youth among them cried loudly, repeatedly calling “uncle...uncle.” He was collecting sticks, garbage, mulch and was putting it on the dead body. Everybody

was tired. He solely took care of the corpse. He observed carefully where the wood was needed and which part was deficient, throwing sticks on it. He made certain that every part of the dead body burnt properly.

All the three stood at a distance from the pyre staring with blank eyes and heavy hearts.

Ramswaroop took out the dry mutton from his bag and started eating. He gave one piece of dry mutton and a chapati with jaggery to Arif and Panditji. “If you want to live, you must eat this. Put your religion aside. Now hunger is our only religion and food is our God. If only humans live, the so-called religion in your secure world will survive. If humans die, religion has no value. Humans create religion. Religion does not create humans...” saying this, Ramswaroop jumped and sat on a big rock and watched the uncle’s burning pyre. The wood being dry, burnt brightly. Black smoke rose into the sky. The wood and the burning corpse had a peculiar smell. The smell reminded Ramswaroop of his house. The village crematorium was close to his community’s settlement in the village. The wind direction usually changed during rainy nights and exactly at dinner time, the smell of the burning corpses hung over the settlement. Many a time, through voluntary contributions, the head of a goat or some such animal was often roasted in their lane, and it smelt the same. He was stunned when he realised that the burning of the old man’s corpse reminded him of hunger and dinner!

The youth near the pyre threw sticks and mulch into the fire. He sat with folded legs as though near a campfire, throwing dry sticks and crying. Ramswaroop approached him meaning to help. Who knew what went in his mind suddenly at that moment! Ramswaroop picked up a long wooden stick and moving behind the youth gave him a hard rap on his back. The boy fell on one side of the pyre and cried aloud. He was so emaciated that his belly touched his back. He had eaten nothing for three days. The people gathered around. All were completely lost. None of them asked why he hit the youth. Ramswaroop at once pulled the crying boy close to him and gave him two jaggery chapatis to eat. The young boy took the chapatis in hand and started sobbing all over again. Even Ramswaroop could not hold back and began to cry. He sang the song by Dushyant Kumar crying loudly:

Now a glimpse of a new culture
 We begin to roast a person to eat
 Who knows what all the scenes are coming into view?
 Singing, the people began to scream.

- **Dushyant Kumar**

Panditji and Arif sat on a big rock began to eat the chapatis and two dried mutton pieces given by Ramswaroop. By now the boy also had calmed down after crying. He ate the food Ramswaroop had given him, drank water and sat under a tree quietly.

The body of the old mazdoor uncle had entirely burnt to ashes. The glowing red embers and cinders of charred wood drifted in the air and only the white ashes remained. Smoke emanated from the pyre. Nothing was left. All of them slept wherever they found a place lessening their weariness.

The next day early at four am in the morning, Panditji, Arif and Ramswaroop left for Igatpuri. They still had to cover a sizeable portion of the ghat. Sometimes they ascended and sometimes descended. They supported each other on the way. As the three went together, Panditji stopped using profane language, cuss words

labelling Arif and even stopped calling him only as Arif. He called him “Bhai,” “Bhaijaan” or at times “Arifbhai” ^{45(*)}. Earlier, in Arif’s mind, Panditji’s knotted ponytail looked like an antenna and whenever he got a chance he would pull his leg. He refrained from doing this now. Both must have considered Ramswaroop as an apostate and an atheist. They never heard even once during this difficult journey, Ramswaroop uttering words like God, Bhagwan, Almighty, Allah save us, etc. On the contrary, whenever they came across a temple, dargah, or tomb, or any of the religious structures for that matter, Panditji would go close, or sometimes from a distance would bow down and offer Namaskar ^{46(*)} to the deity. “Bhagwan will make everything alright,” “All according to Allah’s wish,” “He sees all,” these kinds of words came out from both their mouths every now and then. Earlier, before they became friends whenever Arif came close to Panditji while he chanted God’s name, Panditji would at once spew out cuss words woefully and utter ““Ram! Ram! Ram!” “Wretch! Sinner!” at least ten to twenty times. Likewise, on the way whenever Arif spread the cloth on the ground in preparation for his Namaz, Panditji’s anger rose from bottom of his sole up to his head. He would walk next half a kilometre brusquely stomping his feet and would often turn around to look at him. Mishraji would blabber until Arif finished the namaz and approached folding the cloth. His tongue wagged continuously uttering cuss words; those were his sacred mantras then. Arif was no less and was just as much. He always wished to offer namaz near a temple. When Panditji started to chant hymns, Arif would begin to recite Ayat ^{47(*)}.

Trying to restrain them, would drive Ramswaroop crazy. But now it was the thing of the past. Lately neither Panditji could see temples, nor did Arif remember Aayaata. Between them a lot had changed. They started mingling with each other. It did not matter now when their bags brushed against each other while walking. Now, they would walk hand in hand. Once, Panditji handed over his saffron bag to Arif for safe keeping saying, “Bhaijaan, keep

this” and he went to defecate beside a stream. Ramswaroop gaped at both in astonishment.

They set out early in the morning. Around 8 or 9 am they reached a stream and squatted in the clear cold flowing water. They bathed and freshened up. While bathing, they saw trees laden with wild blackberries. They quickly filled their bags with those berries. Due to the lock-down, the local Adivasis ^{48(*)} had not come to collect the berries and fodder. The berries were lying about on the ground. They walked ahead eating the berries. As they left one hill after another, the altitude rose. The road was serpentine. One side was walled by cliffs and on the other side were deep valleys. Waterfall could be seen in a distant valley. Huge towers on the high hills were visible. They were moving straight down the ghat. Massive cable wires were laid for electrification. At a faraway distance, the large private bungalows on top of a high hill, appeared tiny. After stopping somewhere in between for about ten to fifteen minutes, they would begin to climb the ghat again. Gradually, the ghats were ending.

They saw a pinnacle at a distance. The morning golden sun rays fell on the pinnacle. They went ahead looking at the pinnacle. Slowly the pinnacle turned into a tall stupa. This stupa was the Vipassana Centre of Igatpuri ^{49(*)}. It did not take them long to realise that they reached Igatpuri.

They must walk the entire day today. No matter what, by late evening they had to connect with the transport office on the Nashik Road that would carry people. They had to contact the agent who would transport living human beings. The agent transported humans in a container like chickens.

The chickens at least have a ventilated cage and get to eat... Among a thousand chickens hundred die. Nine hundreds of them are guaranteed to survive, in the least. Yet in this human trafficking, with no guarantee of survival, people still risked their lives and rushed headlong into it. Dying on the roadside or dying in containers, lorries or trucks made no difference to them of late.

Not lingering, they paced on the road without halting anywhere. They walked continuously with their eyes on the milestone. That

white and yellow stone became their pole star. Today they had plenty of wild plums and berries to eat. The question of hunger at least for today was resolved. They walked briskly towards Nashik. In about four to five hours with no rest, at a fast pace, they reached Nashik Road bypass. They searched for the transport office on the Nashik Malegaon Road. They felt extremely happy having reached their decided place. The office shutter was closed from inside. When Ramswaroop knocked on the shutter and called, the shutter opened partially, and the agent came out yelling “What is it?” They mentioned and gave the reference of the truck driver they met on the road. The agent said: “You should have come earlier in the afternoon. Now I can’t do anything. A closed lorry left in the afternoon itself. So, scat.”

“Sir, please!! We must go, please do something for us, sir!” Panditji pleaded in a pitiable tone. Agent’s voice toned down and said: “If you people could have made it early, you would have left by now. You wait out there in the front. I will see if anything can be done in the morning. At least, let some more people gather.” They were enlivened as their hope was still alive. They went and lay down on the ground in front of them. The daylong weariness was so much that they quickly fell asleep without eating anything.

They awoke straight at seven o’clock in the morning when the sun was already high. They got up and at once ran to the transport office in front of the field. The transport office which was partially open yesterday was fully open today. Some people had gathered in the office. They carried some files and documents with them. They were the police. Along with them were three to four witnesses and inspectors. A cameraman was taking photos of the premises. The police were showing photos and enquiring: “Who were these? How many were there in all? How did they come?” The shaken agent could not give neat answers as it was difficult to identify the people. Looking at the photo of an eleven-year-old girl, the agent stuttered, “This girl wore a floral printed mucky frock, and was not able to climb the truck so I only picked her up and put her in the truck.” Now only the girl’s frock could be seen. The rest of her

body was torn into pieces. The face was flattened on one side. An old man's photo could not be identified. A fifty-year-old woman's legs were severed and lying at one side. The agent admitted that he recognized the man who was around thirty-five years old because of his long hair. The agent recalled that he was the head of this group of labourers and that he haggled over the fare to travel in the closed truck. The agent in a suppressed voice said that he did not know the names or addresses of the rest. He told the investigators that he took money and allowed them to sit in the truck and had no other information. The agent admitted that he waved off the truck carrying seventy people, covered from all sides, and secured with ropes so that it appeared as though goods were being transported. Sixteen labourers died while travelling in this closed truck when it met with an accident and forty-five were seriously injured. The transport owner had absconded.

The three of them got to know that yesterday afternoon in a village on the Satna Road in Madhya Pradesh, a truck carrying people from Nashik met with an accident. Knowing that the police are investigating this incident, the three of them turned back.

Mishaps were taking place on national highways, state highways, in many places across the country. Many labourers died or injured by these accidents. Daily, there were reports of trucks full of labourers overturning on the road. Fearful of the police, they drove at high speeds on side roads and met with accidents killing the labourers. Some labourers died of suffocation in the closed container. Some starved to death. Some died of thirst. Some labourers who were on foot fell into the river below and died while crossing the railway bridges. Some labourers tired after walking the entire day would take a break and rest on railway tracks thinking that the trains will not run because of countrywide shutdown of railways. The weariness from the long hard walk would engulf them so much that they would fall asleep instantly. Many of them were run over by trains having slept off on the rails.

The labourers who came under the trains, who died in accidents and who were declared as orphans were the very citizens of the country of India. They were somebody's brother, somebody's sister, somebody's father, somebody's mother, somebody's wife, somebody's husband, somebody's children. But according to the government, they were nameless orphaned bodies. Each day four to five labourers died somewhere. The government which gathers up-to-date information on citizens with the help of Aadhaar card, with no hesitation stated in the parliament that the information on the labourers who died was not available. On top of this, the government brazenly declared that their own recklessness was responsible for their deaths.

Forty labourers too, had come under the freight train near Satana close to Nashik and died. These labourers who were crushed under the railway tracks were not trekking nor religiously circumambulating the Narmada River, nor were they touring. They were walking towards their homes. They related only with bread. They had come searching for bread from far flung villages. In the times of trouble, the alien city cruelly rendered them homeless and threw them into the winds leaving them to starve. A torso of a

mutilated body was found only with a hand and a piece of bread stuck to the fist.

This convoy of labourers had come from thousands of kilometres away leaving their homes and villages only to satisfy the hunger with just two meagre meals a day. They did not want to live in tall skyscrapers nor build a big luxurious bungalow for themselves. They did not even wish to move around in expensive cars. These convoy of toilers came to sell their labour. They came to construct the cement and asphalt roads to prevent car tires from bursting. They came to build the bridges. If the price of their labour was to lie dead on the streets, then this country was no longer a country, it was surely turning into a huge concentration camp.

There were times when we were needed, friends
But now have become useless.
Life is cheap and death is anonymous, friends...

- **Ram Prasad Bismil**

The state apparatus had become oblivious, callous, and brazen. The punitive policing was active. The country had turned into a country of hooting sirens. The citizens lived in an open prison behind iron barricades. The civil rights were abolished. “Work From Home” meant all worked from their homes. The opposition party leaders descended on the government only from their homes. The social activists were performing social work from their homes. Going to the streets was barred for them. Some people had to face police action under Disaster Prevention Act. Journalists were only reporting from homes. The self-proclaimed mahatmas, saints and babas were smug in their air-conditioned ashrams^{50(*)}. The entire world was tired working from home except for the labourers who were on the roads... helpless.

The paternal administration as though intoxicated with a drug, had gone numb. Local self-government organisations stole and looted the subsidies received in the name of labourers willingly and readily. The words like pity, compassion, sympathy seemed frozen.

The citizens of this country were in a trance, brought to disciplinary control with cunning. “The king spoke, the army moved; the qazi spoke, the beard shook...” ^{51(*)} this was what the country had become, a puppet. The country was in ruins. The country even surpassed being the “Banana Republic ^{52(*)}.”

The idle talk of freedom of expression in the country proverbially was like squeezing water from stone. Our constitution guarantees the fundamental right and dignity to live. But when life itself hung in balance, where is the hope for a dignified life?

On the way, they saw a family of blacksmiths who had pitched a shelter by the clearing on the roadside and did forging work. A woman around thirty years of age was hammering an iron bar while an old man kept the coal burning in the furnace with bellows in one hand and in the other, he held the red-hot iron bar with tongs. The woman was hitting the bar strip to give it a shape. The three of them stopped there for a while. After some conversation, they bought a large knife and an axe to safeguard themselves from jungle and wild animals. Noticing that they were going on foot, the blacksmith family gifted them an iron pan. Ramswaroop insisted that they take money for it. It felt improper to him to take anything free from people already in distress. At such times, the memory of his mother toiling on the landlord’s farm would often surface in his mind. Seeing the anguish on Ramswaroop’s face, the old man said: “Son, for years we have been living like this, migrating from place to place, in some village or the other. In this region today and another tomorrow. You people leave, and don’t say anything. We understand your pain. No need of words...”

Taking their luggage, they left for the next course of the journey. On the way, once again they came across the caravan from Madhya Pradesh. Some of the labourers were from Chhattisgarh and some were Adivasi labourers from Jharkhand, and some were Bihari babus ^{53(*)}. As though the workers from all over the country had gathered there. They were on the road, on the highway.

Everywhere. These unorganised workers treaded on the path in each other's company.

Walk hand in hand, that's good for you,
Become companions and walk, that's good for you,
Make a new team, that's good for you

- **Vamandada Kardak**

They had a pan, a knife and an axe given to them by the blacksmith. Still, they had to struggle to obtain essential cooking items like utensils, a ladle etc., and some salt, chillies, flour, lentils, rice, and such articles. The materials needed were not available on the highway. If at all they wanted to get these essentials, they could be obtained only from a small village. But they had an unwritten consent only to walk on the highway. They were not allowed to enter the main marketplace in big villages and towns. The village goons had now gotten policing powers that had made them beefier. Four to five lads wearing saffron scarves around their necks used to sit at the village entrance guarding village boundaries and playing cards. Nobody from outside could come straight into the village. Some villages dug trenches on all four sides of the nearby roads. Thus, despite having money, some migrant labourers starved. They could buy items only in case a village was near the highway and the shops were along the roadside. The situation was such that there were many migrant labourers, the demand was high, and the goods were scarce. Following the motto “Make hay when the sun shines” the resident shopkeepers looted and ran the black market. If someone tried to bargain with them for less price, they bluntly shooed the person away.

That was when they spotted a small village and the clever spirit of Pandit possessed Mishraji. He applied tilak on the forehead and put a band of sandal paste horizontally just above the nose. He hung his trademark saffron bag under his arm, kept Arif standing there, and went into the village along with Ramswaroop as his companion. In front of the panchayat of the small village, was a single village chowk. There was a kind of shop which sold almost all: Pepsi sticks for children, round dots for women to wear on the forehead, castor oil to mobile rechargers, soap to Maggi packets as well as tobacco brands like khaini and bidi packets. The open space in front the shop stood a flagpole, which once hoisted tricolour, on which now fluttered a large saffron flag and a banner bearing the letters “Chhatrapati Warriors Tarun Mandal.”^{54(*)} On the other side of the square was a well. A few females filled water beside the

well. Panditji, his throat parched and yearning to wet his throat with cold water, went near the well and said to the women “Sister, give me water...” The women straightaway refused to give him water. “I am a Brahmin!” exclaimed Panditji. “So what?! Corona does not infect Brahmins or what?” The women retorted and poured water from above from a cracked bucket. Panditji and Ramswaroop drank water which came from two three holes in the bottom of the bucket cupping their hands, that too keeping a distance. Panditji wiped his mouth with the scarf around his neck and went to the shop to buy a few items. As it was a small village, many things were unavailable anyway. Still, he managed to buy flour, salt, lentils, rice, chilli powder, groundnut oil, Hamam soap, razor blade, ‘Ghadi’ detergent bar for wash ing clothes, a dozen eggs and Maggi packets, which Arif had reminded, paying triple the price for all. The shopkeeper filled the items in a large carry bag. Ramswaroop took all the items and put it in his bag and kept the money on the counter. After paying, they both went to the well to fill water in a bottle for Arif. Some animals had come to drink water near the well. The women watered the animals from the same cracked bucket from which Panditji, keeping a distance, drank. Panditji hung his head in shame. He dared not utter a word looking straight at Ramswaroop’s eyes. He thought himself a criminal. Ramswaroop understood this instantly. Ramswaroop said: “They poured you water from a distance, isn’t that all?! That too, from a cracked bucket meant for animals! Mishraji, you call yourself a Brahmin, the supposed creator of this world! You think that you are great right from birth! You are the best. Is that why you are feeling bad?” Panditji stood hanging his head down. Ramswaroop continued to speak. Centuries of rage in his head had exploded. “You must have become a victim of this untouchability for the first time, and you are experiencing the pain of such shoddy behaviour now! We have been enduring this for centuries...” Ramswaroop’s mouth did not stop rambling. Next, he said in a contemptible tone: “You only are the creator of this caste system in this country. You only laid the basis for casteism and discriminating between high and low. You only are the creator of Vedas and Puranas ^{55(*)}. If the

Brahmins knew at that time that an epidemic like corona would spread and Brahmins would have to bear untouchability themselves, at that time itself they would have written in their scriptures: ‘Brahmins are free from epidemics like corona and others. Such a discrimination against Brahmins would be a punishable offence!’ He then taunted smiling sarcastically: “If you sow babul tree, how can you get mangoes!”^{56(*)}

Today Panditji understood what discrimination means when he came out of Mumbai. The stigma of discrimination had nicked his brain. The meaning of being treated as an untouchable, how dignity, even if it is slightly tainted, self-respect wounded, how severe the ulcers could be! If not healed, how the wound festers and the pus oozes out for thousands of years! No matter how it is addressed, the discharge of pus persists, how it takes away many generations suffering humiliation, Panditji could understand all in just two minutes today.

Panditji’s Brahminical pride was destroyed in an instant. Panditji became restless and despondent. Even after walking two kilometres and reaching the main road, the idea of receiving water from afar, each sip of water that he drank with cupped hands, felt bitter. It was nauseating. “They respected animals and despite I, being a high caste Brahmin, was treated inhumanely.” This thought made his head go numb and his mind crestfallen. He shook from within.

Ramswaroop steadied him. Mishraji drew Ramswaroop close and hugged him and both sobbed profusely. This incident lifted the darkness before his eyes and the world became clear as crystal to Panditji. Ramswaroop too felt lighter after he vented out his ire. Now they allied themselves somewhere on the same level. Arif stared at them both in amazement. He could not understand anything. He just prodded them to walk ahead. As there were no utensils for cooking, he was thinking of inventive methods. They only had a pan given by the old blacksmith at the roadside. In that small village, the pots were not available. The three had only one

plate each. Afterall, they did not have to make any delicacies! They had to sate the hunger and they had to make through to the next day, which was all. They had to eat something in the evening and resume the journey ahead. After travelling some distance, they came across a group of labourers with their little ones setting up a hearth and cooking. The three of them stopped and asked them if they could cook on their stove. Those people were only glad to help. They made rotis ^{57(*)} enough for two-three days. For the moment, they made light puffy rotis to eat. Eating them with chilli powder and salt, they stayed there itself. Panditji was still uneasy. When sleeping, Ramswaroop casually asked Panditji: “Why did you come to Mumbai?” “Just to do pooja, and Satyanarayan related work ^{58(*)}”, answered Panditji. Ramswaroop further asked: “Why? Don’t Maharashtra Brahmins perform pooja-rituals? Why do you need to come all the way from Varanasi to Mumbai and Pune for this?” Panditji laughed and said: “No, it isn’t that.” Ramswaroop anyway was not going to sleep without eliciting a proper answer.

“Have the priests of Maharashtra turned into atheists? Hundreds of years ago, the Brahmins of Maharashtra refused to perform ‘hom-havan ^{59(*)}’. At that time too, I have read, that the Brahmins from Varanasi were brought by paying money.”

“The Brahmins of Maharashtra are different, they belong to Marathi folk, and to our UP people, Brahmins like me are pandits. We, the Brahmin pandits from Banaras consider ourselves the most superior.” Mishraji said.

“Panditji, how hollow is your Brahminism! In this internet age, how meaningless it is to perform pooja rituals and puritanical rites by keeping such a long, knotted ponytail! The world has moved far ahead and still where are you Banaras Brahmin pandits?” The barrage of questions did not seem to stop. He questioned further: “You work in hostels, canteens as cooks, as caterers at weddings or as pandits performing pooja and yet you ruin your generation by suffixing “Ji” to your name pompously. You conceal your real situation when you know by rote, you are nowhere in knowledge

or awareness. Are you calling yourself Panditji just to hide your guilt?”

Whenever this discussion ensued between Panditji and Ramswaroop, Arif at first would say nothing, but then Arif started thinking about his own religion and its practice of discrimination by higher ups like Ashrafs, Ajlafs who belonged in the middle rung and Arjal which meant commoner or low caste. He quivered in his mind as to what his condition would be, if the village knew of his newly gotten surname, Shaikh, only to show superiority.

As soon as the discussion around caste and religion began among them, different topics came up living as Indians. They spoke about many things including land-issues, which led to topics like crops, produce, seeds, soil, livestock, etc. in depth. Which crop grows where, times of harvest, the festivals surrounding it, where and how they are celebrated and various subjects like these. They discussed about the Sardar Sarovar Valley project of Narmada, how many villages drowned in the lake because of the dam, how many tribals in the valley were displaced unfairly, how the Adivasis were dispossessed of their land and by whom, and how it was built on the ruins of Adivasi lands. What inclusive public interest really means and whose interest it serves when Gujarat supplies seventy per cent of the water to chemical industries, cold drink companies and many such issues they learnt from each other. Their guru on these subjects was of course Ramswaroop. But much more than him, what they saw and the people they met on the way, their stories and what they understood from them, became their true teachers.

They left Chandwad and reached Malegaon Road. After taking a nice dip in the waters of Girana and Mosam on the way, they felt quite refreshed. After dipping their swollen feet in the cold water, the cramps reduced a little, and they felt better. The accompanying groups of labourers also spent some time on the riverbank. Many women bathed in the river. Among them, two female labourers were pregnant, one of five months and the other, seven months. In that condition, they had to travel on foot. At any rate, they could not keep pace with the men. Their families walked slowly all the time. Now the family had fallen behind. Left behind from their group, they were now together with this group who followed.

Today being Jumma ^{60(*)}, the traffic was sparse. Since praying in the mosque was banned, the policing was organised well. The police vehicle constantly announced of the ban on gatherings. The atmosphere was grave due to the blaring of sirens by 108 numbered ambulances. The term mass ban on gatherings was not new to the people of Malegaon. They roamed around the lanes without a

slightest hint on their faces that something serious had happened. The trading was shut. But in some places, transactions did take place incognito in a normal manner. The people of Malegaon were quite amiable. They enquired and showed concern about the well-being of the trudging labourers.

The namaaz on Jumma is significant. The prayers missed on the rest of the days or performed alone could be disregarded without much concern. This weekly prayer, however, is given foremost importance. In one sense, it is a weekly Eid ^{61(*)}. Reciting namaaz along with the Jamaat ^{62(*)} is necessary. But since the strict rules imposed by the state must be followed, educated Maulanas ^{63(*)} appealed to everybody to stay home. Some young boys stood in front of the mosque on the national highway going to Dhule facing the main road. They were handing packets of Bagara ^{64(*)} rice to the passing travellers. All the three went to them. Seeing Arifbhai, the Maulana greeted him with Salaam-Dua ^{65(*)} and took him aside separating from the rest. He asked Arif how many people were there and so on. Afterwards, three packets were brought from the adjoining alley and given to him. The packets contained hot biryani. Obviously, it was not beef-biryani. Since cow slaughter is banned in Maharashtra, oxen cannot be slaughtered. ‘They’ eat buffalo meat, chicken, and mutton. Maulana Saab said that they were handing out biryanis only to people of their own caste and creed. Arif glanced at Panditji. Moulana understood the meaning of it in no time. He apologised to Panditji and handed him a parcel of plain Bagara rice. Arif took three packets saying, “We are three of us.” Ramswaroop dropped the parcels in his bag. They left Malegaon and headed towards Dhule. For them, there were two highways ahead, one was Manmad-Jalgaon-Nagpur to Balaghat and the other on the banks of Narmada-Tapi which went-through the Narmada valley across the high ranges of Satpura Mountains.

The distance from both the highways was almost the same. Being summer, the sun glowed with intensity and the temperature in Vidharba continued to rise so they went the other way. It was a

long way to Dhule. On the way, some travellers had stopped. They too decided to spend the night there.

They had yesterday's chapatis and three packets of biryani to eat. Moreover, there were parcels of Bagara rice. But they did not eat anything. Their eyes were fixed on labourers who came by road. Many groups reached at frequent intervals. Some went further ahead, and some stayed back. It was seven pm in the night and they sat thinking on the tar road. They would fetch water and drink from the stream flowing under the bridge and again sit on the tar road. They all gazed far into the distance on the road searching for something. They saw a group of labourers slowly approaching them and they felt a little relieved. They wanted to give the biryani packets given by the Maulana to the two pregnant women. These women desperately needed good amount of nutritious food. They were two lives, half-starved, travelling on foot. They needed the biryani the most. They walked slowly and were still among that group of labourers coming behind. So, they waited and sat on the tar road. They had cleared and dusted a place for them to sleep safely. Finally, the two pregnant women and their group moved in.

The pregnant women were wandering on roads in this country that lectures pompously about nourishment, about pregnant woman's diet and what to consume, the diet should be such and such so on and so forth. She fancies a meal when devoid of even one meal per day. The journalists who vehemently say "India wants to know" does not see or want to know the burning reality that she spends the night out in the open. The stark hollowness of the smug manifesto "Healthy baby, Nutritious Food" showed itself at all places on the highway.

From where on earth would the satisfying meal come for the labourers, the toilers who are denied their right to live, let alone the pregnant women? In the least, there is a prison manual for those who are behind bars. Here, the itinerant labours were confined only to the road. There was no rule, no manual for them. They were not

even allowed to common Anganwadi centres ^{66(*)}. The condition was so miserable that the prisoners were guarding themselves.

The national highway connecting Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh goes via Dhule. Dhule is the intersection of two major highways: Nashik-Mumbai-Pune highway coming from one side going towards Burhanpur, Indore, Khandwa, Bhopal, and the other national highway going towards Nagpur via Jalgaon, Amravati coming from industrial cities in Gujarat like Surat, Baroda, Vapi, Silvassa. The labourers who travel to their native villages through this part of the country cannot sidetrack Dhule and this intersection. The workers systematically driven out from industrial towns of Mumbai, Pune, Thane, Surat, Vapi, Baroda merged in Dhule from all the four roads.

The toiling workers from the chemical industry in Vapi, the fertilizer factory workers, some artisans from cloth mills in the cities of Baroda, Surat, workers in the footwear industry of Ahmedabad, the toilers doing sundry jobs in Mumbai, the sweepers who clean the ass of all major cities, all these labourers who were driven out from all four sides were pariahs today. Like a Kumbh Mela ^{67(*)}, a huge assemblage of all those workers on foot who wanted to go to Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Vidharba in Maharashtra, Telengana, Bihar thronged this Dhule intersection. How easily one can say, “After all, I am a fakir, I shall pick up my handbag and leave!” ^{68(*)}. A single glance at these migrant workers would suffice to drive the message home.

There were groups of labourers and toilers all around. Some were on bicycles, carrying their belongings and some carrying little children on their shoulders. Some carried load on their heads. Old and sick people accompanied some. Such was the scene. Lakhs of people had gathered in the square. Each hour the crowds emptied out and filled up again. The main road was jam packed. All over one could see only famished people. They used to walk and in between sit exhausted and fall asleep in extreme fatigue. They would summon up all energy to get up and walk with new vigour once again. These were genuine, real, authentic people. They were the actual owners of this country. These real people were on the roads today.

Today's day marked the third largest migration in the history of India. First took place during the British era, of Dalits and toilers from Mauritius to Suriname, and the second during the partition. Now the third is what was happening now! These three are the world's largest migrations. On global scale, a major migration took place during the recession in the 1930s from New Mexico, Texas to California. All these migrations were of defeated, helpless people. Capitalism was responsible for these migrations. In India, the minor difference was that the migrating populace was of lower caste.

Ramswaroop, Panditji and Arif along with other workers added to the ranks of these oppressed and exploited real people on Dhule's national highway. The CRP and special units of the police were deployed on the road, armed with rifles at each square to prevent the mass of famished proletarian paupers from entering the central part of the city and spoil the environs. They were equipped with sticks and batons. They erected barricades and with armour on their bodies and helmets on their heads they threatened these helpless and starving people. Ten to twenty policemen were stationed at various places. Their superintendents, commissioner and Lion's Club, Mard (Macho) Hindu organisations supplied items like khichdi ^{69(*)}, puri-bhaji ^{70(*)}, bananas, drinking water bottles, etc. to these police personnel.

Meanwhile, four or five labourers aged around thirty, thirty-five years came within spitting distance of the police. They were exhausted and their lips were parched. They were devoid of any strength, their stomachs nearly touching their backs. They had walked hundreds of kilometres on empty stomachs. Their swollen, bloody feet and withered faces expressed the meaning of hunger. These labourers came and stopped near the police glancing around.

The police had thrown the empty khichdi packets aside. The banana peels were also thrown as garbage. The labourers literally swooped on the banana peels. They quickly picked up the banana peels and finished them off. They cleaned the place in five minutes

eating all the peels. The police on duty stared in disbelief. Even their eyes were filled with tears.

It has been quite a while since they left Dhule. They reached near Shirpur. Shirpur is the last big village of Maharashtra near the border. After Shirpur, there is a check post called Bijasan located in Madhya Pradesh. The exercise of cutting across Bijasan and entering the border into Madhya Pradesh was like crossing a live wire. The road was blocked with huge barricades. The police stood at the state border with bulldogs which are used to catch robbers and thieves. One could even cross over from Pakistan-Bangladesh border illegally, but the security on Madhya Pradesh border was so strict that no one would dare cross it. The police stood with machine guns. They came down on the starving helpless destitute labourers with lathis and tore them apart. The police tried to stop them from going to their own village, to meet their own children. The police zealously obeyed the orders; executed them even before they received it. The labourers who were exiled in their own country were dejected and resentful of the oppressors. They worried and wept. Little children wriggled in starvation. The ailing people pleaded and begged with the police. “We will stick to the road and not go anywhere else.” They appealed to the police with folded hands. The police beat them with lathis saying that it was a state government order. Even the stone could melt in such conditions, but the Madhya Pradesh police were ruthless. They unleashed bulldogs on the women who managed to evade the police to cross the border. They pounced upon them with sticks and lathis.

Those who sweated to build this country, their own blood was shed today. Soon after the news of Karnataka state having declared a ban on accepting the labourers, the state of Bihar followed suit. Panic gripped the crowd. An uneasy atmosphere of indignation took form. Who else knew whose national interest was being served by making the labourers starve, leaving them homeless and driving them away? Except for the Khadi lobby who gave the order to the khakis and their retinue of babus! The treatment meted out to the labourers by the administration was like that given to the

terrorists. Were the displaced workers terrorists...? Why did they become exiles and aliens in their own country?

Earlier the entirety felt as it was ours,
Now we feel,
That in our own home
We are in somebody else's house.

- **Nida Fazli**

Nida Fazli wrote the above verse expressing the pain of India-Pakistan partition. These words expressed his enormous grief at that time. The present conditions were also so dire and monstrous that one cannot help but think which partition, the partition during that time or partition this time is more grievous! The labourers were aliens. They could not even walk on the road on their own accord. Even the refugees and the displaced people from foreign countries have some human rights. They do have their shelters and refugee camps. The Red Cross Society manages and takes care of them. There was no such society here for our own people. Sangh Seva Samitees ^{71(*)} that always claim to help and the humanitarian organisations like Rotary or Lions Club, etc., where they hid, into which hole, nobody knew. Whatever little existed were not enough to do much.

Some policemen extorted money from the labourers. Gangs of brokers became active at the border. The labourers who had bought goods worth four annas for twelve annas on the way, were already destitute. While travelling on foot for hundreds of kilometres what money could be shoved down the throats of these broker policemen? After a few days of travel and the total anarchy going on, Ramswaroop's mind was turbulent. His memories as an activist in Banaras Hindu University instilled in his brain provoked him to do something new. Till date, he lived as an unknown labourer saving money to complete his education. He worked peacefully without agitating as an indentured labourer. He was determined to do something now and he went ahead and began to question the police. Mishraji and Arif also joined Ramswaroop. Before the

police ran to thrash the three, Ramswaroop proclaimed “Inquilab Zindabad” ^{72(*)} with clenched fists also followed by Panditji and Arif. The proclamations from these three changed the whole atmosphere.

He condemned the central government’s anti-labour, anti-immigrant, displacement policy. An added police force was called seeing that the crowds of labourers had begun to organise themselves behind the three. Soon these three were in control of the entire area. The convoy of the collector, the superintendent of the police et al showed up themselves at the Bijasan border. The government was now scared of the labourers and their unity. They were scared that the situation was going out of control. The unwieldy crowds of labours could not be controlled. “In case the police beat even a single labourer, we will storm the border and then proceed to the city...,” the trio Ramswaroop, Mishraji and Arif severely warned the collector. “If looting happens in the city, the labourers will not be responsible. We are half-dead as it is and could as well do anything in the face of death... just the same.” Hearing this, the inhuman machine called the system began to negotiate. The administration succumbed to the anger of the workers, to their unity and their determination. After three to four hours of negotiations, the police administration, the district administration, and the state government, finally allowed the mass of labourers to enter Madhya Pradesh. The administration imposed many oppressive conditions like prohibition to enter any village, keeping themselves to the highway and so on. Though the restrictions were imposed on them, they had won the battle to cross the border. For the labourers, now the road had become their country. The entire road was occupied and taken over by migrant labourers on foot. A situation emerged where the proletariat, the exploited workers today became the owners of the roads.

On the day when there is a curfew in the city...
 When there is a ceaseless sound of blaring sirens.
 When the police stand wearing the armour...

That day the road belongs to my father..
The road belongs to my father.

– **Pralhad Chendwankar**

‘The road belongs to our father’ was manifest not to a solitary group of labourers, they were not one group anymore; rather it was one big march of people in search of their home.

After the labourers' protest, the Madhya Pradesh police administration gradually cleared the road. Now these three heaved a sigh of relief as the MP ^{73(*)} police turned back. There was renewed energy and strength among the organised labourers. They felt they were safe now. Not a single day had passed without them being beaten or insulted. Against this backdrop, a feeling of unity was building up their courage. The police harassment had lessened a little, but the hunger was endless. The daily starvation left most of the labourers exhausted. The miserable condition of the children could not be looked at. Their faces were pale, their cheeks and their eyes were sunken. The old men walked like zombies. Many were malnourished and their chest ribs were visible. Their shoulders bones protruded. Their bodies had become skeletons. Their life became a constant walk in the hope of seeing their villages, their homes, and their small farms. While walking, they kept telling each other: "We will reach our village sometime, will be able to hug our parents, meet our wives and children, will see our village, see our people. Once we get to our village, we will never ever leave. We will die in our own village."

The sparse settlement was left behind and a stretch of thick forest area began. From afar, the sound of wild dogs made the silence even more terrifying. Fear arose in each one's mind. The sounds of other wild animals could be heard occasionally. No one dared to leave the road and walk on the side. They usually went in groups of two or four to defecate or urinate. Even the moon had turned rogue. Always a companion during the night journey now became deceptive, slowly waned its crescent teasing them. As the new moon approached, it was on the verge of parting company. The night was terribly dark. In the absence of their rightful companion, now they had to look for each other's company and become each other's eyes while walking. They helped and supported each other using sticks taking care of one another.

The presence of beasts in the forest unnerved them. They were searching for a good, safe place. The forest seemed endless. As walking further became even more impossible, all of them pitched

shelters and prepared stoves on the bank of a flowing stream. Those who had a few crumbs left, ate them. Those who had nothing to eat decided to sleep hungry. Arif laid out a stove. He lit it collecting nearby sticks and leaves. Panditji went to the stream to fetch water. Ramswaroop gathered more firewood. After asking Arif to make chapatis, Mishraji and Ramswaroop went down the path towards the jungle into the dense forest with the tribal labourers of Chhattisgarh.

Way back beyond Nashik, Ramswaroop had bought an axe and a knife from a blacksmith. Now the same axe and knife came in handy to hunt wild animals. The tribals of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand were skilled in hunting. They lead everybody and at times deliberately stayed behind. As they faced difficulties at the border today and were held back for a long time, they planned to travel ahead together.

Looking for something to eat, they were alert and observant of the wild animals in the forest. Listening to the sound of the wild animals they could name the animals of the area. They spoke Gondi, Madiya or Santhali and such dialects among themselves. Ramswaroop and Mishraji could not understand a word. The tribal Hemant Manjhi, a youth among the group of Adivasi labourers, knew Hindi and a little bit of English too. He had studied till twelfth std and after completing ITI ^{74(*)} worked in a private company. He told them about the flora. He shared the knowledge of the jungle with Panditji and Ramswaroop explaining to them about the kind of flower that was edible, which leaf quenches thirst, which leaf suppresses hunger, which bark could be eaten, where and how the tubers are and how to find them, which leaf to chew when having a fever, which leaf to chew for sore throat, when injured where to look for flowers and leaves of Kambarmodi ^{75(*)} for inflammation and how to apply them on the wound, the importance of 'Khandu Chakka' leaves ^{76(*)}, and so on. In a way, the tribal labourer had become the interpreter for Panditji and Ramswaroop. He spoke as the fragrance of Mahua flowers wafted through the forest. "From around 4 am in the morning, the Mahua

flowers begin falling on the ground. Game or no game, you are assured of the Mahua flowers now. We can make polis^{77(*)} of these Mahua flowers and eat them, so you needn't worry." Hemant Manjhi told these two. Great! They felt happy as now there was food available. As they conversed, they entered the middle of the forest. The forest was dense. A bamboo grove stood among the broad trees. A serpentine rough path lay ahead used by the wild animals, and somehow manageable for a person to walk through. All around there were trees, small and large. Monkeys dwelt on those trees. When they sensed human feet, they leapt from one tree to the other screeching. Panditji who never have been in a forest, often fell and lagged. The accompanying tribals held Panditji's hand and taught him how to walk in the forest. In time, Mishraji came to learn how to walk in the jungle.

A game in front of them caught everyone's attention. They surrounded the game from all sides and aimed at it. Within a moment the nimble rabbit fell on the ground. Almost immediately they killed another rabbit. They secured the rabbits using a hanging vine from a tree and handed them over to Panditji. All of them headed back on their way towards the road. Mishraji could not walk properly with the game in his hand. He tripped and fell twice or thrice. But he ensured that the game was safe. It did not take long for them to reach where they halted.

Panditji brought and placed those rabbits with their legs tied in front of Arif. Inflating his chest, with the air of an expert hunter Panditji said: "Common Mian^{78(*)} ... Make it...roast it, Bhai." Arif was confused and began to shiver. He looked at the tied rabbits and became afraid. The eternal question loomed before him – Halal or Haraam?

Looking at his state, Panditji said: "Mian, I am a pure vegetarian Brahmin from Ganga ghats. But now I am neither a vegetarian nor have I become a pure non-vegetarian. I am just an eater. When edible items like meat, grains are in front of you and still you starve

to death, then it is nothing but suicide and none of the religions permit suicide. Hearing this, Arif started to roast the rabbit meat.

They gave the roasted rabbit meat to some old labourers and the three sat down to eat. Ramswaroop smiled and remarked naughtily: “Pegging religion aside when necessary, changing oneself in a moment, bending the principles when needed, turning progressive as the wind direction changes, if there is such a human being on earth, it is a Brahmin...” It was a slap of appreciation as well as a wry mockery. Panditji laughed heartily.

At five in the morning, all the members of this small group awoke and went to the forest along with tribals of Chhattisgarh. The jungle bloomed with mahua flowers. The intoxicating smell of the mahua flowers permeated throughout. The birds chirped. A variety of sounds from many kinds of birds could be heard. Among them the sound of peacocks merged and created a new melody. The tree branches swayed in the gentle breeze and the mahua flowers fluttered below. The jungle sated their hunger giving away the mahua flowers from the wild trees. The dense jungle which appeared scary in the night was now quite delightful.

The jungle is all.
But a displacement.
The jungle is a sound,
Which always will say,
That your city is a hyena
Which fled from the jungle.

- **Veeru Sonkar**

On the head
Carrying a sack of wheat,
The man from the village descends into the city.
The city
Puts down the sack.
And grinds the man.
And eats him.

- **Anjum Sharma**

The forests in India are of two kinds. One forest gives rain. It keeps the environmental balance. It feeds the animals naturally. Maintains the food chain. It takes care of such groups of starving labourers and feeds them. The other forest treats the hardworking labourers worse than cats and dogs. It is a dried-up forest of cement-concrete. It is the jungle called the city that sucks the blood like a flea. It is owned by industrialists and demons that divide people into religion and caste. It is a jungle of city culture. The hearts and minds of those who live in this cement jungle have also turned into concrete and stone. It is not a city, but an inhuman colony of stony minds that uses humans.

These outcastes from the cement and concrete city roamed this jungle forgetting their sorrows for a while. Each family from the group took possession of each tree and gathered mahua flowers with immense pleasure. They found wild fruits, tendu fruits ^{79(*)}, wild berries, baheda ^{80(*)}, amla ^{81(*)}, hirada ^{82(*)}, bael fruits ^{83(*)}, or some sour kavath ^{84(*)}. They always found something or the other. They collected and ate, feeding a mouthful to their babies.

The tribal labourers of Chhattisgarh sang their own songs of the jungle. Some labourers even picked up couple of songs from those tribals. These songs, the gentle golden rays of the morning sun and the memories of the forest would be with them for the rest of their journey ahead. Their next stop now would be around Indore. The milestone said that Indore was approximately fifteen kms away. The road to Indore was a bit awful. There were potholes on the road. When they walked, they were pricked by the gravel and

stones. When their feet fell into a pit, their toes cracked. Often their feet and toes stumbled on the stones. Most of the labourers' shoes were worn and torn. Some labourers walked barefoot. Though the police troubles had eased a bit, the potholes on the road and the scorching sun made up for the police atrocities.

The whole scene reminded Ramswaroop of the retreating army of Alexander returning to their country, desperate and tattered. In search of bread, some people in earlier times too must have faced similar fates. Scores of families must have wandered like gypsies from one region to another, from one country to another having the same questions, facing similar difficulties. They too must have been in distress, upset and worried by the memories of their home and must have walked with wounded feet and screamed in pain. Who can tell whether this calamity which has befallen us, will not repeat again tomorrow for someone else? This relentless journey is inevitable, but the journey should not be a helpless one, rather it should be a search for a new and better world...These were the thoughts racing in his mind.

Even before,
Many travellers must have passed,
Should have picked up the stones at least...

- **Rahat Indori**

A prominent leader of Madhya Pradesh had defected. The state government was overthrown with the aid of a big leader of Indore, so the political ambience was tense. The communal atmosphere in the city was charged. The rulers held meetings and rallies flouting their own rules. The Covid guidelines, protocol, etc. were meant only for the labourers, the poor and the toilers eating from hand to mouth. The ruling party, their leaders, their underlings, the so-called activists held public rallies. They broke all Covid rules and roamed carefree. They delivered specific religious, provocative slogans. They were polarizing the society. The language ‘Us and Them’ began to be used by the system through insinuations. The oaths in the name of Rama, Mahakaleshwar, Quran were being exchanged. The equation in the society of caste and sects was being presented anew. There were marches. It rained opium, ganja ^{85(*)} and alcohol. The efforts were directed towards how to bring their own party to power in the state. An overall atmosphere of religious and communal hatred was being created. As if this was not enough, the pandemic, which evicted labourers from their cities, from their work, was being painted in saffron and green colours. The campaign “The pandemic in the country has been brought by a single religious group to destroy the country” was conducted relentlessly. The various Godi media houses which were the sharpest and always one step ahead engaged in the conspiracy. The media houses with their eyes glued to Nagpur and Delhi had become the ‘Voice of the country.’ It was screaming “What lies we say are not lies but truth, a big truth.”

Indore was a residency of Ahalyabai Rani who ruled for the people. The drinking water well which the labourers had discovered in the Kasara ghat was built by the same Ahalyabai. During Hindu-Sikh riots in the eighties, the famous seven storied ancient mansion called Holkarwada, which belonged to Richard Holkar, the heir of Ahalyabai was burnt down to ashes. Ever since, the peaceful Indore was smouldering in glowing embers. Also, during the Ram-

Janmbhoomi agitation and Mandal dispute ^{86(*)}, riots broke out in Indore. Now, a deal for making Indore Clean City had been announced.

On the same day, in Delhi, at Nizamuddin Markaz ^{87(*)}, Tablighi Jamaat ^{88(*)} organised a large gathering of fifteen to twenty thousand people comprising of locals as well as people from abroad belonging to the same community. The government permission was duly obtained for this gathering before the pandemic. Tablighis ^{89(*)} from various countries like America, Britain, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia numbering about two to three thousand had joined the gathering. When the gathering ended, the Markaaz was raided. The police arrested many. Maulana Saad of Tablighi who organised the meeting had absconded. As he was hiding, the investigating agency could not seize him. Yet before he absconded there were reports that the head of the NSA ^{90(*)} had met him.

The ministry of home affairs knew that the foreign Tablighis were coming to India for the gathering. The Tablighi Jamaat was indeed held with proper permission. The Maulana being untraceable, giving a statement to the pet media which sat on the Nagpur-Delhi lap when absconding, was highly suspect. The police cleared the Markaaz. Immediately the media, which prostrated before power, aired a special news, breaking news, major news on top of their voice that ‘Markaaz’ in Delhi was responsible for spreading the pandemic. The religious leaders, zealous party workers, camera obsessed mouthpieces of the ruling party bellowed until their throats went dry that “the pandemic spread because of ‘THEM’”. The news spread that ‘Markaaz’ is a suicide bomb, and Muslims were suicide bombers. They began the propaganda that Muslims were travelling around the country with the corona virus. “The bearded men with surma ^{91(*)} in their eyes are terrorists”. “These Tablighis will spread corona virus and finish off the people in the country.” “Wherever these bearded men

appear, crush them defiantly” appealed the leaders of religious parties. The exercisers of power pushed their own failure to contain the pandemic onto the Muslims. As a result, the tar road too took the hue of religious colour. Many Muslim labourers were thrashed. The Muslim labourers, hungry and worn-out walking on foot were targeted. They were terrified. These hardworking labourers were not even aware what Markaaz was. They had left their homes in search of bread and only knew their bellies. These labourers who left their villages to fill their bellies by doing sundry jobs only knew how to master their skill. Muslim labourers were being pulled apart and beaten up hard. They were seized by terror.

Both Ramswaroop and Panditji were worried what would happen to Arif at such a time. They thought of leaving the main road and take another road. All the roads were same, and there was no certainty that attack would not take place on another road. ‘We will not let a single hair on Arif’s head be harmed. We are all Arifs, and we are only labourers’ – the entire group echoed. To save Arif, they planned various measures. The Chhattisgarh tribals walked with Arif keeping him in their midst.

Once after such a beating incident, Mishraji took him to the roadside and comforted him. Arif was scared. He understood nothing. He was in terror. “Won’t I ever go home now? My Ammi... Abbajaan, brother, auntie, won’t they ever see me again? Why are they beating me without any fault of mine? Is it a crime being a Muslim? I was never in the Markaaz, yet why are they troubling me?” These were the thoughts troubling him. Before this, he was never reminded expressly that he was a Muslim. He never felt that he was that ‘different.’ He could not understand a thing.

Panditji had bought a few things from the shop in the village where he was insulted, was discriminated against, and was fed water from a distance. Among those was a razor blade. He took it out from the bag and without further thought he held Arif’s head in his hands.

He swiftly swept the razor along Arif's cheek. Panditji himself shaved Arif's entire beard with his own hands. He hung his saffron bag on Arif's shoulder and tightly embraced Arif firmly holding his hand. By this time, the rest of the group had crossed Indore and moved ahead.

The rulers of this country used religion to keep and perpetuate their power. The capitalist pimps were financing them. Gangs of religious fanatics intoxicated by religion oppressed the minorities. They were amassing their homes in the name of the pandemic. They sold bogus medicines turning disease into a business, and to cover the nose sold two-rupee rags for four to five hundred rupees and later for five to fifty rupees. In the shops, black market for essential goods was rampant. The grains in ration shops had disappeared. Looting was widespread from villages to the cities. The leaders of the ruling party used excuse of the pandemic to keep and strengthen their political power. Highlighting the scare of the pandemic, the industrialists sold their waste products at inflated prices in the market. They grabbed lakhs of rupees from the pockets of common citizens selling products from masks, sanitizers, floor cleaners to the new products like fruit cleaners, eucalyptus oil and numerous other varieties of items. The self-proclaimed Mahatmas ^{92(*)}, Sant-babas in the name of ayurvedic ^{93(*)} medicine made drugs claiming to cure covid. Cow dung and urine occupied a place in the royal court and the business of cow urine boomed and even went online.

The cow urine became as holy as the Ganges water. Moreover, in the pandemic business, the elements practicing witchcraft and black magic did not stay behind. The public were mute spectators. The newspapers, TV, police, administration, and courts also mewed under the governing power. The people who were hell bent to mould the country into private company opportunely used incidents like Markaaz to impose one religion in the entire country. Capitalising on the pandemic, they strategically paved the highway to achieve their goal.

“The lockdown would end soon and during the next journey, it will not be necessary to grind the heels and walk in a hurry, stumbling and bleeding. The second lockdown of twenty-one days planted by the PM is ending today. We need to walk like this only today. From tomorrow we need not exert hard. We will not starve; we will get food daily. Tomorrow the shops in the towns and villages would

remain open. We can buy stuff. As soon as the hotels open, we can eat our stomachs full. We need not live outside the village. We will not be outcasts. We can go to our villages. We can go to any bus stand tomorrow and get on a government bus or go to a major nearby railway station and catch a train and somehow reach our village. The city of Devas is nearby. From there, we can leave for Bhopal, Katni. From Katni we can take another vehicle, bus or a truck and so move on ahead..." This was how the group excitedly spoke to each other. Their pace became faster than usual while they walked.

Many of the labourers had little bit of money but they were banned from entering the village and being social outcasts, they could not spend that money. "Maa, I am hungry" the children would cry leaning on their mothers' chests. The mothers, gently stroking would comfort them, "tomorrow the hotels will open, and my lovely children can eat bhajiya and gulgule, too ...!"^{94(*)} The pitiable children used to complain "You say this daily..." and the mother hiding her own tears and with a smiling face would try to convince the kid "This time will truly give you..."

They had walked non-stop forgetting the torture and suffering until now with one day left for the lockdown to end. They ate mahua flowers and wild berries and kept drinking water. The town of Devas neared.

The summer had begun. The sun burnt intensely. The tar on the road melted and stuck to the slippers. The slipper bands broke when they lifted their legs. From twelve noon to three, the journey was gruelling and painful. Their clothes became drenched with sweat, some labourers carried small children on their shoulders, women carried them in their arms.

Ramswaroop, Arif and Panditji formed a bond of great friendship. After reaching their village, they would still treat each other the same way and their friendship would remain intact, they would assert. Their relation transcended the differences of religion, caste, and creed, and they promised to keep it. Their prejudices in terms

of religion and caste were ending. They began feeling that the religion and caste were useless in times of trouble and only human beings come together to help.

They had travelled a long way. They looked for a place to stay near the village of Devas, somewhere where water was available. They spotted a vacant space. In front was a small village of around fifty houses. There was a hand pump for water. They settled in the vacant space. “We will spend the night here somehow and wait for tomorrow morning’s sun. Let us wake up early and—reach the government bus stop.” Thinking thus, they rested.

The labourers’ group was tired and hungry. Many lit their own stoves and some cooked mahua flowers. Some of them had some flour left. The mixed it in the mahua flowers and baked loaves. Some travellers only ate mahua and relaxed.

As usual, Panditji today also went to the village alone to see if anything was available. Whenever they needed anything from the village, Panditji always went alone. Sometimes he came back humiliated and sometimes with alms. Sometimes he pleaded with the shopkeeper and bought some items. Ramswaroop collected dried leaves and twigs fallen from the tree to light the stove. They had some flour left with them and a good amount of mahua flowers. So, they did not worry too much. “Panditji would surely bring some items from the village for today and tomorrow we need not concern with the mess of cooking. The entire world will be open, and we can comfortably eat in a hotel. Our journey will start straightaway. Tomorrow would indeed be a wonderful day – the lockdown would end!” Thought both.

Ramswaroop was more cheerful. He asked Panditji to get mahua liquor from the village if it was available and mentioned it to Arif in a muffled voice. Ramswaroop had no doubt in Panditji’s dexterity and tenacity. He had a peculiar Brahmin quality of acquiring through tall tales. Even in a tiny village of ten to twenty houses, mahua liquor is available. The Chhattisgarh labourers always had liquor at night to remove their daytime fatigue. In their

culture, alcohol was not something to be discarded. It was part of their culture. Today those labourers from Chhattisgarh were far behind. Maybe they had stopped to hunt. As there was no sign of their arrival, he had asked Panditji to arrange something from the village today.

It was nighttime. Still Panditji had not returned from the village. Both began worrying about Panditji. Was there any conflict between Panditji and the village people? Did they beat him? Have they handed him over to the police thinking he was a thief? Their minds were engrossed by many such doubts. Both were worried and waited to tell each other that he would come back, eventually. There was no trace of Panditji. Nearly an hour and half had passed. Even the tribal labourers of Chhattisgarh arrived but there was still no trace of Panditji.

After waiting for long time, when Ramswaroop started to walk towards the village in search of Panditji, he saw a figure coming towards them from a distance. That figure approached cursing in anger. As the expletives became louder, Panditji became visible, and they both heaved a sigh of relief. Noticing particularly the fierce form of Panditji who cursed in a peculiar Banarasi Hindi slang, everyone asked what had happened to Panditji.

Panditji loudly uttered expletives “ma ...chod..., boo...chod...^{95(*)}” claiming that he was cheated. He called them traitors. Saying “Only family understands the value of family....and u... boor...chodika....” Panditji wept at the same time. He had taken a little drink. Never until today had Panditji drank. No one ever had seen Panditji drink throughout such a long journey.

Ramswaroop instigated Panditji to talk. Panditji spoke and all the labourers listened. Everyone’s chest pounded, and legs were heavy. Just as an accused’s heart palpitates and stops for a moment before being pronounced a sentence, all their heartbeats stopped. They turned stiff. The ground was pulled under. Everyone looked

at each other. The situation was grave. As if death took place in every house in the neighbourhood and no one was left to console.

The helpless labourers heard the news mixed with cuss words from Panditji. Listening to this, they too became furious and started cursing in unison. They snapped their fingers in anger. They cried. The children naively stared at their parents looking at their tears.

This incident was like sprinkling salt on the grief-stricken wounds of the labourers who walked on foot. The dream of going home the very next day catching a bus or train, a tempo or some other vehicle was again shattered. The news intended not to make the dawn rise.

The PM of the country was back on TV today. Quietly, the duration of the twenty-one days lockdown was extended. The restrictions were to become severe. The PM told all to stay at home. It was a mockery of hope the labourers had to return home. The outrage of being cheated was seen on everyone's face.

The tongue cannot be sewed...

Life is such that cannot be lived...

You have made me Jesus.

Now we cannot even complain...

- **Dushyant Kumar**

As the announcement of lockdown was made for an indefinite period, the labourers were caught in a dilemma. The earlier two lockdowns were of three weeks. After they were over, now the third one had begun. It became uncertain how long the lockdown era would last. This event plunged all into despair. This announcement by the central government came as a great shock for not only these three but all the labourers who walked on different highways across the country to return to their villages, to various towns. Nearly twenty lakh labourers walked on different roads in the country. Their circumstances were the same. The labourers walking on foot starved to death on the roads, they convulsed in thirst, leaving the world in exhaustion or heat stroke. The state should have at least taken into consideration these labourers while extending the lockdown. The arrangements could have been made to direct these people to their villages.

Hundreds of vehicles were arranged spending lakhs of rupees, to bring back offsprings of leaders, industrialists, big officials who had joined classes like NEET, JEE in Kota, Rajasthan. Readiness was shown to bring back white-collar employees from Silicon Valley abroad. Five-star hotels, three-star hotels were booked for their quarantine purposes. On the other hand, the state and the administration were not at all ready to consider the toilers, labourers of the country, as human beings. To expect such a thing from the state was like milking a bull.

The labourers were left with no other choice but to tread on foot. They would reach home only if they walked as much, and only walking would save them, and they must walk. So, they pledged and walked with determination.

They had completed the journey spanning nearly 750 kms on foot. For many people, the distance was much more to be travelled. Some of them had to go beyond Gorakhpur to the border of Nepal. Some of them had to go to Jharkhand, Ranchi, and up to Odisha border. Some labourers were from various parts of UP. Many labourers had to reach the furthest tip of Bihar.

Now they were ready to cross any peak, mountain, or ghat. The only barrier was hunger and thirst, two meals, and four sips of water! Seen from the aeroplane, the mountains are scenic. Looking from a five-star hotel, the forest and the mountains seem alluring. All looks okay, but on a scorching summer day when it comes to walking on foot on the tar road, it is beyond imagination. One must ask what the taste of iron is to a horse that is in reins. In what way does it matter if one sits in an AC room in a mountain resort and calls oneself a nature lover? The labourers did not have any grains, pulses, flour or any such thing to eat. Now, it was not even possible to move ahead begging on the road. Nobody else could be seen on the way. If there was any settlement, the dwellers did not allow the labourers to approach them. If at all they entered any village on the way to ask for something, they returned empty handed as there was nothing to eat in their houses. Unexpectedly, a social organisation would give them something to eat furtively. The social activists could not donate food by setting up stalls. They too had to face police batons. They were also in difficulty due to this. Now labourers had to eat leaves, flowers and fruits in the forest and resume the next part of the journey. They were even unable to get any flowers and leaves due to the summer season.

Tonight, they were supposed to eat only mahua and sleep. Small children found it hard to digest mahua, so some people were preparing to cook the mahua flowers for the children to eat. The city of Bhopal had come near.

The outskirts of Bhopal, the city of lakes, was just five kms away. It was nighttime. They stopped at a vacant spot on the side of the highway. There were no fields nearby. A long plateau stretched far into the distance and touched the lights of the city. The dismantled shelters lay about in the unsecured area. No vehicles plied back and forth. Silence pervaded like a tomb. It was new moon and therefore dark. All of them were breathless and exhausted. Getting cramps on the feet due to the arduous walk was a routine matter and so their legs had turned hard as stone. They pressed and massaged their legs themselves. They had no painkillers or balm.

Ramswaroop usually could not fall asleep early at night. He chatted with Panditji and Arif and kept them awake with questions like ‘how much Hadis ^{96(*)} is applicable in today’s day and age’ to Arif and to Panditji ‘How Rama did not commit a sin having killed Shambuka and Vali...’ puzzling him. He would stir their minds with these questions, pestering them in the night.

At midnight, while they chatted, they saw someone approach from a distance. It was nighttime. From the ringing sound of bangles and anklets, Ramswaroop realized that a woman was coming towards them. Ramswaroop drew Arif’s and Panditji’s attention and slowly pointed his finger towards the approaching figure and in a faint voice said” “Someone is there...”

She was alone. There was no one behind her. She was scared, shaking, and gasped for breath. Her lips were dry, and her hair dishevelled. She became even more scared after she suddenly saw these three men. Seeing a young woman wandering alone in the dead of new moon night, the three of them were shocked for a few moments. No one talked. They just looked at each other. There was no strength left in her to move on. She saw the travellers sleeping soundly nearby and felt somewhat relieved. She sighed at the idea that she could stay safe in the night at least. Without much thought she dropped the bag from her shoulder and sat down. She cried and wiping her tears asked for water. Panditji gave her his water bottle and asked her to drink it gently.

That lone girl worked in some big cloth mill in Surat. Working on diverse designs of clothes and studying market trends was her job. Designing various sarees was her specialty. Due to the lockdown, the mill owner fired all the skilled and unskilled women including her. The mill owner had not arranged transport for other women workers to go to their villages. When it came to this girl, it was a bit different. He had to arrange something for her along with four others, as she worked at a higher position in the factory. He had arranged a private vehicle to transport them. There were four girls along with her. Since the four of them were from Indore and

somewhere nearby, the car came only up to Indore and returned. The owner had promised her parents that she would be dropped at home. Following the owner's instructions, the driver tricked her, dropped her off on the Indore bypass road and fled with the car. She was from Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh. She wanted to go home. She had a good amount of money. She took earnest efforts to go to Mirzapur. All her attempts had failed, though. Utterly helpless, she walked behind a group who were on foot. She was now in search of another safe group since that group headed in a different direction. She panicked as the evening approached. She continued to walk even in the night as there was no safe place to stop on the way.

She was utterly tired and exhausted. She wept. The three of them noticed her state. Panditji reassured her, and properly asked about her situation and said: "Sister, we too are labourers and travellers, don't you worry at all, you too are from our UP, from nearby district." He then woke up the sleeping women close by. When she saw the women, she burst into endless tears. Those were the tears of relief. She felt safe. She had passed the forest entirely alone. She could not eat even though she had food. She starved. She was so tired that her limbs gave away and dropped to the ground almost unconscious. One of the women sprinkled water on her dry face and she slowly regained consciousness.

Bhopal means the city of lakes and is the capital of Madhya Pradesh. A few days ago, a new government had come to power splitting up the MLAs in the ruling party. The moment they came to power, they made changes to the labour laws during the covid period. They had solid blessings of the central government backing them. This government of Madhya Pradesh had scrapped the labour agreements for two and a half years. They also scrapped the Industrial disputes Act and Industrial Relations Act.

This government took many decisions such as no need of registration for a contractor employing up to fifty workers, no obligation to inspect the factory for three months, license in a day for industries, one time registration for startups and increase in shift timings from eight to twelve hours. In Bhopal, thirty-five years ago, the gas tragedy had claimed the lives of twenty thousand workers and injured equal numbers of workers. The ill-consequences are still borne by the next generation. Such was the scale of this historical tragedy. The accused owner securely went scot-free. A contingency aid plan was made for the aggrieved families. That too was discontinued by this government.

On the streets of Bhopal only the police could be seen. The sound of blaring sirens terrorised the bustling jolly city of Bhopal. The police continually shouted on the loudspeaker that no one is allowed on the streets. The situation was so terrible that even if somebody went outside to bring essential vegetables, was sure to get swollen up beaten by sticks. Otherwise, Bhopal is a bustling city, peaceful, smiling, and humorous. The famed Soorma Bhopali^{97(*)} was from here. The old stories and anecdotes of this city are popular. The people here lived smugly, carefree in their own world, exaggerating even a small incident. The makers of mole hills into mountains, gossipers of exceptional tales, the humorous people of Bhopal today were reeling under a curfew. The usually laughing and tickling Bhopal was quiet and sad. The people were imprisoned in the narrow streets of the city. The Bhopalis who romped making fun of small incidents, who laughed, created a

concert like atmosphere were squeezed at home. The people who otherwise usually rushed to help, just gazed at the labourers walking on foot from a distance. They could not help even if they wanted to.

Bhopal is a city of many artists, singers, poets.

To create a ruckus is not my intention,
My effort is to change the profile,
In my heart or yours
Wherever there is fire, it should keep burning.

- **Dushyant Kumar**

The poet Dhushyant Kumar who says this is from the city of Bhopal. The poet Dhushyant once wrote poetry on hunger and revolted against tyranny; lit the young minds. He gave a tough time to the rulers. His poems were a powerful challenge to the dictatorship. His poetic words were slogans of the oppressed then. No city stays peaceful all the time. The fire of discontent glow like coals. Today, the groups of starving labourers walked barefoot across the land of Bhopal.

The police did not allow the labourers to leave the highway and enter the city. Ramswaroop, Arif and Panditji could not do without going into the city. Today if they did not go into the city, then they had to eat soil and pebbles on the road. No one was allowed entry. These three and the rest of the group requested the newly joined young lady to tie a scarf and bring some items from the shop. The question was how she would go alone. No matter what, it was not right to send her alone. A woman from the group went with her.

The name of this new girl who spoke English fluently, was Deepali. She was well educated. She had a master's degree in designing. She was a good designer. She worked in Surat on a good salary. The people like her do not consider themselves workers despite working for somebody. Being in a higher position at the workplace, they do not treat the workers properly. But now the situation was such that she had to become a part of the labour

group. During the times of recession, depression, the proprietor class always secure themselves and they sacrifice their workers. If you belong to the middle class, you end up being ground as well and it is also your destiny. Deepali had become aware of this considering her recent experience. She had heard her friends who were active in the student movement talk and discuss about this while studying at JNU Delhi. They organised marches, meetings etc taking up student issues. They told her about the labour laws, the government policies critically. But Deepali wanted to make her career. She was certain that she would not get involved in this. Or else why would she do the course in fashion designing. The girl who ate pizza, burgers, and Chinese food, drank Red Bull had to eat mahua flowers in the morning and begin the next journey with them. From the city of Bhopal, she could have easily reached her village taking a private vehicle by paying extra money. She had tried this so many times. But all her efforts had failed. She now was compelled to travel further with this group as any other possibility for her either had ended badly or was inevitable.

Deepali who used to order the waiters glancing at the menu with her head held high, today sneaked soft footedly into the city like an infiltrator to get some food in her own country. Some shops were open following different timings as decided by the administration. The way the curfew is relaxed for some time, similarly, only a few shops were allowed to be open for two three hours from morning to afternoon. Therefore, these shops were overcrowded. All the time one had to listen to the shopkeeper say “Not this...this is over...you will get it tomorrow...not available...” She bought limited items such as wheat flour, some biscuits and toast for small children, two three packets of pickles, soap, sugar, tea leaves and joined her clan. A packet of five kilos of Ashirwad flour and four mouths to feed including hers! About twenty to twenty-five days of journey still remained. Ramswaroop who had become their chief, did not know what to do.

The little children starved. The hardworking people who never begged, now were begging. The time had come when they had to

extend their palms for food. The people who worked hard and broke stones to earn their meal, today begged with the same hands. When someone dropped dried roti or bread accidentally, they all swooped on it. There was starvation, and only starvation everywhere. But these labourers were more ethical than those who begged for power. They still held themselves. They had self-control. They did not lose their balance. Therefore, the state too was nonchalant.

For day and night, I searched.
Not a trace of holiness
Shrines and Dargah alike
No one could evade what the future held
Prayed and fasted
Loomed still the wave of horror.

Searched within me, searched all over
Yet failed to find a pious soul.
Day and night searched among my folks and family
Religion named Humanity not found anywhere

- **Prakash Jadhav**

All of them left from the main road of Bhopal. Some turbaned Punjabi boys on the street surrounded them. Around twenty, twenty-five of them had gathered. Among them was an old Sardarji. He appeared to be their leader. As soon as they saw the labourers come, they greeted “Wahe Guruji Da Khalsa, Wahe Guruji Di Fateh...”^{98(*)}. All of them flocked around requesting to go with them. Seeing the restlessness in Panditji, one youth among the group of Sikhs^{99(*)} said “O Pandit..., why are you afraid...? Do we look like thieves or bandits? Don’t be scared...”

The elderly Sardarji came forward. “There is a Gurudwara not far from here...for the travellers on the road, there is a Langar^{100(*)} kept. Lets’ all go there!” Saying this, he dispensed biscuits to the little children.

They were all smiles when they heard the word ‘Langar.’ The doubts were cleared, and their stress vanished. The word ‘Langar’ was new to the tribals of Chhattisgarh. They asked, “What is Langar?” and hearing this, a sweet smile spread on the Sardarji’s face. He gestured with one hand and joining the fingers of his right hand brought them to his mouth. They understood at once. All of them happily followed keeping a social distance behind the Sardarji. They now were aware of social distancing.

When entering a prison, a new inmate does not know the rules. After waking up in the morning they must sit in rows of two. If a new prisoner sits alone, he is beaten up and told to sit in a queue. The next day he by himself sits in the queue. So also, was true with this case. They were often beaten up in the name of social distancing while in the city and so now, when they entered the city, they obeyed social distancing without having to be told. They wore masks or wrapped their nose and mouth with towels or scarves. The women in the group used pallu of their saris or dupattas ^{101(*)}. In the city, they never broke the social distancing rules and abided by them and once they left the city, they mingled with each other. They removed their masks, towels, handkerchiefs, and scarves. They breathed freely.

They reached the gurdwara observing social distancing. The labourers who walked on foot were attended upon with selfless service by the volunteers. They were given warm water to wash their hands and feet. Young Sikh children gave them various balms, pain killers, and oil. To maintain salt and sugar levels in the body, they distributed glucose and ORS packets. All the Sardars in the gurdwara seemed alike. There was a big kitchen inside where all worked together. This was the Langar. A communal kitchen and dining home.

Those who served and ate in the Langar never discriminated between poor, rich, superiority, authority, status, prestige, and such. The Sikh gurus forbid such discrimination. When coming here, one must leave their caste, religion, occupation, sects outside. There is only a single kitchen for all. The Langar has an enormous importance in Sikh society. It was introduced sometime in the 15th century. During the days of the first religious leader, Guru Nanak Sahib, the Langar was not only meant to sate the stomach but also to quench the yearning for ethics, spirituality, and knowledge through Satsang and Gurubani ^{102(*)}. The Langar tradition of the Sikhs is continued to be practised throughout the country as well as abroad. The practice of the Langar ‘Vand Chakko,’ the teaching of Guru Nanakdev, means whatever you have, should be shared.

The Sikh boys wanted all the labourers to have plenty of food and went on serving them in earnest. Today, after many days, these labourers ate their fill. Some labourers asked and took rotis for the onward journey. When the elderly Sardarji put rotis and pickles in their bags, the labourers were delighted. For the walk ahead on the road, their evening meal was assured. They need not sleep with empty bellies in the night. Even the little children ate their full. The children with blooming faces chattered with Deepali who had newly joined the group.

Ramswaroop, Arif and Panditji cleaned and swept the courtyard in front of the Gurudwara. Deepali too took the initiative and along with the women in the group collected the garbage and put it in the bin. All of them vacated the Gurudwara. Many labourers kept coming behind them to taste the food at the Langar. After thanking the Gurmat ^{103(*)} and the Sevadars ^{104(*)} – the volunteers, they moved ahead on their journey. While leaving, the group chanted “Wahe Guruji Da Khalsa, Wahe Guruji Di Fateh..... Sat Sri Akaal ^{105(*)}”.

Each one of the labourers’ groups was drenched in sweat because of the blazing sun. As the temperature soared day after day, the labourers got worried. It was not possible to journey ahead in the hot sun. It was a torture walking barefoot on the cement and tar road, their soles baked and formed blisters. Their footsteps were on fire. They discussed whether the next journey would be better if undertaken in the evening or nighttime. They were afraid of wild beasts and thieves in the night and in the day, the lashing solar heat.

They were all refreshed after a sumptuous meal. They stopped at a public well in a village beside the road. There were tall trees near the well. The trees provided shade. The cool breeze made the atmosphere nicely cold. The entire group rested in the shade of those trees and decided to proceed the next day via Vidhisha.

In the future years, as much one is able, one must fight for the welfare of the labourers and toilers, Mishraji was engrossed in such thoughts. This was the result of their almost month-long

companionship, hard hit by the circumstances. The humiliation borne on the road, the overall respect and affection received on the way had an overwhelming impact on him. “The Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujan ^{106(*)} people are always looted in the name of religion. As it is, the people are already reeling under the circumstances, over and above the loot in the name of religion!!!...How inhuman!!!” He called Ramswaroop and Arif close and told them what was in his mind “I alone cannot stop all this, but I won’t be part of this.” He declared his intention not to continue the rituals like pooja etc and resolved to break the sacred thread of Pandit, his caste identity. Arif also had learnt a lot during the period of twenty-five days of this journey. What exactly do we mean when we say we are Muslims? Why aren’t we Ashraf? How much longer the maulvi would tell us the examples of Mughal rulers? Why should the Azaan ^{107(*)} be recited and listened to in Arabic? Why not in Hindi Urdu? The people of our country like Panditji, Ramswaroop, Deepali are not Muslims by religion, so what? Why can’t there be fraternity between us? Who helps us in times of trouble? He began contemplating. Ramswaroop’s mind was also not an exception to this turbulence. The propertied classes who hold the entire country in their clutches are responsible for the discrimination in the social structure, among various cultures and among the people. The devil called owner takes advantage of our difference in identities, food, religion, caste, language, and makes us fight like fowls. Ramswaroop was beginning to gain clarity about these from his own life experience. In front of all he expressed his anguish, which pricked his mind: “I worked hard breaking my neck in Mumbai at whatever wage but never spoke explicitly. When studying in the university, I heard discussions about equality but did not join. I protested the fee hike but limited it to the fees, when the demands were met, and difficulties removed, I kept the agitation aside, when many protest marches took place in Mumbai, I never took part in any...”

There was a consensus among each that it is imperative to understand our society, the background and must speak about the

injustices. Now they began to talk a bit freely among themselves about the kind of work they do, what wages the owners paid them, how the middlemen and agents loot, the circumstances in the village and such things. As the moon rose in the sky, their conversations also became more engaging.

As the cool night breeze blew, someone started to beat the plate with a spoon rhythmically and the people of the group began to sing songs. Their songs in different dialects and languages generated a festive atmosphere. A cultural meet began. They started singing folk songs from their respective regions in Bihari Magadhi, Bhojpuri, Chhattisgarhi Korku, Bastari languages. Some of them performed plays, singing Bhojpuri songs. The tribals of Chhattisgarh formed a ring and danced rela^{108(*)}. The tribal worker Hemant Manjhi who was their interpreter, sang a song of “Bal Gangadhar Bagi” on a high note:

In the quarry of coals life was burnt,
How many nights passed searching for the sun,
But the thread of my life I got not.
Eyesight crumbled searching

Coal is my body and a pawn of coal
Life is a black sand and the uncertainties above

Place is a hideout, nowhere is my home.
No right and no respect are my world.

Roamed and roamed in the jungle I became a wanderer.
My sleep nestled on footpath in the village, town, city,
everywhere.

Day and night, often on empty stomach, slept here and
there

Holding all the pain the world in my hands forever

Just tell me who I am.

What value the democracy puts on me?

Adivasi society and Adivasi the name
Our spirit is innocence that in abundance.

I keep bows and arrows spear or an axe
But in amity, no doubt, at lofty heights

From the cities to the jungles the regime is theirs
All resources lost from the Adivasi hands

- **Bal Gangadhar Bagi**

Vidisha is a part of a vast plateau, some parts are plains and some parts highlands. Many stone hills surround the city of Vidisha. The city was an important trading post since the past hundreds of years. The Sanchi Stupa and the world-famous Ashok Pillar is right here. The caves carved out of mountains, the river Betwa reaching here flowing from a great distance, the forts, the royal palace, the beautiful carvings on them speak of an era of wealth which Vidisha had seen. Vidisha occupies a special place on UNESCO World Heritage List. The temples and stupas stand as our cultural tradition before the Mughal period. Vidisha was the in-law's place of Emperor Ashoka. His children Mahendra and Sanghamitra who spent their life preaching Buddhist religion and renounced themselves propagating it, had played, and entertained right here in this city.

Ramswaroop regretted that they could not see the Stupa of Sanchi and Ashok Pillar, even having come so close to Vidisha. He constantly voiced his regret. Panditji could not understand his feeling of regret not having seen a Stupa or Ashok Pillar. "Do not look at it as a symbol of a religion. This is just not a Buddhist religious place nor a tourist place. It is an important milestone for us on our journey to be Indian, our history of equality, our pride as Indians. The Greeks came here in their quest for knowledge..." Ramswaroop said, and everybody listened to him with awe. Hemant Manjhi suddenly remembered "Oh, somewhere nearby is Bhim Betka... the first evidence of our tribal paintings in India. Thirty to forty thousand years ago, we herded cattle, in our society the women were equal. One can find the evidence of equality in the colourful pictures on rock carvings. We painted the first picture, the colour picture in India. These pictures are a proof of Indian culture." Hemant Manjhi said proudly. Panditji and Deepali, totally impressed, told Ramswaroop: "Once all gets back to normal; let us come here again and understand our history..."

The rivers Betwa and Besa, flowing from the two sides hug each other here lovingly. On both sides of the highway is a vast expanse of plateau. On one side, the plateau is fertile and on the other,

barren with rocks. The weather is cool on one side and on the other hot! The labourers got sunburns when they walked on the hot plateau. While walking, blasts of scorching summer air blew from the left. While walking, the group ailed. The raging sun was unbearable. This lash of excessive heat was different. It was never so hot in Mumbai. Despite the heat in Mumbai, the body never got dry. The region known for its heat waves was yet to come. The heat wave could annihilate even healthy people. All of them covered their faces with towels, handkerchiefs, and stoles but could not lessen the heat. Instead, covering the faces increased thirst, and made it difficult to breathe. They became short of breath. Nausea gripped some of the labourers. Some of them retched. Some of them developed a fever due to sunstroke. Ramswroop's body burnt with fever. He happened to have nausea, headache.

Ramswaroop showed signs of heatstroke. Facing extreme temperatures, the body's thermal balance went awry due to exposure and walking in the sun for a long time. The proteins in the body affected adversely. He and the others were in dire need of treatment. It was an abbreviated time for evening. The Betwa river was close by. They climbed down from the road to the river to cool the bodies. They wanted to bathe in the riverbed.

Only by crossing this Betwa river, one could reach the city of Vidisha. A huge bridge was built over the river on the Bhopal-Sanchi highway. Usually, the road is always crowded. There is non-stop traffic of commuters and goods. Trucks, travel buses ply on the road, autorickshaws, tum tums, tongas, sumos ^{109(*)}, black and yellow vehicles carrying locals, there is rush all the time. The bullock carts too come and go. Sometimes a luxury car of a rich man could be seen driving down the road moving ahead. The area from the famous Anu Dhaba to the bridge over the river is usually jam packed. The long queues of trucks, trailers line up on both sides of the road.

Travel buses, trucks, tum tums, jeep, tongas, bullock carts passing through the bridge, captures an image of India living in many

different eras at the same time. Baadwaale Ganesh temple ^{110(*)} on the edge of the river is on one side and a Hanuman temple on the other. The tar road which goes through between is the national highway. Usually, during daytime there is no space even to place one's foot here. All the time, there are incoming commuters for the market, crowds of milkmen, workers from the nearby industrial estate, farmers bringing vegetables to sell in market, are all there and many such activities go on. Today, however, only an ambulance or a police vehicle plied on the road once a while. A grave silence pervaded in this chaotic area today. Only the walking labourers could be seen. The river Betwa which overflowed during the other seasons, had now almost dried up due to the summer.

All of them reached the river after walking for an hour. Still some water flowed near the temple. The rest of the place had dried up. The exhausted group of labourers reached the place where there was water.

Ramswaroop's condition had become worse. He panted all the time. He felt that his head was constantly pummelled with the horn of local trains. He was unable to even walk properly. Arif made Ramswaroop sit on the bank of the river. Panditji collected the nearby black mud deposited by the river. Just like a potter who softens clay by adding water to it, he softened it. Arif dabbed the soft mud all over Ramswaroop's body. He sprinkled water on him. It did not take long for the mud to dry. This was the guaranteed native solution for reducing body heat. All of them applied mud on their bodies and sat on the bank. They bathed Ramswaroop when the sun was about to set. Ramswaroop now felt better. They made him sit on the bank and without heeding gender differences, they all took bath and refreshed themselves in the cool waters.

Deepali took care of everybody including Arif. The ORS packets received from the Gurudwara in Bhopal now came in handy. Deepali gave the ORS solution to Ramswaroop to drink repeatedly. Ramswaroop now felt alive.

The travellers of MP were happy as they had neared their village. Some people were to continue ahead from Vidisha while some people were to take another route from Sagar and most of the rest were to go from Katni to their respective areas according to their convenience. Today, everyone decided to spend the night in the premises of a closed temple near the highway on the bank of the river. All of them had dropped the idea of crossing boundaries of Vidisha. They always avoided going into the city at night. The police patrols were strict at night. They used to get up early to cross the city as the police beat them mercilessly if found. At that time, the police were usually less in number and some of the shops open.

The labourers set up their stoves and cooked. No one talked much today as they were tired and suffered from oppressive heat.

After having food, the group fell asleep under the moonlit sky considering the future possibilities.

Before the sun shone through their eyelids, all left for the next journey. The items these four had were getting over. Even if nothing else was available, they were in dire need of flour and matchsticks. The salt levels in the body had come down through sweat. Salt was needed. The remaining five kgs of flour which Deepali bought in Bhopal was down to the bottom of the bag yesterday. In the night, they had exchanged four bowls of flour for ORS packets, antipyretic pills, and painkillers. Here the notes printed by the Reserve Bank of India had proved to be ineffective. The oath, as it stated: “I promise to pay the bearer one hundred rupees” had fallen flat. The labourers were fed up not getting anything on the road. However, at the crossroads and somewhere beside the road, locally made liquor was available in plenty. There was no discrimination in selling liquor to anyone whether one belonged to this village or that or was a traveller or an outsider. This did not matter to the hooch sellers. Here the distinctions such as caste, religion, familiarity, or unfamiliarity did not exist. Each got the alcohol from the same glass. The issues of social distancing, masks, pandemic also did not exist.

The local administration had given permission to the residents of the city to buy various essential items such as milk, vegetables, oil, salt, flour, only from 8 am to 11 am. The outsiders were not allowed to enter the city.

They used to enter stealthily at the peep of day and when the shops opened, they would separately buy what they needed from different shops. Now as well they left for the city early in the morning. If they were seen buying items or roaming together, the shopkeepers would not sell them anything.

Arif now went into the city carefree as he was now clean shaven. Earlier his beard decided whether he could go to a village or mix with people or not! “This saali ^{111(*)} beard of mine determines my religion...” muttering to himself he laughed. Deepali and Arif went together to Sai Kirana stores on Mirzapur Road. They bought flour, Maggi, salt and chillies, millet flour, soap, oil, match box, tobacco,

and such stuff that would last for five to six days. They could have bought more stuff, but the extra load would have been a burden while walking on foot. Ramswaroop and Mishraji bought medicines like painkillers, balm bandages and such. Through a half-open shop, they bought scarves, towels, and two-three German cooking utensils. After buying two pairs of slippers, they came out of the city by eleven am. The entire scattered group re-joined again near a petrol pump on the Sagar bypass road.

A girl in her twenties came alone pushing a bicycle loaded with luggage. Her bicycle had a puncture. She had brought her sick father along with her. She had travelled seven hundred kms on bicycle and had five more hundred to go to reach her home. She rode the bicycle carrying her sick father like a child. On flat and downhill roads, she would cycle and uphill she used to push the bicycle making her father seated. She used to make rotis for two three days and travel further eating the same dried rotis. She had to reach her home under any circumstances. She had necessary accessories with her to remove puncture but had no idea how to remove the bicycle wheel and refit it again. She approached this group seeking help.

Arif knew how to do all these kinds of work. Arif quickly undid the wheel of her bicycle and removed the puncture, pumped air, rectified the brakes, etc. He left on the same bicycle to pick up her sick father who was left to sit under a pipal tree two kms behind, according to what she said. As he traversed the distance alone on the bicycle, the police stopped him on the road and beat him badly until his back turned black and blue. In tough times one must even bow down before a donkey, so thought Arif and pleaded with the police falling on their feet, evaded them and brought back her sick father.

The father-daughter pair was with them for some distance. The entire group applauded her courage and persistence. She thanked all, said goodbye to the group and took her father on the bicycle and went ahead. They looked teary eyed at the slogan “See You

Again” on the mudguard of her rear bicycle wheel. Arif bid farewell groaning in pain. In his mind he said “We will meet, but not like this...”

The greenish blue scars from beatings on Arif's thigh did not allow him to sit still. His back was terribly swollen. When the police beat him, he had taken the beating on his right hand. The fingers were also badly bruised. The little finger and the ring finger were also terribly swollen. He limped slowly. The three of them lifted his belongings. It became a routine for the entire group to walk on foot famished in the hot sun, over and above getting thrashed regularly by the police.

Deepali had given painkiller pills to Arif. Panditji gave him a light massage. Either the massage or the care shown by 'our people' had lessened the pain. They walked continuously till 1.30 pm. Now they wanted to rest. They were in search for a good place.

Rahatgarh was still twenty kms away. Some people with them were from nearby villages. Since their village was close, they were excited. They were happy and was in a hurry to travel further. As the rest still had a long way to go, they followed their existing practice.

They had bought toast and bread in the morning from a shop in the city. They were to stop in a quiet shaded place to eat and rest for a while. They sat under a tree on the bank of a flowing stream. It was 2 pm in the afternoon. The sun continued to spew flames from the sky above. The stove had to be lit because of the fire in the stomach. They arranged the stoves. They craved for tea. It was thirty-five days since they had tea. Those labourers who drank tea cuttings four to five times daily without fail, were to drink their monthly quota of tea today.

The labourers from Rahatgarh started to walk with more vigour as their villages were getting closer, and since they knew the villages, large and small, in that region, they were infused with confidence. They were not afraid now. They were in a hurry to go home by nighttime without delay. They were not ready to stop.

Arif's leg and little finger were swollen. He had developed a mild fever, and so they sat under the shade of a tree. There was a brook

in front. A few people from the group stopped like them by the stream. Stopping meant sleeping for the travelling labourers. The moment they lay down, in five minutes they would sleep. Some people soaked the dry polis in water and ate them. Then they lay down to relax for a while but slept off. Ramswaroop made nice, hot tea and everyone drank from their glasses along with the toast and bread as breakfast. As they ate, some of their strength was revived and they felt good. They slept off thinking that they would relax for an hour or two but woke up straight around 5 pm in the evening.

They wanted to go beyond Rahatgarh and rest tonight. All of them readied themselves for the next journey. However, they could not see any of the migrant workers from Rahatgarh. They were a tight group of ten people. No one had a clue of where they went. Since their village was close by, they had left while their companions were still asleep.

Rahatgarh is a place in Sagar district. The flowing streams from all four sides, the ancient structures - now in ruins, the forts and palaces fading away in the caves of the past, the famous perennial waterfalls of the Bina River, the old mosque on the road, the magnificent, intricately carved old royal buildings make Rahatgarh an attraction. The Aboriginal Parmar kings from this place are historically famous for their valour having defeated the Chola kings. The Shalivahana kings and Raja Bhoj also hailed from among these Parmars who moved to Bihar. After coming to Maharashtra, they became Pawar from Parmar and remained Kshatriyas ^{112(*)}. The Parmars in Malwa, Gujarat are but Dalits today – working in public toilets in Mumbai. Ramswaroop decided to study and systematically understand the history of Parmars later whenever time allowed. A vegetable market on the road caught his attention. Around 6-6.30 in the evening they passed through the vegetable market. The cultivators were unable to sell their products in the Rahatgarh market. Due to police atrocities, many cultivators had left, abandoning their vegetables on the street itself. How much of vegetables could they have sold in two hours? Working hard and

sweating throughout the year, not only they were unable to get a fair price but also not a single buyer. There is a demand for intoxicating items such as liquor, Ganja, opium for all the twelve months and steady rates, too. The sellers of these items do not have to face recession. Even if the liquor shops are kept closed during the lockdown, during curfew, on some festivals days, or on some specific holidays, one could sell at double the rates. These cultivators alone had to leave their vegetables and run away fearing the police. Stuck at home due to police crackdown the people were living out their days eating only gram flour and chutney ^{113(*)}.

The labourers seeing the strewn green vegetables lying all over, swooped on them. Even if some discarded vegetables were dried up, the labourers had seen this green colour after several days. Everyone picked some vegetables and tied them into bundles and walked along the side of the road in a disciplined manner as if it were a republic day parade of 26th January!

At about 8 pm they crossed Rahatgarh bypass. There was a thicket of bushes and palash tress ^{114(*)} ahead of the turn. A farmland stretched in front. The farmland was drip irrigated. The well had water, and a bucket was tied with a rope. There was no one in the farm, no cart, no servant, no owner, none. The labourers went to the well for water. All of them filled their water bottles, collected firewood, and lit their stoves. Those who had flour with them baked Bhakri ^{115(*)} and Phulka ^{116(*)}. Some boiled the vegetables and just ate them with salt. They wanted to save the flour, and the vegetables would get spoiled or rot quickly as it was summer. Those, who had no flour left with them, had no choice but to eat cooked vegetables and pass the night.

The labourers from around Rahatgarh who had left the group were to reach home late at two to three am in the night, the labourers from Sagar the next day and the labourers from Katni the day after.

“Gradually the number of people would diminish in the group. Some would go to Katni, some to Chhattisgarh, some to Jharkhand. All the miserable people would reach their homes in the land of

happiness, the group would go on shrinking, only we would walk ahead, our day will come too, this walk would be over, our village and our home too will come....” - thought the four of them and the night faintly showed them the dreams of happy days.

They woke up early in the morning and readied for their next journey. There were two big bee hives on the trees where they stopped. The Adivasi labourers from the group had a valuable experience in the art of harvesting the honeycombs from trees. They took Ramswaroop along with them and told the rest of the labourers to keep distance. They brought down the honeycombs gently from one side and called the group closer and take honey as much as they wanted.

A different problem posed in front of the labourers. Where to collect the honey? They did not have many empty water bottles and if they collected honey in them, how could they drink water? They decided amongst themselves and collected honey in a few bottles. Ramswaroop and Deepali collected honey in two empty bottles. The Adivasi labourers made an excellent shape of a pot with palash leaves pinning them with bamboo blades and filled it with honey. Not a drop of honey fell to the ground, such was the pot. Panditji deeply appreciated the skills of the Adivasis and saluted them. The honey provided by the Adivasis was to aid the stomach at least for a few days. Now the dried withered rotis, puffed bread, loaf, toast whatever is available could be eaten with honey. All of them were happy.

The group walked alongside the highway. Each of them had a load tied behind their back. The bags hung on their armpits. Some female and male labourers carried pale and malnourished children on their shoulders. In a closed tyre shop on the road, lay battered tyres. Arif gathered it. Stopping at one place, he cut and tore them and made soles out of it. Arif repaired the slippers of those which were broken and worn out while walking. Seeing Arif's skill, they would use his craftsmanship to utilise anything that they could find on the road. Whatever one could get – thin cables or nails, thick piece of plastic or a torn nylon bag – they would make useful things out of them. Arif could sew torn bags and slippers using the string of a nylon bag. Some labourers gathered jute from the forest and made thin ropes, plates, and bowls from the leaves. They passed

these objects among each other...a feeling of fellowship had formed. A new kind of fraternity was created.

There was a small village right in front touching the highway. The police had gathered there in numbers. As the police stood with batons, their hearts skipped a beat. All of them stopped at once. Thinking how they would cross the road now, they talked to each other in a muffled voice, gestured to each other. They were scared that now the police would certainly beat them up. They could neither go forward nor retreat...

Their necks strained standing for a long time at a single place with loads on their heads. They got cramps in their legs. Finally, Deepali mustered courage and walked ahead. She took her three companions with her. All four of them were afraid in their hearts. Slowly they reached the place where the police stood. Some villagers had crowded and watched the place from a distance, some sat on trees focussed on the police. When they reached close, they saw three mutilated bodies on the road. They were labourers crushed under a speeding truck in the night. Their belongings lay strewn. The police were investigating the accident identifying the dead bodies and conducting a panchnama ^{117(*)}. Since the police did not speak or beat anybody, all the labourers walked and quickly reached the spot.

All the three labourers hit by the truck, were from their own group. They were in a hurry to reach their homes which were nearby. They were the very persons who left them while they slept yesterday afternoon. They walked fast as their village had come closer. Even while walking they felt sleepy at around 4 am in the early morning. They lacked strength to walk even two more steps. Left with no choice, they stopped for a few minutes on the road to take rest. They lay beside the road and slept. Then the speeding truck ran over them. The head of one person was crushed, the second person came under the wheels at the waist, and an old man who collided with the truck died in agony. Everyone gasped seeing the dead bodies. If they had stayed with them that night, they would have

avoided the accident, but when their village was so close, who would stop? In their yearning to reach home, they had to leave the world. They came from so far away only to die so close to home!

Deepali was looking at the public board erected by the highway construction department. It said, “Leave early, Arrive on time!” She was distressed thinking that three people from the group died in vain.

The faces of the dead labourers stuck motionless in their eyes. “Till yesterday, these people laughed, walked, and talked with us and what could be worse than that they were recorded as unknown corpses in the police report today” thought Arif. At that time Farid Ayyaz somewhere far away sang “Padhaaro Mharo Des...” ... “Welcome to my country...”

All were restless while walking. No one talked. Though they were calm on the outside, inside they were in utter grief. They walked for a long time in silence. While they were still at the accident spot, none of the relatives, children or wives of those dead labourers had reached. They waited for them for a long time. They wanted to meet and comfort them, but the police chased them away. They involuntarily dragged their feet ahead.

All of them were heartbroken. Their minds raged with the same thought, “What if they had stopped for a day? What would have gone wrong if they had done so? If they had halted in the night, they would have been alive now and not have died like this in anguish. For so many days we were together, walked together, spent so many nights together, travelled together starving, accompanied each other and once their homes came close, they went far away from life...” That such an incident can happen to them too, and at night a truck can also mow them down, thoughts such as these frightened them. They kept reminding each other that such an incident should not befall on them, that they should stay together and walk observing the decided safety rules, and not to walk in any hurried or disorderly manner, and not to leave each other’s company. Many labourers from the group were from the rural region of Sagar. Many were going to Dhana, Mokulpur Some were from Bandri, Bina area. Many labourers were from Nariyavli, Surkhi, Udan, Surkhi areas. All these labourers were now leaving the group and going a different road. Their village and households had come close. The group was thinning. They could easily make a mistake in excitement and happiness that they have reached close to home. All the rest continually cautioned not to hurry.

Many of the labourers from the region of Sagar had kins from Samrat Ashok Nagar, Babasaheb Ambedkar Nagar. These settlements were once outside the village boundaries and now they lived in settlements near the highway. Many labourers were from proper villages too. They were happy that they would spend the night with the group and tomorrow morning by the time the sun

comes up they would reach their homes. They were also upset that their companions had died. They had detailed understanding about this region. How long would it take to reach Sagar, the villages on the way, they knew all this well. They excitedly talked about the diversity of Sagar district, Sagar university, Sagar vegetable market, famous sweets like Khurachan, Chirounji ki Burfee ^{118(*)} available at Teen Batti crossroads, and so on. Their talk infused enthusiasm in everybody.

Many prisoners stay in jail for several months and days. The information such as who, where and how are exchanged with each other. Who all live at home? How many brothers? What kind of work? The names of children, wife, etc. such concerns become a part of their daily talks and gossip. If a prisoner is upset or restless, the other prisoners will ask humorously “are you remembering your wife?” and enquiring about the children, family wellbeing, they try to console. Something similar was happening here. In jail, if a prisoner gets bail, or were to be released, the rest of them become happy. ‘You are free now, but come to meet us,’ they insist; ‘and let’s meet conveniently once we are released,’ they say. The prisoners who are released and able to see the boundless sky without any prison railings, leave their belongings to new friends in jail for their use. Something similar took place here, with only one exception. This was an open, mobile jail of walking prisoners.

Many labourers were to go home tomorrow. Exchanging their addresses and phone numbers of their already discharged mobiles, they forgot their exertion of the long walk. In anticipation that they would reach home tomorrow afternoon, the labourers near Sagar collected all their leftover flour, pulses, salt, chillies, oil, etc. and gave it to the rest of the group going ahead. Much time had passed since they walked on foot. Now they wanted to stop for a while and were in search of good place. There was an intersection nearby on the Kishanpur bypass road. Many labourers were going to Bhaisa village, some to Ishurwada village and few to kheda Jarua Kheda. The old mazdoor uncle who died of thirst in agony at the Igatpuri

ghat was from this village. All of them had to proceed further from Kishanpur bypass and from there their paths diverged. They decided to stay there. There was a Dhaba nearby called ‘Surya’ and water was available. There was a hand pump and a well too. Anyway, they could not walk further and all of them stopped there.

As the sun set and darkness began to fall, the people in the group began to light their stoves. Today they finished their meals early. Even though their bodies were tired and needed sleep, they could not, no matter what. Waking up early in the morning some were to go from the bypass and some others from the Sagar bus stop. Now, they were to part company with whom they were walking with for so many days. The group was about to split.

So, all of them sat talking. Deepali spoke about how the people were taken care of in European countries during lockdown. “I have no idea as to how the untouchable Roma gypsies in Europe are enduring this lockdown.” She spoke.

“There, too, is no record of how the gypsies endured Hitler and the Nazis. Nobody knows.” Ramswaroop reminded. “The minorities have no history, present or past,” he added.

“Will we be known to future generations, at least even for the record purposes who knows! We will be ignored in the present itself.” said Arif thoughtfully looking at Panditji’s hair knot.

At least some period was considered in foreign countries while imposing lockdown. Whereas here, the lockdown was decided instantly in the night and announced at once the next day. While they discussed the lockdown, Ramswaroop, Mishraji and Deepali talked about how the welfare laws, labour laws were being changed and their impact. Arif listened intently. He did not grasp the whole thing what was being said, but nowadays he felt that it was something crucial and that he should know all. They also sang songs in between and slept sometime late in the night.

Thoughts rose in their minds even in their sleep. “In the future, social security and the remaining rights of the workers will be lost, trade unions are being destroyed as it is, banks, railways, LIC, public sector, and few such places where the workers’ associations are still strong, there too it is quite a struggle for wage increase. When the wage increase of a middle-class worker is in jeopardy, then what will befall upon our labourer friends? Our co-travellers? At every corner they daily wait to get some kind of work, daily they throw their life into the winds of uncertainty, what would become of them...? The economy has already gone into the dumps and now opportunely taking away whatever is left in the hands of the workers in the name of Covid, what happens then?” - Thoughts churned in Deepali’s head. She slept at some point while thinking.

...Suddenly Deepali screamed. Nobody knew what happened. But Panditji knew instantly what it was. He realised that something must have bitten her. He made Deepali stand up and when he quickly pulled the sheet from her and flapped it, he saw a small scorpion near her feet. Ramswaroop caught the scorpion and threw it far away. It had bit her hard on the foot while she slept.

The pain was searing and when it burned, she screamed. There were no clinics nearby and even if there were, would the doctors, scared of Covid ever wake up, was the question! The scare of covid was such that the doctors were not willing to go near the patients and moreover the labourers were ostracized travellers. What to do now? No solution came to mind. Ramswaroop gave her a Dolo tablet. Some labourers from Madhya Pradesh started doing tantra-mantra ^{119(*)} Their understanding was that the venom of scorpion goes away by chanting specific mantras. She had intermittent pain. The pain did not lessen whatever. The burning pain was unbearable. She trembled and wept. They moved her around to divert her attention from pain and gently massaged the bite wound. It was nearing two in the night. By around three, three-thirty she started to feel better. Everyone remained awake for her. She

gradually fell asleep and all of them felt relieved. At that time, Venus shone brightly in the sky.

All of them woke up in the morning straight at seven o'clock to the rays of the sun...

The travellers from the villages nearby had woken up early by five-thirty in the morning ready to leave and waited for the others to get up. As the sunlight fell on them, they woke up one by one with wiggly eyes and began to pack. Deepali too readied herself, her leg in pain. Her leg was slightly swollen. It would take some time for the swelling to subside. The pace of travel would reduce a bit, but there was no alternative, Panditji thought.

The labourers living nearby now felt the urge to leave for home. The labourers from Bhaisa, Ishurwada, Jarua Kheda villages had already tied their belongings and were ready, they had given many of their things to the needy labourers. But today, they were not at all in a hurry. They did not forget the incident that befell upon their companions. There were tears in their eyes when they bid farewell. They prayed for each other that no one must endure the horrid walk like this, this torture and such a miserable life. A little friendship had now developed, and they had to leave. The companions of this painful journey hugged each other and started crying too. The labourers from the villages nearby gave away their sandals which were in better shape to those who had to travel far. Many labourers were walking barefoot.

The labourers from Bihar, UP, and Jharkhand still had to walk for at least a month. The hope of buses, trains resuming had died long back. They all suffered. They worried whether they could reach home alive. Even so, they were a bit gratified that they had at least reached closer to home. During the journey, all their joys and sorrows were shared mutually. The force of circumstances brought these workers together from various corners, shops, factories, hotels, etc. and bound them together. They had a clear understanding that it was not the act of God or fruits of Karma that made them suffer but was due to the recklessness of the government. They bid goodbyes with heavy hearts to their brethren who were to go from the Kishanpur bypass. They turned back to look at each other until they went far into the distance. The rest of the labourers took the Sagar Road. Deepali suffered even now. She felt cramps in her legs. The body seared with the scorpion bite. She

wanted to go into the city to take antibiotic tablets. While walking, when they stopped in jungles, the labourers often had to bear the trouble from reptiles. At night large poisonous insects used to bite them often. Many of their faces would get swollen in the morning because of this. Their bodies would inflame and run fever. Hence, they always kept tablets of painkillers like Dolo, combi flam, antibiotics, and ointments, cotton, bandages, etc. with them. They would never get treated in any primary health centres on the way.

How could it be that they would not face any trouble from the police while entering Sagar boundary! The police had erected barricades on all four sides. The retinue of police stood on all sides. They decided to proceed through a side lane. Through that narrow lane, they went straight one by one, crossing Lakha, Banjara Lake and reached Parakota Old Sagar area. From a bakery near the post office, they smelt the aroma of crisply baked bread, toast, and pav. They almost rushed to the bakery. The door of the New India Bakery was locked from inside, but a few workers were inside working. They were determined to get bread etc., from this bakery in whatever way possible. They knocked on the door of the bakery. The bakery workers panicked as they thought that the police had come. Nobody opened the door. The bakery workers hid in fear. Arif stood there alone asking everybody else to remain at a distance near the post office. After a while, thinking that the police had left, the workers in the bakery came out slowly. Arif requested them to sell bread and pav. After listening to the conditions from Arif, the workers who had earlier refused to sell bread, pav, and toast, gave him the items. Now since the food had been arranged, they were reassured and walked briskly to reach the main road. Many labourers now were to leave for their respective villages taking different routes. They all expected that they would reach their homes by evening. Teary-eyed, they bid goodbyes to their companions just as it happened in the morning. Now the rest of the many labourers were to take the bypass highway route to go via Sagar to Jhansi-Kanpur Road leading to Lucknow; a journey of

about a thousand kilometres. The bypass road was packed with migrant workers.

Though gradually many labourers reached their respective villages and the numbers in the group fell, still the overall crowd on the highway was huge. If one takes a bucket of water from the sea, would the water in the sea become less? Ahead, from Katni, many labourers were to go to Banda via Chhatarpur. The displaced labourers coming from Ahmedabad were to go to Chhattisgarh and Ranchi areas. Only few people like Ramswaroop, Deepali and Mishraji were going to Banaras.

The city of Katni was about 150 kms away. Today, like every other day they had to walk. Still no other options were open and there was no sign of this yet. The labourers from MP were to go from the bypass to Garahkota and Damoh towns. Among them some were from rural areas such as Ronda, Kumhari Phata, etc. They stopped near a farm in the afternoon. A big tamarind tree stood there. They sat under the tree and had breakfast, drank water, and rested a while. The swelling on Deepali's foot had decreased and she felt better. After relaxing for a while, they started for the path ahead. Like every other day, the sun showed its true colour. They were drenched with sweat while they walked. Their bodies were exposed to the heat of the last week of April. It is not fun to walk all the time under the scorching heat of the sun on the highway. It was not their morning walk! It will squeeze and wring you dry! In this dry air, when most needed, water is scarcer than ever! All their faces were pale. The legs had turned into stone. The feet of some labourers appeared as though they had elephantiasis. The leg wounds of some labourers exuded pus. The fingers of some labourers were cracked and looked like ginger. The blood had clotted where it oozed. The wounded areas looked black. They used to apply Kambarmodi leaves on them that they had collected in the jungle on the way. Some of them plucked Khandu Chakka leaves from the wild and tied them on wounds. They came to know the uses of these herbs from the Adivasi labourers who accompanied them.

Now since they were used to this, they learnt to ignore. Hoping that somehow after reaching their villages they would focus on their feet, they endured their cracked, painful, and swollen state. Next week was the beginning of May. The hot spell was to shoot up and they had no other choice but to bear the brunt. After a long walk and rest in between, they reached a forest area. The forest department had constructed water holes nearby for the wild animals. They stopped thinking they would spend the night there itself. This was an area of dense forest, tall trees, with no trace of any village or tribal hamlet nearby. The labourers from Bastar had spent their day drinking only honey. They quickly picked some bael fruits. A thicket of kavath trees stood on the side, and the smell of ripe kavath fruits pervaded. They collected the ripe kavath fruits in plenty and filled their bags. These kavath and bael fruits were to save them from the heatstroke. Panditji gave Arif, Deepali and Ramswaroop honey and bread to eat. They drank water and tidied up the place to sleep. All of them lay down. They did not realise how and when they fell asleep while talking.

Around one or two am in the night, the roar of the tiger made them lose their wits. The dense forest awoke with the movement of the animals. The roar made Deepali stand on her feet. The families who slept here and there gathered in panic. Little children started to cry. They felt that the tiger had come towards them roaring. All of them were silent. Nobody made a sound. Without speaking, they lit the extinguished stoves and firewood. The lapwing tweeted loudly in the middle of the night. The Bastar labourers did not take much time to judge that the tiger had caught some prey. The prey was silent now. The tiger too made no sound. The labourers were quiet already. But the tribal labourers broke the silence. They took the burning torches and ran towards the place from where the sound came. They carried Ramswaroop's axe with them only to come back after nearly two hours. They had chased the tiger away with shouts and brought the prey in a heap. The moment they came, they skinned the prey and threw away the hide. They chopped the meat with the axe and knives. They finely divided the prey among

all. Early that morning, some people cooked the meat and some of them roasted the meat just right. They rested for a while and readied themselves for the journey ahead through the forest path. Today they had plenty of meat. Each of them received a kilogram more or less of meat. Today was comfortable. It was a definite splash of cheer in an otherwise painful journey. The hunger for two or three days was covered. It was one of the benefits of roasting the meat properly.

Whatever the case, they had to come out of the forest as soon as possible. They made their way as best as they could and went ahead without stopping or lingering. As they crossed the embankment built by the forest department, they found themselves further inside the deep forest. Even the accompanying tribals and Adivasis could not absorb this unfamiliar forest. They had come three to four kilometres inside the forest from the highway. But the forest ahead was even denser. Now the trail was invisible. Due to the lockdown, even the employees of the forest department did not take rounds. The local tribals had turned away from the forest. So, the trails were erased. The whole area blossomed with mahua flowers. The Tendu fruits fallen under the trees dried up as it were. Fallen on the ground, they became pitch black. Some were charoli ^{120(*)} trees. Now and then some mulberry trees made their presence filled with purple, black, red-green fruits. Large trees of wild amla, baheda, khirni fruits ^{121(*)} like yellow coloured nimboli fruits ^{122(*)} stood right in the middle of the jungle. Some trees seemed like cashew trees. Their mouths got sore eating those cashew-like fruits. Those were Bhilawa ^{123(*)} fruits. The forest was thick and abounded with many wild fowls and peacocks. There were enough wild fruits which would last not only for a month, but even for many days more. They could not take more as the next journey was long and it was not possible to carry the load.

They walked and entered even deeper into the forest simply unable to find a way out. They were lost and wandered in the forest. How to reach the main road, what to do next, was the question now. It must have been twelve noon, but the sun rays did not penetrate the forest. From the other side behind the bamboo thicket, they could hear flowing water. It was a rivulet. They stopped near the rivulet to rest for a while, loosened their bags and ate the meat. But they could not sleep there or take rest for a longer period. They could not sleep at all losing their way in the dense jungle. They had somehow narrowly escaped from yesterday night's incident. That experience was fresh in their minds. The Adivasis from Jharkhand tried to figure out the direction in which the stream flowed and

decided to walk alongside the stream. Their experience told them that either the stream would meet a river, or they would see a village on its bank somewhere ahead. It was impossible to walk on the edge of the stream. The bamboo thicket was too dense. The bamboos became barriers all the time. It was quite difficult to make way through the grove of sagwan ^{124(*)}, kavath, Ain ^{125(*)} tress. They began walking on the sand beside the stream. On the banks of the stream, huge wild beehives hung from trees. The birds chirped noisily, and the owls hooted even in mid-afternoon. The constant screeching sound of wild inspects all around was giving them the creeps. The forest was becoming more frightening.

Right in the front, at shouting distance, two jet black haired bears could be seen. The bears in the wild are more irritable and bad tempered, tend to attack naturally and not easily withdrawn. All of them stopped at the same place for a while. Arif gripped the axe tight in his hands and stood there firmly as if he was the group leader. The rest had something or the other in their hands. Some of them had picked up stones and some of them held sticks. All of them thought of how to resist the bears. After seeing the bears, they started shouting. The noise scared the bears, and they retreated slowly disappearing into the forest. All of them breathed sighs of relief.

After walking for a long time, they saw a small village in the forest. A tamarind tree was in sight. There was a narrow path beside the tree. It occurred to them that this path would lead them to the big village, and all of them took it. They had guessed it right. Around four o'clock the forest ended and the fields next to the forest were visible. After they exited the forest, they felt better in the open.

They stopped near a farm. There was no sign of the farmer. The farm was deserted. There was however a well brimming with water. Nearby lay a bucket with a rope tied to it. They drew the water from the well. They heartily drank the sweet, cool water, filled up their pots and bottles and started to walk again. In about three to four kilometres the trail joined a big tar road. They were

happy to reach there but did not know whether to take a right or left. There was no vehicular movement on the road, and the black tar road lay dull like a python. They could not figure it out. After a considerable time, whine of a M80 bike ^{126(*)} came by. As it reached closer, they stopped the M80 and asked for directions. “Ahead from the nearby Garhakota village, a road meets the Damoh Katni highway.” The M80 person said.

Just before the sun gave the way for the moon to move in the sky, they had reached the Garhakota village. It was not possible now to go further to Damoh. There was quite a large ground on the way to the village. Some people from the local hunter tribe - Fasepardhi had already placed tents on the ground. Finding them a good company, they decided to stay near them. The fasepardhis are considered a nomadic tribe. For them there is no nation, no village. The British put a permanent stamp of criminality on them, nevertheless. Then the Indian government freed them from the Criminal Tribes Act but has ever the social stigma of being a criminal tribe faded away so easily?! The group of exiled people in the present rested near the tents of those experiencing centuries of lockdown.

Panditji thought that the migrant labourers from Garhakota who were with them the previous day, must have reached their villages yesterday in the evening or late in the night. He took out a diary from his bag. He searched the names of his companion migrant labourers in the diary, and enquiring alone, he reached their home. The labourers were surprised to see Mishraji standing at the door unexpectedly. Panditji told them bit by bit about the horrid experience they went through the day before. He also informed them that they were twenty people in all, and the rest had left towards the highway.

After it became a little dark, the labourers in the village brought the women in the group home. They arranged hot water for bathing and gave them tea. After so many days the women in the group saw a household. Deepali was happy, forgot about her exhaustion, took

bath, and began washing all her clothes. But despite her repeated protests, the woman of the house washed them for her. Today, as she was to sleep in a house after so many days, she was happy. They arranged food for the rest of the people. Without informing the other residents of the village, these labourers took food for rest of the group in the night. On the very day incidentally, there was power outage in the village. Therefore, they could not charge their mobiles.

This settlement was outside the village. The dwellers of this settlement too were peripheral to the main village. That is why a visit to their place by Panditji, Deepali and other women in the group went unnoticed. The ill-fated poor souls who have been travelling together for so many days, had met each other again. Their conversation continued excitedly with homemade dinner till late in the night until their eyes became heavy, and they fell asleep one by one. In their sleep, they dreamt of returning to their homes.

Yet some time remained for the early light. They still slept on that ground. The labourers from the village reached there before the rest of their village was awake. They woke them up from their sleep and helped them to get ready to leave. They gave tea to all from the kettle they had brought. Even provisions were packed for them for the journey. To avoid any untowardly incident, all the members of the group started on their way before the other villagers woke up.

During that time, each village was filled with terror. The village head, sarpanch ^{127(*)}, secretary et al were always alert and ready to report to the police about who came and left. In some villages the roads were dug up. They cut down trees and piled them up on the roads to block entry. In many places, gangs of youth patrolled under the leadership of the headman or sarpanch of the village. These gangs gave information to the police. In some places they indulged in violence, took away things, money wallets from the walking labourers and drove them away. In any case, these local labourers who had helped them had to face more troubles once they would return to their village. Moreover, these labourers were from ‘lowly castes.’ Despite all these issues, these brotherly labourers made necessary arrangements for them. It was indeed in their favour that the houses of these local labourers were not inside but outside of the village. Otherwise, it would have been a calamity in the night itself.

All of them took bath at a nearby well. This ancient well was outside the village. This stone carved well must have been at least two hundred years old. The water in the well never went dry. There were springs on all four sides of the well. There was a small drain slope shaped next to it. From the same drain, a stone tank was made for the animals to drink water. Back in time, the travellers fed water to the cattle and horses here. The passers-by and travellers quenched their thirst from this well water and found it sweet, therefore they named it ‘Meethi Vihir’ ^{128(*)}. This well which supplied water to about more than four villages, was always bustling. It used to be packed with women and water carriers. But

recently, ever since the Gram Panchayat ^{129(*)} received the funds from Zilla Parishad ^{130(*)} and built a well right in the middle of the village, hardly anyone came to this well. But today this well came of use to such wandering people and tribes like fasepardhi, garudi, gadilohar, etc.

The travellers were given homemade ghee, jaggery to eat when on the journey. After bidding goodbye to their labourer friends from the village, they started to walk on the Damoh road. They had plenty to eat. Bread, loaves, toast, jaggery, honey and most importantly, the wild fruits collected from the forest. There was no need to worry about lunch now as the labourer brothers from Garhakota would arrange food at intervals in some village or the other. Until they reached Katni, they were carefree. They stopped, rested awhile, and walked in a relaxed manner. In any case regardless of their short breaks in between or slow pace they would have reached Damoh by three in the afternoon.

This road was not a highway. It may be within the limits of the Public Works Dept, Zilla Parishad or may be under the State Govt. At short distance intervals, came small villages. Temples, big and small, were seen at all places. It was a road only in name, otherwise potholes were everywhere. Where there were no villages, there were fields on both sides of the road. As it was summer, there were no crops in the field. Where the facilities like wells and water pumps existed, vegetables were grown. These fields were owned by high caste chiefs or supremos et al of the village. In this backward area of Bundelkhand region, rarely a house made of solid bricks, cement and concrete could be seen among the tiny villages. Most of the houses were huts made of mud with thatched roofs. There were cattle sheds either attached to the houses or in front of them. Each house had a bower, or trellis in front. They were used as an open hall. In the village, this was the season for gathering tendu leaves. But this year due to the lock down, the collection centres had not started. There were huge piles of tendu leaves in every house. There was hardly any traffic on the road. Only once a while a four-wheeler could be seen crossing the road, else all over

stillness prevailed. As such, discrimination did not exist on this road. In any village, they could easily obtain water. The fear of covid was diminishing among villagers. The village elders were eagerly making enquiries. The major reason behind this was of course, Deepali's urban youth dress and Panditji's orange bag. In some places in between they could even avail of tea. When they stopped on the way near the Gram Panchayat of a small village called Kumeria, the villagers even offered them buttermilk. At the village of Padriya, they even got food.

Padriya village was a quiet, self-sufficient village. There was a neatly colour-painted Zilla Parishad primary school with oil painted portraits of great men on the compound wall, and attractively painted quotes in legible letters. It had a Gram Panchayat building with a public square in front and a bore well close by, a common well as well as a veterinary hospital and an Anganwadi for children too. All the buildings were bolted and locked due to the lock down and the Zilla Parishad school awaited the children.

The labourers from Padariya among the trudging group had returned to their village over two days ago. They arranged food for their labourer friends in their homes opposite the Anganwadi centre. They were already informed by their friends from Garhakota on phone that the group would be passing by their village. The moment the group met their labour friends at Padariya, they burst into tears. They had travelled together for around forty days and separated only two days ago. The motherly women from their friends' households prepared daal-bhat ^{131(*)} for them with utmost love. 'Just as our children reached home safely, so will you,' they blessed them. There was no electricity here either. The state that made "the resolve to construct a self-reliant region" had no electricity here for eighteen hours in a day!

Many of the villagers tied bundles of old clothes, quilts, and some useful things for them. The village people and their labourer brethren dropped them at the village gate. They said goodbyes to

each other. The Damoh crossroad was now close. The group began to walk briskly in that direction. They reached the place within about one and half to two hours. A crowd of labourers had already gathered there. This group also joined the crowd.

Many of the labourers who had gathered at the intersection of Damoh highway were to go in the direction of Hatta, Amanganj. They dwelt in the remote nearby villages. Some labourers were to go ahead to the famous Panna reserve forest region. Most of the people from this area had gone to Mumbai, Gujarat in search of employment for sustenance. Now they were on the verge of reaching their villages. So separate groups were being formed to take short cuts to reach their villages. Many labourers had begun to reach their villages at various intervals. Still the crowd of the labourers in the streets did not subside much. The Katni road thronged with hordes of people. The starving people carrying the children on their shoulders-and walking with bundles in their arms, was an unchanging sight seen right from Mumbai, their faces pale and worn out.

Ramswaroop pointed out to Panditji the skeletal frame of a member in the family who sat close to them. Truly they had no reason to be surprised. If one travels on foot in the heat of summer eating whatever food one could find and at times staying hungry, what else could be the condition of such people? Was Ramswaroop's or Panditji's or anyone else's condition any better? The man with the skeletal frame had joined the group two days ago or so, along with his wife, son, and daughter-in-law. They were not labourers who had gone to Mumbai or Gujarat in search of work but rather were well-to-do farmers from the village. They owned an eight acre perennially fertile agricultural farm yielding a good income. They had a well, motor pump, and two bullock pairs. A well in the farm, motor pump, a full-time person handling domestic as well farm chores, they had it all. Their earnings were good. Their two daughters of age were taking proper education. The hard-working old man's throat pained terribly for many days. He found difficulty in swallowing food and his son took him to a district doctor for check-up. That doctor sent them to another specialist in the district. The specialist did numerous tests and diagnosed him as having throat cancer. After administering him first aid, the doctor told them to take the old man to AIIMS in Delhi. The family belonged

to a small village near Rewa. One of their fraternities in Mumbai suggested that he would get effective treatment at Tata Cancer Hospital in Mumbai. The son came to Mumbai relying on the relative, accompanied by his mother and his wife, leaving both his sisters at home. The cancer treatment had not even started. The announcement of lockdown made this youth and his old parents wrestle moving from place to place in agitation. That relative let them down ultimately at the last-minute. They had no other relatives other than this person in Mumbai and neither any acquaintance in the city. No food to eat, nowhere to stay. With whatever money they had brought for treatment they bought a few things and spent the initial days. They made all efforts within their means to make some arrangement to go back to their village. Finally, they joined a group that left for Rewa. Even though they had some money in the bank and some cash in hand they had to undergo starvation. Eating whatever they could they had to pave their way. They too fell victim to police brutality. The police did not check the cancer appointment note when they thrashed. They did not care who was a patient, who was old, who was pregnant.

Initially they spoke with the family members at home on their mobiles but later their batteries ran out of juice. When there was nothing to eat in the first place, how could one charge a battery! After their mobile went off, they lost contact with the village. They last spoke when they were at CSMT-Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus in Mumbai. No contact with their own village, No contact with their own daughters. Without medicines, without proper food, without a place to sleep, in such a condition, the old man somehow held out. An emaciated body, sunken cheeks, overgrown beard, dishevelled hair, thin bony child-like arms, and shoulders. A belly that almost touched the back and the ribs on the chest that could be counted, and legs like twigs! He was trying to go home in such a state.

There was no possibility for treating cancer anymore. The sick man's only wish was to return to the village home alive. He repeatedly expressed his wish that when death comes, let him be

among his kins and kids... Listening to the old man's distress, Arif and Mishraji went near and comforted him "everything would be okay soon." They gave him wild berries to eat and a bottle of water.

Panditji usually found out some clever method to go to the village and bought something or other for everybody, and at times Deepali bought the stuff. They sometimes entered the village or town in a roundabout way and other times stealthily and were able to survive till now because of these skills.

That cancer patient and his son did not deviate-from the highway even a single day. They were unable to get essential items on the road. Panditji told the boy how to get necessary things like flour, salt, chillies, chatni and from where. Panditji braced them and assured "Today we will give our flour to you. Also, tomorrow we will arrange for few things from the village ahead." Deepali had taken the entire responsibility of today's cooking, she made chapatis for everybody until late in the night. She gave chapatis, honey and pickles to the old man and his family. All ate together. Today, after so many days the old man's family received acceptable food and human support.

They began their next journey much before dawn. They wanted to come across a big village on the way. In any case, today, they were determined to obtain flour, pulses and edible items for the cancer stricken old man and his family. They kept walking ahead. Somewhere in between they saw a name board which mentioned Raipura village. To reach this village, they had to leave the highway and go downwards to enter the village.

Raipura is a large village which occupies both sides of the highway. This is a marketplace large enough to cater to the needs of small villages scattered around thirty kms of the surrounding region. The bamboo fences were erected on all four sides to prevent outsiders entering the village. In the sleepy darkness of early morning, Deepali and Panditji somehow managed to enter the village unnoticed. They had arrived before the shops had opened. A shop was close to the highway. The moment the shop opened, they quickly took the items they needed, paid the money at once and retraced towards the group. They gave items like bathing and washing soap, wheat flour, oil, chilli powder, salt, pulses, etc. to the old man's family. They wanted many more items, but it was impossible to get them in that village. Moreover, due to the stoppage of cargo, essential goods were unavailable and secondly, inflation and black marketing had skyrocketed. There was a massive shortage of goods.

As usual, they sat figuring out how much stuff they would need daily, how many days would it last, how many days would it take to reach, how many days they would be able to hold on with the remaining money. "Let's take only those things that are needed to keep us alive and keep us going further. Let's distribute the excess to those who need them and discard the rest. We should think on how to cross the road ahead as soon as possible."-Arif proposed. So, they mustered their remaining strength and started to walk briskly. After walking fairly for a long distance, they stopped when they saw a flat and wide ground a bit like a plain. Arif and Panditji tidied the place. Ramswaroop went in search of stones big enough to be used as a stove.

The son and daughter-in-law of the old man gathered twigs and sticks lying around. After collecting the lot, they began to cook the rice. The old man's wife started to knead the dough. Deepali took some flour and prepared to make Ambil ^{132(*)}. She thought that once the Ambil is ready, the old man would have something with him to eat until the next day's evening dinner.

The tradition of eating Ambil is seen everywhere in rural India. The labourers of Bihar drink Sattu ^{133(*)} made of roasted gram flour, quite like Ambil. "Now anyways if we are to make Ambeel, let us make more. After making chapatis, with all the remaining flour we can make Ambeel" suggested Ramswaroop and Deepali. All agreed. Having eaten the meals, they left for the next journey. After covering a long distance, they stopped for rest. For today's meal they powdered the dry chapatis using their hands, mixed some salt, chilli powder and water to it and boiled it. After eating this boiled food along with Ambeel they began to walk again. They rested for a moment in a village in between and reached the village of Rithi. The people of this village followed a strict lockdown and so it was deserted. The village shops were closed. The relaxation of lockdown, etc. was being announced by the state government as well as by the central government, but the local administration seemed more intent on celebrating the lockdown.

The education had not spread well in this rural area. The people were ignorant. There was a possibility they would attack and harm. Even the cities that call themselves civilized, did not understand them. It was quite clear that ignorance had nothing to do with being rural or urban. They had experienced that the city folks behaved even more weirdly. They were aware that these people allowed the animals to come close but drove away the humans. Be it in the city or in the countryside, they were always ostracised without any exception. So, they decided not to enter the village. As it is they never deviated from the highway line unless it was necessary. In comparison, the journey through the countryside was better and through the forest, it was even better. There was always something to eat in the forest like the wildflowers, leaves, tubers, etc. In the

company of Adivasis from Jharkhand they had learnt how to survive in the jungle what to eat, which leaves to eat, which tubers to dig to sate hunger, what leaves to chew when thirsty, etc. Also, there was no fear of the police. They preferred to take the road through the forest. But now they did not even want to do that. Of late they had escaped the attack from wild animals by the skin of their teeth. The city of Katni was nearby. The highway leading to two-three states passed through there itself. Many travellers were to take their own routes from there.

The lockdown continued to be extended and the goods available in the market were now disappearing. Whatever was left, could only be bought by no less than double the rate and that, too through back doors. The poor had nothing left now. Whatever money was left with them was over. The city's poor now were half-starved. The kind of help extended by the so-called philanthropic leaders was to their own castes and people with an eye on elections and the benefits that would ensue. Two to four kilos of grain came from the government aid and that too were distributed with the photos of the PM, CM printed on them. As though they were paying for it from their own pockets.

There was no trace of the crores of rupees collected by the government in the name of public welfare fund. The doctors and others in the city were agitating for essential services and facilities. Some photo savvy philanthropists, self-proclaimed social workers, and future MLA, MP candidates provided a little help to "their own" fifty or hundred people. That was being exaggerated massively on Facebook and WhatsApp.

Thousands of labourers who came from Nagpur, Hyderabad had already reached Katni city. As usual, the program of preventing people from entering the city continued relentlessly. The travellers coming from outside were detained and quarantined straight away in one school on the road. The police drove away the travellers from outside Katni at the bypass itself. Now the eight travellers in the group from such places as Maihar, Rewa, Amarpatan, etc. were

to go their own route. Only four remained in the group who had to go to Banaras, Mirzapur, Rampur regions. Now it was no longer a caravan.

Maihar, Rewa, Amarpatan were part of the Bundelkhand region. Simply put, the Bundelkhand region is an open, bare, dry, and bizarre land of dried-up rivers, entirely neglected by Mother Nature. In short, this region can be said to be Maharashtra's Marathwada region! There is not much of agricultural produce and none of the industries flourish. Banda is a district in Bundelkhand, which fell victim to continual attacks by ruling invaders; whether it was Ghazni Mahmud or Lodhi Sultan or Maratha Peshwa Bajirao, all of them brutally plundered the region! From places such as these, the people move to metropolises like Dream City Mumbai in search of work. Not having fallen in love with the City of Dreams – not for the love of Mumbai but being helpless as their own native country cannot provide them with two meals!

Due to the strict lockdown, these four were unable to get items for cooking, and ahead a big uncertainty awaited them. They stealthily crossed Katni's Indira-nagar and somehow reached Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) area. They wore mask on their faces and went to a shop behind the committee area to buy few things. The shopkeeper drove them away. The small hotel in front of the APMC was closed. There were small hotels in front of the APMC operating in their shacks, but they too were closed. The shack owners lived there itself. They had a lot of unused maida ^{134(*)} since many days. It was infested with weevils and worms. The owner sold them such maida at an exorbitant price! This is how people see opportunities in calamity and over and above pretend to be merciful! Ramswaroop and Mishraji bought this rotten maida, only meant to be thrown away, at a high price thinking that they could clean it. They now had to ration and eat these five kilos of maida. Although intensely troubled with worries about food in coming days, they comforted themselves thinking whatever they got now is nonetheless good enough. With this their footsteps turned quickly in the direction of Katni bypass.

There was still time left for the bypass highway. Going ahead from Deendayal chowk, they came across a Delhi Public School right in front. They stopped and drank some water. They were revived with a bit of strength. Though they wanted to stay longer, it was impossible. The police zealously exercised their authority. They came to the main highway passing the next petrol pump. They had meagre food items to eat and drink and moreover were worried of taking care of young woman's safety. Such was their state. Preparing Ambil, eating it if it lasted, eating dried chapatis, toast, drinking sugar water from time to time and walking continuously with their heads hung down was the only thing they could do.

They woke up early today and eating only toasts, began their journey. They wanted to rest a while if they came across a good place. How much could one walk? Would be exhausted for sure! As the sun rose higher, so did the heat each hour. Though it was nearing evening, the heat did not lessen. The fiery sun above and

beneath the melting tar on the road! The blast of hot wind blowing from the farm made it difficult to walk. Soon, suddenly it started becoming dark. The clouds accumulated in the sky in a big way. They were daunted in anticipation of rain. Adding to their weird condition, the road was deserted and no sign of shelter anywhere. Gusts of wind blew. It started to rain bringing along thunder and lightning!

The sudden onset of the storm made their legs tremble. The gale blew dust into their eyes and whipped up dirt and sand. They covered their eyes with one hand and had to manage the bags with the other. The howling and whistling wind sounded creepy. The dark clouds accumulated even more in the sky. The crackle of electricity made it even more terrifying. In a little while the hailstorm began. It started with one or two hailstones, but they could guess that there would be heavy hailstorm in the area soon. They were scared that their food items would get wet.

They became apprehensive and frightened as the hailstones fell on them repeatedly. Their bodies and heads were badly hit by the large hailstones, almost of the size of a big Ahmedabad ber^{135(*)}. First the heat of the sun and now the hailstones! They did not know what to do. They stood under a tree without saying anything to each other. It was not safe but even perilous to stop like this. The lightning could strike anywhere at any time. The lightning, like a serpent darting to its mate, goes for the wet tree. There was thunder and lightning once again in the sky. They could see nothing to hide themselves, far into the distance. At that moment in the flash of lightning, Arif saw a door of a shed. They hurried to that place in tremor. It was a granite, marble factory on the roadside. Without a thought, the four of them entered the factory premises.

Who will stop and think in the face of raging thunderstorm, lightning, and fear of death?! The tin roof was laid on large iron pillars. Open on all four sides, the structure was closed due to lockdown and deserted. They found a good shelter. The drizzle from the wind did not reach there. Now the food items and they

themselves were safe and secure. After an hour of rain and hailstones, the agitated overcast skies calmed down a bit.

Katni district is famous for its marble. High quality marble is found in this area. The green marble here is quite famous. From here, the marble, kadappa and granite go all over India. The big traders, builders, businesspeople come here to buy marble and granite. Katni is dotted with marble and granite quarries on all four sides. There are many stone cutting factories around. The artisans and the labourers working in these factories were now missing. The crowded city had exiled the labourers working here. The factory owners had straightaway expelled the workers. Not only had the labourers from Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi become refugees but also from towns like Katni. Labourers making various articles or providing service of some kind, workers from large mines, workers from factories, large and small, numbering in lakhs and thousands were displaced from everywhere. This closed defunct marble factory told this blatant truth to four of them.

The marble and granite were not edible items, so there was no question of somebody stealing it as there was no traffic. Therefore, the owners kicked out the security guards too. The four decided to spend the night there. The rain had stopped but it was extremely late in the night. Also, they would not get a place like this for shelter on the road again. They gathered the firewood lying there. The stoves of the labourers who worked there remained as it were. There was a water facility and a hand pump. The firewood was wet because of the rain. Even the matchsticks were wet. If the stove was not lit, they had to sleep hungry. If they did not cook and eat, it would be difficult to walk tomorrow. All four of them pondered over this problem. “How to light a fire? Light the stove? The primitive cavepeople must have grappled with these same questions...” so thought Deepali. “Covid and the system had turned us into primitives.” - she talked to herself.

They first wanted to have tea. Their bodies were shivering with extreme cold. Suddenly Arif’s attention was directed to a tire tube

belt meant for lifting marble and granite. The broken tire tube hung on a rusted iron hook. They felt relief. Some hope was kindled. They grappled with the fact that they must light the tire tube with three or four matchsticks. They saw a pile of dried clothes. These rags were used to wipe away dust. They succeeded in lighting a rag. The cloth caught fire and they placed the tire tube on it and set it ablaze. They threw the collected firewood into the fire and lit the stove once for all feeling relieved. After having tea, they felt better. They dried the matchsticks near the stove. They even dried their wet clothes and went on to cook. They quickly made puff rotis, ate them with pickles and honey and extinguished the stove. If someone saw the smoke from afar, or if the factory owner or the police knew, nothing good would result. Searching for a dry place, they spread their beds and late in the night they slept in the shadow of dread.

They left the factory premises early in the morning hurriedly in fear lest someone spot them and come there. The fear of yesterday's storm still loomed. Even a five-minute delay in the storm searching for shelter, the rain and hailstones would have blown them away. There would not have been even the question of eating. Although they got a shelter from the rain, they cooked in the night in fear lest they be spotted. Somehow, they ate and slept huddled in that place. No one would have imagined that nature, which was calm until then, could take such a monstrous turn, and the bodies baking in heat would be blasted with water. After experiencing yesterday's hailstorm Arif was reminded of the water cannons used by the police at Azad Maidan in Mumbai! One of his acquaintances had forced him to join the protest march of Raza Academy ^{136(*)}, the story of that time.

They came a little ahead leaving behind Katni MIDC. This region was at the end of the Satpura Range ^{137(*)}. It seemed as though the surrounding mountains walked with them. Satpura means mountains adorned with hundreds of natural resources. Today these mountains do not resemble as they were hundreds of years ago. At present, there is a stark competition going on to extract expensive minerals from these mountains. Giant cement factories, marble factories have carved up the mountains up to fifty kilometres. For generations, skilled local artisans honed the art and craft of marble and granite, decorated the high-rises and bungalows. In the process, they destroyed their own lives. Even today they cannot afford to put marble in their own houses. Their huts at the foothills of these mountains are still the same as before independence. Now their condition is even worse. Their houses are nothing, but a roof thatched with grass and small black tiles, a veranda of mud, and a yard daubed with white chalk powder. They have not been able to place even a modest piece of marble on their veranda. However, a temple has been built for them in marble by the factory owners. Rituals, culture, and manners are taught to the children of workers in the premises of this temple and a flag is hoisted.

The one who labours to build the houses is homeless and the one who grows food always starves, ours is such a pathetic society! Their minds in a stir, the four of them thought when will this disparity be over and everyone will have a house where one can sleep peacefully. Not only they walked but also watched what happened around. They paced faster and reached Patwara Chunabhatti ^{138(*)}. The Katni Mountains are dotted with traditional limestone kilns where the limestones are baked and finally lime produced. Today, these old furnaces, just like the Parmar rule, were only remnants. Now the stones are taken from the hill and from these stones lime is made using modern machinery. The new mechanised kilns came into being and the traditional means of production were destroyed. The present-day lime factories needed only a few workers. Their wages were also less. The local people were reduced to penury, and they wandered in search of work.

After covering a long distance, they reached the village of Suhaula in the foothills. The hill stretched from the village of Pakariya to Maihar village ahead. They stopped for a while. They rested near the hand pump in front of the Suhaula Gram Panchayat. Getting their breath back they got up and walked ahead briskly to reach the nearby Kherwasani Toll Plaza.

Some groups of labourers were coming from the opposite direction of the toll plaza. They had to go via Jabalpur, Seoni road and reach their villages. These were the labourers thrown out from industrial estates in Allahabad. The workers who worked in garment companies in Allahabad were not few but numbered in thousands. Some also worked in other industries. As the traffic was absent, the toll collection counter was also closed. The migrant labours passing this toll station usually rested there for a while and moved ahead on their way. These four enquired the whereabouts of the labourers who were getting across to learn about their situation. As though there was something new to learn! There was nothing new. Though there was a feeling of empathy. The conscious effort was to identify with each other as workers. Each one of them had one thing in common; all of them had starved for much more than a day

and walked towards their village. The condition of pregnant women and children was more delicate.

This exhausted and starving caravan was taking care of children. They told them stories of kings and queens. While Ramswaroop and his group discussed with the labourers, they saw a flock of people coming from one side. Among them was an elderly woman and accompanying her were three ladies clad in clean and pretty sarees, two women in salwar suits and a young lady wearing skintight jeans and a blue coloured top. That flock came and stopped near them. One among them beckoned a child to come near. The child looked at them and was scared to go near them. They said that they usually stood at the station and begged but due to lockdown that too had stopped.

“Hey, what have we to offer you? Somehow, we ourselves are managing to push through the day” said Ramswaroop stepping forward. “We really have nothing to give you” repeated Panditji. The ladies laughed at first and said “So far, we’ve been blocking the passersby at this toll station asking for money. We prayed for children and took money. We have been blessing “Flourish, Blossom, Stay healthy and wealthy, Live long,” to all. Wished from our heart that no evil eye should cast upon our donors. But today we have not come here to ask for anything but to give.” Explaining thus they began distributing food items they had with them. Deepali went close to them accompanied by children. They gave peanut chikkis, papdi ^{139(*)} and some other sweets to the children. Smiles of contentment spread on the faces of children. The ladies literally cuddled the small children. They had brought about a hundred or two homemade chapatis from their own homes for distribution. The sweets were from the sweet mart which was closed due to lockdown. The shopkeeper had given these free for distribution. The gujju-marwadi owner ^{140(*)} of the sweet mart gave away the sweets thinking that he would earn virtue for free as it would go into the mouths of the needy, instead of getting spoiled. These women were transgender. Like the workers on foot they, too, were rejects of the society. For the last eight days or so they came

to the toll station each day and performed their part helping the people.

All the four of them were overwhelmed by the help provided by the transgender people. Our society does not even consider them as human beings. How exclusion torments people at many levels! They endure so much suffering, yet they live with compassion. Even when it feels like everything is finished, they still remain humane. This humanity was exactly what they saw in them.

The four left after bidding goodbye to them as well as to the group of labourers and moved ahead. They always kept thinking while they walked. Though the new day dawned, the routine did not change at all. Walking on foot, slaving for food, worries about what would happen next constantly invoked terror in them! They felt terrible especially in the night – as though it was their adversary!

Every day they counted the days and nights with their fingers. Their gaze was fixed on the milestones on the road. Each day, they estimated how far they walked. They calculated how much of travel was now left. With this daily estimate they would work out the arithmetic of how many days more it would take. At times to themselves and sometimes talking to each other, the topic was only how much distance remained. Whenever they remembered their family members, they would become restless. They had travelled around twelve hundred kms together. When a fellow traveller reached his village, they would rejoice with him. At least for a while they would forget their sorrows. As though the hope that they too would reach their village today or tomorrow gave them more energy to walk for the next few days.

They were now famished. They had eaten only sweets at the toll station. As the chapatis were not enough, they had left it with the large group. Those people too had a long way to go. At least these four had little wheat flour and Maida though infested. They picked up dry twigs and wood lying on the way. As the forest touched the hill, they could easily get firewood. In case the area happened to be a plateau, there was no water nor firewood. Therefore, they always kept a small bundle of firewood with them.

A little further ahead was a place of pilgrimage called Maihar. How much ever they walked, they would not reach Maihar before noon the next day. They walked and walked and reached the village of Ghunwara at three o'clock. On the way, they spotted a lemon tree in a field. They stopped their caravan under the tree. Mishraji brought water from a nearby well and Arif made a stove from three stones and lit it. Ramswaroop and Deepali began to bake the chapatis. The flour they had was running out. They were unable to judge for how many days it would last, what is there to eat next? As it is, they ate only once a day. They starved in the night or sometimes in the day. Of late, they were gradually losing weight. They felt weak. They had a kilo of wheat flour and five kilos of infested Maida. The mahua flowers they had for so many days were over. There was no toast too. Only a bottle having some honey was left. Still there were about three hundred kilometres to go. They had already decided to get up early in the morning and walk till noon and in the evening walk till eight or nine pm to cover an added ten kilometres.

Taking some flour on a plate they removed the larvae from the Maida. They dried the Maida flour in the sun, kneaded it along with a little wheat flour and baked a few phulkas. They had brought down a few raw mangoes from a tree on the way behind. They made a chutney of these mangoes with salt. All of them ate and washed the utensils and sat quietly under the shade of the lemon tree.

By this time, it was evening. Even if they travelled further, they had to stop somewhere. So, they decided to spend the night there itself and leave early in the morning. They could not sleep so soon, however. So, they sat talking to the fellow workers who passed by. Some labourers travelled late into the night, and some got up early and travelled ahead. Due to the summer heat, not many people walked in the afternoon. To meet labourers accompanied by children, old people, women, and sick ones, was not easy as they avoided travelling in the afternoon. When these people travelled in the night, these four were asleep. When some labourers travelled

in the early morning, they were still asleep but finally the singular goal was to reach the destination.

They saw the group approach who was ahead or behind them every now and then. In the group were pregnant women. Accompanying them were two men, and two small children. They met this family daily somewhere on the road. But today, the pregnant woman came sitting on the backseat of the bicycle. A small boy sat on the bicycle rod in front. Bags hung on the handle. All the four observed them with curiosity. Until yesterday, they had no bicycle but now where has this bicycle come from! They stopped and asked them: “We bought this bicycle from a small village behind us.” They told.

Ramswaroop asked “Why are the villagers selling bicycles?” The fellow traveller said: “The condition of the labourers from village and cities is the same like us. The only difference is that they are half-starved and confined in their homes and we are neither here nor there, just hanging on the street. The questions how, what, and from where to eat everyday also harass them. They are in their huts, at home and we are in the open prison on the road. Both are in the same situation. They are in a hurry to get out of the house, and we are in a hurry to reach home! Due to the lockdown and lack of wages, they have no money in their hands. They cannot get out of their houses. At such a time, whether it is a bicycle or brass buttons or a suitcase they sell at throwaway prices to meet their daily needs at home. They shove the jewellery with them into the throats of moneylenders and take money on interest. They mortgage their land, articles, and their dwellings or sell them. This covid time is a golden age for the landlords throughout the country, for the builders, moneylenders, too. The gangs of the feudal lords, moneylenders have seized the opportunity in lockdown, making hay, amassing currency notes. Under the titles of saving groups, finance companies, the new moneylenders are booming legally. In order not to starve to death, the people are trying to get money from wherever they can.”

That man continued. “I bought this cycle from someone who used it daily for work. Just for four hundred rupees... Otherwise it would have cost me around two thousand rupees.” Anyway, for this man who walked home, even four hundred rupees was also too high!

They also thought that they should buy bicycle from somewhere. Two or three bicycles would enable them to reach the village faster and make the travel easier, they thought. Until that family was far out of sight, they thought about the bicycle. Mishraji had accepted the challenge to get a bicycle. He waited just for the morning. They discussed this under the lemon tree till late in the night.

Deepali was tall and pretty with stylish tresses. She wore an expensive watch in one hand and a golden bracelet in the other. She was highly educated and earned a good salary. Until now she had lived her life in a quite comfortable way. Her family owned a nice farmland. Her father had a government job. She left her home to be independent, accomplish something and stand on her own feet. Due to her innate intelligence and her education, she easily got a job that paid well. Her outlook was neither narrow nor carefree. She was from a world of big shopping malls, Chinese food, pizza pasta, burgers but she had a smartness inherited from her small town. She was sensitive to the world around. Everybody else in her house were vegetarian but she ate meat. She was quite fond of biriyani. When she walked briskly among them, people on the road stared at her. She wore a gold necklace, earrings, and a thin gold ring on her finger. One could make out from a distance that she was from a well-to-do family. The moment she arrived these three had told her to remove and keep away her ornaments. Judging from her expensive sandals and her walking gait, one could easily tell that she was not one of them. She occasionally spent money as and when needed. Since the time she joined them, nobody heard her complaining or her likes and dislikes. When she ate dried rotis and chapatis, they pitied her. The girl who drank coke, mineral water, now drank water from the stream with cupped hands. When she spent the days eating chutney, and dried pieces of roti, they felt she was one of them. She was related to no one, yet she was attached to all. Panditji, Ramswaroop and Arif all the three were always vigilant about the safety of this young woman, Deepali. Anyhow the four of them took care of each other. She too became one of them and lived in complete trust.

In the so many days of travel, Deepali became aware and could judge each one's character. She never underestimated anyone. Each of them was no less big-hearted in comparison. Though they were economically weak, by heart they were billionaires. She had met such good-hearted people for the second time in her life. The first time was at JNU when she met student boys and girls who

carried the red flag as activists. At that time, she had seen such big-hearted companions. She had seen these activists spending the entire day on samosa ^{141(*)} and tea immersed in the movement, living the life of activists. Subsequently, she never saw such humanity among the many who worked in the corporate world earning fat salaries. She now understood and felt the difference among people. That was the reason Deepali felt a close and profound companionship in them.

They got up in the morning and lit up yesterday's stove of three stones. They had soaked half a glass of flour in the night itself. The summer made it ferment quickly. They made Ambil using the flour. After drinking Ambil, they set off on their next journey. They kept some Ambil for fermentation purpose and were to drink it again in the afternoon. In such summer heat, Ambil proves to be quite useful for the journey. First, it is easy to make, second it takes less flour, and most of all fills the stomach, and does not make you tired. In wet and dry drought ridden region with scant food, Ambil which is easy to make, must have come into existence.

Their entire day was focussed on getting the bicycles. Whenever they came across a small or a big village on the way, Mishraji made everybody halt on the highway and he himself went into the village to search if anyone had an old bicycle to sell. Even if someone did have a bicycle lying somewhere, it was so old and damaged as though made in 1857. Some bicycles had no tires, and some no seats. The chain itself of some bicycles was broken. Arif was ready to buy even such a bicycle and repair it. It was indeed difficult to get spare parts. All the bicycle shops in the towns were closed. Only some shops selling essential grocery goods were open. They could not get a functional bicycle. They went to every village on the way, enquired repeatedly. They spent quite a long time in this. They had spent this entire day searching for bicycles. Finally, they got a bicycle in Arva village, but deal did not get finalised despite their sincere efforts. Much more prices had to be paid. In the end through a village broker's help, the deal was finalised, and they bought the bicycle paying twelve hundred rupees and left for Maihar village. Now many things could be carried on the bicycle. To try and get two or three more bicycles was to frantically continue.

The mountains on both sides of the road still seemed to be accompanying them. They now saw the last couple of mountains. They felt as though these high hills and mountains were about to bid a farewell to them. On top of a high mountain, was the

Sharadamata temple ^{142(*)}. This is the only Shardamata temple in the whole of India. At other times, this place always teemed with devotees of the goddess who came from outside. Many people come here to take vows or to fulfil their vows. This goddess is popular for her blessings on vows taken by devotees.

The residences, numerous ashrams, dharmshalas ^{143(*)} constructed here for the stay of devotees lay deserted. The temple road used to be crowded with four-wheelers that came from outside. But today not a single vehicle was visible. Any newcomer in the town, if spotted by locals on the street, was sure to be mobbed by local touts pestering “Do you want to go to the temple? Do you need a room?” They accompanied and escorted the outsiders to the hotel nearby. Rattling about clean room, hot or cold water, clean toilet, TV, etc. they bent their waist showing hospitality. They carried the baggage of the travellers. They stood until their bath was over. Then they would usher the devotees to the temple for Darshan ^{144(*)}. The devotees would know later that this fake hospitality was a part of their job and sustenance. But today this whole area was silent. Nobody was seen standing at the usual junction. Those who had taken vows before the Goddess had postponed their program to fulfil them. In general, the vows made to God had to be fulfilled by a particular day and date whatever the obstacle, is the belief. “The debt or the vow must be paid on time!” This was the understanding of the area. But today the fear of the pandemic was much greater than the fear of God or religion. Those who commit whatever deeds in the name of God and religion, today showed their backs to the God to save their lives.

The flowers and garland shops on the way, women sitting with heaps of vermillion, sandal paste sellers and appliers, sweet shops with lahya ^{145(*)}, batashahs ^{146(*)}, pedas for Prasad ^{147(*)}, shops selling colourful sacred clothes, tippets, the bands with Jai Matadi taglines and bangles stalls, shops of holy threads, books on worship and rituals, shops selling items for the pooja like coconut, betelnut, ash, etc. none of them could be seen today. Those on the street who eagerly pointed the way to the lodgings, were behind closed doors.

They were poised for the moment the lockdown would end so that they could restart their business. The four walked towards the temple on the hill hoping that they would get something or the other, but it did not take much time for them to be disappointed. There was not a single pandit, the travel help desk was lying vacant. ‘Our highway is much better! At least there are people alive like us and little activity,’ they thought.

In fact, they were to go straight from the highway. Every day onwards from Katni though, Panditji repeatedly used to persist “My distant uncle stays here. He has a big coconut shop. The coconuts in truckload are directly brought from Kerala. He has a good influence in the temple area. His name is renowned. He is originally from Kashi and most of all, my distant uncle. We could get grains, flour, etc. free of cost. If possible, we can get a bicycle and we can also get home-cooked food...” That was why upon Panditji’s insistence they came here following an inner trail.

Mumbai’s Pandit Mishraji was in search of coconut shop owner Pandit Mishraji. But this coconut uncle was not at all to be found. How could our Pandit Mishraji accept defeat, after all he was from Mumbai! His attention was drawn to a woman carrying water from a well nearby and from her attire Mishraji concluded at once that she was a female pandit. He asked her: “Where does the coconut pandit Mishraji stay?” She pointed out the house with her finger from afar and said: “That yellow building ahead on the left.” Panditji took Ramswaroop with him and went in front of that yellow building and started calling out “Uncle, we are from Banaras, Brij Mohan Mishra, grandson of Maharaja Rampur’s family pandit Suryanarayan Mishraji.” They did not listen even after calling out aloud. After yelling many times, finally a voice could be heard from inside that yellow building “He is not at home...” The door remained shut. A woman shouted from inside. Finally, Ramswaroop took Mishraji by hand and dragged him to the place where Arif and Deepali stood. In an instant, the entire circumstance was understood. Coconut Mishraji would have been at home in the yellow building on the upper floor, eating crispy

kachoris ^{148(*)} or watching TV or doing something else. If at all Panditji was to be invited inside, even the coconut aunty could have recognised him. In such a strict lockdown and in such harsh summer where could pandit-uncle go? Panditji realised that the coconut uncle himself sent the message that he was not at home.

The kith and kin, relatives showed their backs to each other. Human beings estranged from each other. Even blood relatives did not recognise each other in this pandemic. Everyone felt that the other has come to take his or her life. Panditji had seen the ostracism of caste. He also knew about religious hatred. But now such a situation had arisen that even ostracism was being practiced among relatives. Panditji came to the realisation of yet another fact that the higher one went up in the caste hierarchy, the ostracism among relatives was much more intense.

He had called out with a big hope, but the coconut uncle refused to even acknowledge, and this distressed Panditji. He could not endure this behaviour. He felt it as an insult. His self-esteem was wounded, and his mind was completely devastated.

They walked their way back through Maihar lanes and reached their rightful place, meaning, on the highway. There was Royal Punjab hotel at the junction. They stopped there for a long time. Mishraji put the water bottle in his mouth and took two sips and started walking again. The temperature was even higher than usual. Mishraji felt uneasy. His head ached. He felt as though his whole body was draining away. He felt dizzy. In a short while he was soaked in sweat. It seemed he had developed a slight fever. Panditji could not understand whether it was the heat or coconut uncle's rebuke which caused the problem. In the same state, he took the road ahead. It was close to evening now. They were thinking of stopping somewhere, take rest and eat something, if there is nothing else drink Ambil. They searched for a flat surface where they could rest. They tied Mishraji's luggage on the bicycle.

They left for Amarpatan indeed but in between they stopped at the Lakhanpur bypass. They laid their baggage at nice open place

beside the bypass road. The typically babbling Mishraji was quiet today. Mishraji's fever went up. The body's heat was unusual. The hands and feet ached severely. His headache too had increased. Arif cleaned the surrounding area and spread the bedsheet for Mishraji to sleep. He asked Mishraji to rest for a while, lit the stove to prepare hot tea for Mishraji and took out sugar and tea leaves from the bag so that all others could also drink. The concern now was only enough sugar was left for a single cup. The grains, pulses and other items were almost over. They could not buy anything as all the shops in Maihar were closed. Mishraji always did the work of getting the items. He took advantage of being a pandit as much as possible. He gathered information of important people in the village and using their names, got the things. Whichever village he went, there he asked who were the Brahmins there, what were their names. He spontaneously gathered complete information. Earlier Panditji used to be happy that MP region would be over soon and all of them would enter UP territory. He always repeated which of his relatives lived on the way, whoever were his acquaintances. But today's experience instantly opened his eyes. None of his relatives could be trusted. "When he came to Banaras, this asshole coconut uncle stayed at our house for a full week, gobbled up all our monthly ration in eight days, the bastard! This fricking epidemic has broken all relations, estranged the people, humans are no more humans..." He had begun to say. Those very relatives on whom he had faith refused even to recognize him. This experience jolted him severely.

"The people from our caste, from our religion are our own, the other castes are outsiders. When times are bad, people from our own religion, and our own caste only come to our aid"- proved to be a lie. The ground on which he lived his life so far, the bogus values upheld by him, all had crumbled. It has been proved false. The vanity of his Sanatan Dharma, his caste, its sham surfaced in front of him in an instant. Just as the monster made of paper and bamboo sticks burns and topples down, his caste and religious pride preserved carefully till now had collapsed. He was

completely shaken. That Ramswaroop and Arif were not abominable low castes but pure human beings, this realisation had jerked him awake from his slumber. The great truth that one must live and keep relationship based on humanity as an eternal value arose suddenly before him in this journey. The exhaustion one feels when on the edge of abandoning old culture and accepting the new was natural. Discarding old values and accepting the new exhausted Panditji at his age.

“The anguished labourers who walk on foot like us on the road are much superior to our relatives or caste. Arif, Ramswaroop and Deepali are true companions. These are our dear ones,” he felt. “They never discriminate, they understand each other, care for each other, so from now onwards I consider them my folks...” Panditji could not help thinking that they are the true kindred.

Arif somehow managed to make barely a cup of tea and gave it to Mishraji. He also gave him a paracetamol tablet. Panditji took the tablet, had tea, and lay down intending to sleep but could not. When he pulled the cover over him, he felt hot, and if he removed it, he felt cold. Half asleep, he could not bear the storm of raging thoughts in his head.

Doubts became doubts
Each one in their own search
For something beneficially dubious
Like the naked search for clothes

The season of pandemic
Anxiety, depression, and helplessness
Meet each other
Like the three rivers
In my city

Blood drips from the nails of TV channels
And fire from the sky
Labourers coming back even now
Like crores of broken dreams returning
Toward a pair of awaiting eyes

- **Anurag Anant**

The Ambil made in the morning had nicely fermented by afternoon. Arif added some flour into it and swelled it up. He took a little Ambil and kept it in a different box and tightly closed it with the lid. Later he gave the rest of the Ambil to everybody. Crocin tablet made Panditji sweat. The fever had reduced. Fatigue and weakness remained. Occasionally, Arif gave him two-three glasses of Ambil, some gruel along with lemon pickle. After consuming them he felt energetic.

They had Maida with them. So, they could have made rotis and phulkas. Since the Maida was infested with larvae, they made Ambil and drank their stomach full right in the morning. Now all felt sluggish, and they lay down one by one at the same place.

Panditji every now and then got up and sat. He could not sleep whatever. After travelling on foot so far Mishraji had never felt so tired before. However, today, he felt more tired, his hands and feet hurt. Seeing him in pain, Ramswaroop and Arif massaged his legs. By this time evening slipped into darkness and the stars showed the way to the moon.

The next day morning all of them awoke late. Panditji was still asleep. Sensing with the hand it was noticeable that the fever had not fully come down. The crocin tablet reduced the fever and made him sweat but the fever used to return. The sweat had drained all his energy away. They all became worried. If the fever did not come down, it was difficult to continue the next journey. Now to take Panditji to a clinic meant taking him to Amarpatan, as there was no other place and to reach Amarpatan would be a walk of twenty kilometres. Taking Mishraji there by walk was difficult.

When the sun struck his eyes, Mishraji somehow woke and stood up. He decided to walk, showed readiness but had no strength in his legs. He walked, yet whenever he saw a tree, he sat under it. Mishraji coughed a little now. As he kept coughing, everybody felt even more worried.

In the Covid period, even when someone coughed a bit, got short of breath, or began to gasp, it was serious. He would be quarantined and sent straight to the special Covid ward. Over and above, they were “travelling?!” So, they kept thinking how to tackle this problem. Mishraji’s luggage was tied to the bicycle and making him sit on the back seat of the bicycle, Arif rode it ahead double seated. He crossed the uphill sections holding the bicycle handles with both hands and pulling it like a rickshaw. Even though he sweat a lot, gasped for breath, he did not allow Mishraji to get down and walk. Mishraji felt awful and repeatedly said “I will walk.” But it was impossible since even if he walked a little, he would be breathless, and would start coughing.

They struggled to get flour today by whatever means. Deepali was to go to the village to get the needed items, but Amarpatan town was still far away. They stopped on the road itself to sift the flour. Since there was no sieve, they spread the flour on a shirt and kept it in the sunshine. Some larvae came up and some lay dead in the flour itself. Thinking what to do, Deepali took her netted stole and sifted the flour. Now they had Maida which would only suffice for two days. There was some millet flour left to make Ambil. They

had to make do with this until they could find something. Towards evening, they reached Amarpatan bypass. They searched for a clean and safe place where they could settle down.

A road went directly from outside Amarpatan and the other through the town. Since their items ran out, they needed to go into the town. It was evening. During the lockdown whether the shops would be open was always doubtful and even if so, it was uncertain that the shops would have the goods. They stopped at a nearby closed dhaba. Near the dhaba stood a handpump. A little further was a well. There was a bucket to collect water and a large water tank made of cement concrete. This must have been the usual stop for the truck drivers. They stopped at a shed beside the dhaba. They prepared the stove. Arif spread a sheet neatly at a nearby place for Panditji and asked him to take rest. It must be said that even Panditji's fever was a bit naughty like him! It appeared to go low and rise again.

The sun was beginning to set but it was not dark yet. The streetlights were on, and the road was well lit. Deepali took Ramswaroop along with her and went to the town to buy the articles. They entered the town knowing nothing. The road ahead went in the direction of Municipality and

another road went straight to join the highway from another direction. They could not understand in which direction is the market. An eerie silence prevailed on the Amarpatan road. Occasionally some person or the other could be seen on the street. The deserted streets, deserted lanes, and closed houses... as though everyone had abandoned the town! Nobody could be seen on the street to tell them anything. After walking some distance, they could see some people and they walked in that direction. This road went through the town and met the highway ahead. A little further ahead, people stood in groups of five or six. The shutters of all the shops were closed. The four wheelers were parked beside the road. They approached the group to enquire if any of the shops were open. They understood then that it was an outlet selling

government liquor. The outlet was presently closed, and the groups stood there for a chance of getting liquor stealthily through the backdoor. Many were drunk, some were ready to drink. Ramswaroop enquired with them about the grocery shop. “Only liquor is available here, if you need to buy articles then the timings given are from eight in the morning to twelve noon. For that you need to go left from the next junction,” said the person. Suddenly, the people standing there looked alarmed and started running helter-skelter. Some ran into the lanes and some on the main road. Before they could realise, the police van stopped near them. The police came out of the vehicle and started beating Ramswaroop hard with sticks.

He got hit two three times on the legs, four five times on the back and many welts appeared on his back. What to do and how, they were not able to think. Deepali tried to intervene and began to explain that they came in search of food items. But the police were not in a mood to listen to anything. When Deepali quietly took out a five hundred rupee note from her purse and stuck it to the policeman’s hand, the police left them alone. Their aim was to obtain something to eat, and it turned for the worse.

Arif was ready to make phulkas by the time they returned from the town. He could see nothing in both their hands. Looking at the state of Ramswaroop he could guess what had happened. Deepali snapped her fingers and cursed the police.

Ramswaroop's legs were quite swollen up. His back ached due to the blows from the bamboo sticks. Arif took water from the tank and gave it to Ramswaroop so that he would feel better. Ramswaroop took cold water bath. He felt slightly okay but his legs and back still hurt.

The phulkas made from Maida were ready. They had not tasted the vegetables for a long time. They used to eat with spice and salt or at times with lemon pickle and drank water. They pushed through the days as they came. Even though they had money, they could not buy the items they wanted. They had to reach their village. They travelled starving once a day. The pickle in the bottle was touching the bottom. It was dry and only a few slices remained. They sparingly used whatever was left. They struggled to preserve whatever was there and ate little. But that too was getting over. They could see the devil of famine making faces and laughing menacingly at them. It was quite late. All of them were starving. They ate phulkas with the pickle slices. When deprived of food, even sawdust becomes tasty. They ate their stomach full!

They had not eaten anything since morning, they had forgotten breakfast, etc. Nowadays they ate late in the afternoon so that they do not feel hungry at night. This was Ramswaroop's idea. During college days, low caste boys from small villages like him ate at four in the afternoon to save their scant money, and study in the night. They became lethargic after eating stomach full of phulkas, but it was due to the heaviness in the body. Usually, they felt sleepy after eating but of late they found it difficult to fall asleep. Despite walking throughout the day, they stayed awake for long time in the night. Today too, they could not sleep. They discussed about their household matters till late. They could see the labourers walking on the road in that night's darkness. Some groups went from Satna, Prayagraj via Katni-Jabalpur route, and some from Katni to Prayagraj, Satna, Rewa, Varanasi. From wherever they came, to wherever they headed, they were grief-stricken all the same. On each highway in the country, torrent of labourers could be seen. The toilers occupied every highway. Now, in the last leg of the

journey, the crowd lessened gradually, the caravans turned into groups. They walked in groups of four or five people. Some went with a companion, and some went alone. Many people reached their homes. Some still walked.

Maybe it was twelve in the night. Two young travellers seeking cover, came in their direction. They stopped near them. They took a bucket full of water from the well and gulped it down. They seemed tired, exhausted; must have been hungry. They looked around and opened a bundle. They had filled the bundle with wheat after stealing from a field and kept it hidden. The farmers in this region usually sow wheat in December. They harvest it during April May. Soon after harvest, they burn the field, till it and sow the next crop of wheat immediately. Some sow pulses or winter crops together. During lockdown, no labourers were available for harvest. The wholesale shops, market committees were not open and as a result the crops lay unharvested in the field. The big farmers did not venture into their field. In some fields, the wheat was ready, in some fields the wheat was yet to dry. In some fields there were only wet unripe wheat.

These two travellers had walked the entire day starving and could not sleep in the night. Instead of sitting awake all night, they entered a field in the night to look for something to eat. The wheat had grown well. Some harvest was done, but the sheaves of grain still lay in the field. Those two then collected the ears of wheat, threshed, and filled them in bundles. In a hurry they took the small bundles and came to the place where all rested. Then they took out the wheat, but they had nothing to winnow it. They also could not eat raw wheat and were immensely hungry. Moreover, their tired bodies ached, and felt guilty for stealing. They were at sea. Arif approached them and helped them clean the wheat. He relit the extinguished stove. He took a vessel, poured water, and dropped two-three measures of wheat into it. The soft wheat cooked in an hour and right away the two scooped the hot wheat slurry and put it into their mouth. Their mouth steamed burning their tongue. But they were not ready to let go and were unable to open their closed

mouths. Their tongues and upper palate were severely singed. They took a gulp of water and swallowed the boiled wheat. “How heedless is the hunger of a human! What all hunger makes one do! Some burn the mouth to calm the stomach and some people just for a change of palate, spend five hundred rupees on a pizza, one hundred-fifty rupees on a Red Bull can. Which appetite is greater? Changing the palate or stealing to calm the stomach?” Thought Arif.

Deepali told them to wait until it becomes cooler. But they could not listen at all. Then Deepali mixed some cold water in the wheat. They finished off the wheat in a trice and sat leaning against the wall. Their stomach had calmed down. They had been starving for three days, walked drinking only water, nobody even gave them alms, and everybody drove them away from afar. On nights they plucked something or the other from the creepers growing in somebody’s yard and ate them. Showing their thighs, they said they had twice been bitten by dogs. The lesions were clearly visible. When they narrated the incidents, they burst into tears.

The exiles, wanderers, people yearning to meet their loved ones, walking thousands of kilometres, feeling that living is luxury were not only these two people; there were many, in various places. On each highway in the country, starving, mute people, hanging their heads down and legs moving mechanically forward formed a walking colony. The newspapers, news channels had become puppets of the government. The news was created on behalf of the government. This news was blared and yelled into the ears. A girl who had carried her father on a bicycle had become the role model. Instead of focusing on her helplessness, her love for paternity and her courage were being exhibited. The truth was being killed. The meaning of truth was being twisted with lot of clamour and chatter. The condition of the labourers, the oppressed, the walking poor, the slum dwellers, farmers, the tillers had become pitiful. The lockdown was imposed in many countries to contain the pandemic. The lockdown in those countries was decided by a definite policy. Their state took care of its people. At times tough decisions need to be taken for the public good. When the people are taken into confidence, the people themselves co-operate. But here in this country, it was quite the contrary. The government had no definite policy, completely ignored the people having yellow ration cards and treated them like trash. It used the pandemic as a political platform. The people who gave helpful advice for the benefit of public were being sidelined. This was affecting the common people. The rich people watched the pandemic on TV in their farmhouses on hill stations, the bureaucrats who had amassed enough for seven generations taught their children about Ratan Tata's simplicity and counted the floors of Ambani's residence.

After they woke up, they completed the morning chores, brushed teeth with charcoal and washed their mouths. They took water from the well and bathed as usual. They readied and walked as though going to work. The only difference was that instead of assuredly returning home to their wives and children, they had to walk non-stop, endlessly on foot and that has become their life. They were walking meant that they had a body which was alive, that was all.

Arif took the bicycle, made Mishraji sit on the backseat, and both left for the highway. Deepali and Ramswaroop were ready to go to Amarpatan and were to meet at the junction where the road going through the town met the highway. In any case they had to get the necessary items.

They reached the same place where Ramswaroop was beaten by the police, then they turned ahead at the chowk, but the shops were closed. There was a small shop, and the shopkeeper stayed there itself. He gave goods from the house; his shop also did not have the items they needed. They could get only sugar, tea leaves, chilli spices, salt, and pulses. There was no flour, and no wheat. The shopkeeper gave them a kilo of rice from his own house. Although they could not get the desired flour, still they felt comforted with the tea leaves. They bought a good two kilos of sugar, and two kilos of jaggery. They simply estimated that even if nothing were available, they could drink tea to overcome tiredness and push through the day. Also, now even if the bags were heavy, they had a bicycle with them. As they turned to go to another shop for the flour, a municipal vehicle came up announcing on the mike “Do not let any stranger into the town, in case you see any outside person, immediately inform the police station.” They heard this announcement and the two of them ran into a lane. Since they had no bags or baggage, no one suspected them. They passed a few alleys, crossed one or two chowks, and came near a hardware shop which was closed. There was a flour mill beside the hardware store. A woman broomed the mill and was cleaning it. Ramswaroop went to the woman and asked her to give some flour if she had. The woman used to keep aside some wheat and millet flour while grinding. Not only this woman but any flour mill person would always pilfer some flour. They got around 8 to 10 kilos of mixed flour. They were certain that they could make food for few more days with it and were happy. More importantly, they got sugar, jaggery and tea leaves. Now they had no hope of getting any articles ahead and even if they did not, they could make do with whatever was with them now.

They went to the highway through the town road, the highway was about three kilometres away. Today was much hotter than usual. The sun burnt at nine o'clock itself. They had to walk and bear the wrath of the sun for the entire day. They came to the highway and searched for Mishraji and Arif. Neither of them could be found. They were hungry. It was getting hot. They were irritated for sure. Their bodies were wet with sweat. They could see many travellers on the highway but not their friends. If they go ahead and in case there is a road going into the village at the beginning of the bypass, then they would not meet. They sat under a tree waiting anxiously. They became tired sitting. They had nothing in the stomach since morning, and no water. Their lips were dry. There was a colony of ten to twenty houses in front of them. They could see these two coming from there on a bicycle. They felt relief seeing them. The moment they arrived they gave water bottles to Deepali and Ramswaroop. It had buttermilk. There were more cows and buffalos in a small nearby village. As Arif and Panditji got the information that milk, curd, ghee, buttermilk was available, they had gone to that colony. They had bought ghee, curd, and drank two full glasses of milk too.

“If we continue to go at this snail’s pace, it will take one more month. We must go further. My village will come soon. Then Ramswaroop’s village and finally both of yours.” Deepali said pointing at Mishraji and Arif. They still had about three hundred kilometres of travel. They had walked about twelve to thirteen hundred kilometres so far.

Today was hot. They decided to go further ten kilometres, cook, and rest for a while and again travel in the evening. They kept an eye on the distance milestone. There were big sign boards on the highway. It showed the distances for major cities like Varanasi, Lucknow, Kanpur, Allahabad. On the highway there were huge hoardings displaying slogans of ‘Prosperous India, Thriving India.’ Panditji felt that these seductive advertisements and the mantras he recited about heaven and salvation, were the same. The big blue boards on the road displayed how many kilometres to Satna, Rewa,

and their direction. These boards reminded them that they had to reach Rewa and once they cross Rewa, they would reach Hanumana border. Discussing their route, they continued to walk.

They came up to the Famous Shuklaji Dhaba on the highway. Since the advertisement said so, it could be called famous! There was a canal in front. To cook, they collected twigs on the way, and gathered cow dung. As water was available, they began to cook. Lighting the stove they made tea. After drinking tea, to finish off the Maida they had, they at once made phulkas out of it. Today they had ghee, one kilo of rice, and around eight kilos of mixed flour. Also, jaggery and sugar. In addition, a bicycle to hang all these bags! They were richer than the king of Saudi Arabia! They ate their stomachs full. Mishraji felt slightly better today but the cough persisted, and the wheezing continued. The body was slightly feverish. Still, he worked today. Ramswaroop's body pain had ceased. The welts on his back could be still seen but his suffering had subsided. Today they had made plenty of phulkas so were quite content that more can be had in the night with ghee or sugar.

The heat of the sun had reduced now. They walked again. Now the next stop would be at Bela village or at the junction there. They would reach Bela a night. They walked. Darkness fell. The stars twinkled brightly. The moon accompanied them. The cold breeze blew from the otherwise hot Chambal ravines during the day. They did not feel the tiredness. The atmosphere was pleasant. They saw fireflies glow when they walked. Bela village came closer. It must have been eight or nine o'clock. There was jungle of bushes on the way. They went through the bushes. A family had taken shelter on the wayside. They were scared. Deepali called them to come close. That family had gone ahead in front of them. The same family that they saw who had a bicycle with them.

Since long time, this family of two men, two women, and two small children had been accompanying them, at times ahead, sometimes behind, or other times with them. Those two women were pregnant. That family travelled carrying their luggage on the bicycle, sometimes making the small children sit on the bicycle, and at times these pregnant women. They had gone to work in Navi Mumbai. Since those women were pregnant, they were paid special attention, and they were also given meat which was hunted by the Adivasis from the group. They were given honey from the jungle, edible gum, mahua, tendu, and wild berries and such. At ten in the night, one of the women started showing symptoms of labour pain. As the pain became intolerable, they somehow made her sleep beneath a tree beside the road.

She was already seven months pregnant when she began to walk. Today, forty-five days were completed on the continual journey. She also had a primary health centre's care card for pregnant mom. She used to receive iron and calcium tablets. But during the lockdown, she could not visit the health centre. Also, the Covid treatment had started there. Due to Covid, the rest of the diseases had become minor. None of the primary health centres on the way granted her even a simple admission. Their village was nearby. Even nearby meant around fifty kilometres beyond Rewa and in all about a hundred kilometres away.

They had decided to get her delivery done by the neighbour midwife once they reach the village.

“The old woman Ramdulari from the neighbouring village is popular for this kind of work in the entire area. People from places nearby come to pick her up day or night on the carts, and nowadays on autorickshaws, four wheelers, and sometimes on tractors. Our whole family is in her hands. Earlier, even she was delivered by Ramdulari as midwife,” the other pregnant woman told Deepali. They had felt slightly relaxed as now the village was closer. The pregnant woman also wanted to go the village and wished to have her delivery managed by Ramdulari. Anyway, there was no other

alternative! She counted the days. However mighty claims we may make of being superpower, the fact still is that in the rural areas and villages, modern health facilities are not available! Leave aside the Fortis hospital shown in movies like *Three Idiots*, even primary health centres were not there!

If they had not been caught in the storm and hailstones on the other day, they would have reached their village or somewhere close enough. The hailstorm had wrecked them. Their things had become wet, the sheets became drenched, somehow, they had found shelter. So, they succeeded in saving both the pregnant woman and the unborn child from the hailstorm. Suddenly at night she started having unbearable contractions in the belly. Also, the other woman was six months pregnant. In such a tough time, these troubled women and the labourer brethren asked Deepali for help.

Deepali lacked knowledge in this matter. The other woman was quite young, and a new bride. She too was scared. She was pregnant herself for the first time. It was not wise to carry the woman in labour sitting on the bicycle to the nearby government clinic and even if done so, the treatment was not guaranteed. They had a “good” experience of government clinics behind them. If taken to a private clinic on the way, being migrant labourers, they were not allowed to even approach and were driven away. In the name of social distancing a new ostracism had arisen, and a new notion of untouchability had begun. What to do and how, they had no idea. These four people were worried and stopped to help but could not, even if they wanted to. The woman cried aloud then stayed quiet for a while and again screamed aloud. She lay on a sheet under the tree.

Ramswaroop came forward at this time. But her husband did not allow Ramswaroop or any other man to come near her. Male mentality! The husband thinking of himself as her rightful owner, no other man should see her even if his woman’s life is lost. “Earlier, in the princely state of Rampur, a doctor examining the woman had a curtain in between them and the doctor’s stethoscope

was eight to ten feet in length.” – Arif recalled what his Ammi ^{149(*)} had told him in his childhood. The woman was in terrible pain. She was screaming. Ramswaroop told Arif to light the stove, heat the water and make jaggery tea. He recalled that when he had bought an axe from a blacksmith on Nashik Road, he also had got a knife for free. Seeing the knife with Mishraji, Ramswaroop advised sharpening it as fast as possible. “After sharpening, boil it in water” he added, and he got absorbed himself in his work. A knife was needed anyway to cut the umbilical cord after delivery.

Deepali prepared the jaggery tea and gave it sip by sip to the woman in labour. Deepali comforted her, but nobody knew what to do next. Ramswaroop whispered something in Arif’s ear. Then Arif left for nearby Bela village taking her husband on the bicycle to get help if they could.

Ramswaroop explained to Deepali in simple language “the pregnancy period and the baby’s weight decide the time of delivery. Sometimes mental stress, physical tiredness leads to premature delivery, the pregnant woman’s health affects the newborn baby. Delivery begins when the uterus contracts. Just check and let me know whether uterus has contracted and check if the thickness of the cervix has narrowed down. Watch out for excessive contraction of the uterus and if so tell me at once. Do check for bleeding.” He then gave few more instructions to Deepali. All this was going over Deepali’s head and yet she listened intently, staring at Ramswaroop.

It happened exactly as Ramswaroop said. But there was no bleeding. The woman had severe labour pangs and was in pain. She screamed at the top of her voice. Ramswaroop went close to her and looking at the opening said that it would take another two hours and asked her to drink jaggery tea.

The water had boiled. He searched for an implement for cutting the umbilical cord post-delivery. In the bustle of taking the husband with him, Arif had forgotten to put the knife in boiling water. Sometime back Panditji had bought one razor blade. When there

was Hindu-Muslim hostility on the streets, using the same razor blade they had shaved Arif and transformed him into a Hindu. Panditji began to search for the razor blade. They had thrown away the blade on the road somewhere. But something had to be done urgently. Ramswaroop needed a nice strong thread or something similar. Deepali did not understand a thing, and Panditji was utterly ignorant about this. “At the time of birth, the baby is attached to the mother by an umbilical cord. To cut this cord a knife is needed,” Ramswaroop explained. The knife was nowhere to be found.

After hearing another loud scream from the woman, Deepali and Ramswaroop both went close to her. The bleeding had started and time for a new life to emerge into the world was getting close. As the birth pains grew in intensity, her cries spread in all the directions in the deserted forest. The other woman spread a sheet, completely baffled. The labouring woman was in unbearable pain, now she was not shy of Ramswaroop anymore, and obeyed him. To her he was her God, and he was the guardian of her baby. Now again she let out a loud cry. She was getting ready. The pain had intensified. She felt dizzy. Darkness loomed in front of her. She convulsed in sharp unbearable pains again. She was drenched in sweat and clenching her fists started screaming loudly. In rising pangs of pain, she held her breath biting her lips. Now with full strength and inhalation, she screamed and calmly lay silent on the ground. A new life had come into this world. Ramswaroop told her that the baby was safe, she remained calm. The knot was tied quickly and then finally the umbilical cord was cut with an axe as the only choice.

In this soon-to-be superpower country, a new life took birth on the roadside dust. To welcome it there were four-five trudging, famished people with swollen, sore legs.

In a little while, Arif and her husband came back from the village empty-handed. Seeing the baby in his wife’s arms, the husband kissed the baby passionately. At that moment of sheer happiness how could questions as to what and how, arise in his mind!

Many such births took place on the road but there was no Ramswaroop there. The government was engrossed in only showing ‘Mon-key Baat’ ^{150(*)}, ‘Swasth Bharat’ ^{151(*)} dreams. “At some point the people will question this shameless government, all accounts will be settled, this is public – they know it all...” Arif mumbled.

Worship not the Brahmin who has no virtue, says Raidas
152(*)

Worship the Chandaal ^{153(*)}, who is a treasure of virtue
and skill!

- **Saint Raidas**

It was past twelve in the night. The baby and the mother both were safe. Arif made tea for all. They ate afternoon's phulkas with the tea and spread the sheet to sleep. They lay on the sheet, counted the stars, and chatted appreciating Ramswaroop's skills. Everybody agreed that if it were not for Ramswaroop, the baby would not have seen the light of this world. Panditji unable to contain, asked the question in everybody's mind "My friend, Rame! Where did you learn this skill, you have not learnt medicine, then where did you get this amazing knowledge?"

Ramswaroop spoke "This art is our family's identity. The identity of our caste. This art is in our blood from our grandmother, great-grandmother, great-great grandmother. My mother worked as a mid-wife. My grandmothers, both from mother's and father's side, as well as all other women in the household are doing this work since many generations. My father played a special musical instrument called kalat ^{154(*)}. The black coloured long kalat cannot be played by anyone easily. For that you need to hold a long breath and keep the air in the stomach and then release it; one gets exhausted when playing it. Meri Pyari Beheniya... ^{155(*)} in this song you must have heard kalat. Our grandfather was a musical band player for processions. Many generations ago, we were originally Matangs ^{156(*)} of Marathwada from Maharashtra. Our original surname is More. My grandfather's grandfather meaning my great-great grandfather was employed in the royal court. In honour of the royal guests, weddings, and festivals, he did the work of playing kalat. The elder women in our household, worked as midwives for childbirth in palaces and mansions. We have brought the kids of Peshwas, their sirdars ^{157(*)} in this world. Our mothers and grandmothers have aided in the childbirth of their women. Be

it Bajirao or some other Peshwa, their mothers' pregnancy and post-delivery massage was done by my family members. During the last days when Peshwa counted his pension at Brahmavarta ^{158(*)}, a Marathi Brahmin was brought to Kashi for their pooja, and other religious rituals and my grandfather's grandfather was also brought along with him to play the shehnai during pooja. From their principalities, many rich princely rulers, provincial heads, heads of princely states, landlords used to send their priests, their helpers and the Brahmins performing pooja to Kashi for immersing their ancestors' ashes for their salvation. These priests and others lived here as dependants; and are here even now. There are pandits of many landlords from beyond Baroda, Gwalior to Tamilnadu, Kerala, up to Mysore. They still do the religious work of recording the dates of their deaths, post death rituals, cremation, poojas, urns, lighting lamps, etc. Peshwas were more in favour of the Ganges. It is said that, during the battle at Panipat ^{159(*)}, in the Peshwa army there were more people seeking darshan of the Ganges than the number of soldiers in the army. The Peshwas spent their pension on the shores of Ganges itself. We, meaning our ancestors came along with those Peshwa's Brahmins. We played shehnai, and poongis on the ghats of Kashi. We came here and changed our surnames from More to Maurya. Maurya meant descendants of Chandragupta Maurya. Our people have claim over everyone from Chandragupta Maurya to Ashoka; they are from our caste, or we are their descendants. Now we are natives here, meaning from the shores of Ganges. The women from our homes worked as maids here too. When we sat in front of the Brahmins during pooja playing poongi, we also learnt all the pooja rituals. We were able to chant mantras. After listening to and watching marriage ceremonies, we also learnt to chant marriage auspice. The sound of shehnai played by the untouchable community fulfilled the marriage. Those marriages were valid but the depravity and untouchability of Matangs were permanent!

When we became "Maurya" from "More" we never knew, but even when we became Maurya, our place remained outside the house;

the culture of drinking tea from the broken cup kept aside outside did not change. The surname changed but not the caste.

We managed the birth of these sirdars and landlords, the delivery of their wives with our own hands but even our shadow was repugnant to them. What the Peshwa Brahmins did in Maharashtra, the same happened here. Later Indirabai ^{160(*)} abolished their princely privileges and ended their privy purses and in turn the princes made many Brahmins retire from their services. Those Marathi Brahmins took possession of our houses in Kashi. After driving us out, they turned our houses into dharmshalas, and started the business of widow ashrams, rented out the space to shop owners. We were driven out.

Now helpless, we had no choice but to work as farm labourers in nearby villages. Wherever we go, casteism, untouchability, discrimination is stuck to our body, like leeches. I used to go with my mother and grandmother for delivering the baby. Being small, I was allowed into the delivery room. I learnt this skill from my mother herself. We used to receive old clothes and something to eat then. When a male baby was born, we used to get sweets. To eat sweets, I used to pray in my heart for a male baby to be born. If a girl was born, we never got any money, clothes, or anything to eat. In so many houses where a girl was born and my mother went the next day for bathing and massaging the baby, the baby girl was not to be seen. We understood at once what happened. But we were not to speak about it nor could we.”

Listening to Ramswaroop and how the girls disappear from this world, Deepali stood dumbfounded.

Panditji pulled Ramswaroop close and said “I asked you for the first time in front of Mumbai CST what is your caste, Bhai? When I asked you this, you made me listen to Sant Kabir’s couplet –

Never ask a saint his caste, Ask about his knowledge,
Value the sword, Ignore the sheath.

Your knowledge is indeed superior.” Panditji embraced Ramswaroop asking for forgiveness. At that time, Ramswaroop recalled the dream country of Raidas where there was no untouchability. The name of this country was not ‘Hindu’stan, but Begumpura ^{161(*)} ...!

Until late in the night till dawn, the four of them sat and discussed on diverse topics. Their eyes drooped and closed. At that time Venus was beckoning the moon. The family had left with the baby and its mother. In whatever way, they had to take the baby to a health centre or a private clinic for vaccination and the mother for tetanus injection. Since it entailed lots of enquiries, they left ahead at first light when these four were asleep.

When the sun came up overhead, they all got up in lethargy. Finishing all the morning dues they readied themselves for the journey. Without having tea or anything, they went to their rightful place, the highway, for further journey. They had to walk till one or two pm. Stopping somewhere in the afternoon, they had to cook. Sometimes they cooked in the morning. Sometimes they ate dried phulkas with tea at night and slept and other times cooked late in the afternoon. They only messed with cooking once a day. They had to save time. Also, the foodgrains were less.

Walking, they came past Bela. Yet the horrific sight of the delivery last night remained before their eyes. All over the country such incidents took place on the highway. Many women gave birth in the open. Newborn babies were seen lying dead under the bushes at many places on the road. No one cared. Nobody showed sympathy. The refugee labourers overall as a community were seen as failures to be discarded. They were kept far away from basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, health, water.

This reminded of the injustice, oppression perpetrated by the old autocratic religious monarchy in France. Those in power mocked at the hungry people. When starvation became a joke, a revolution took place in France and toppled the monarchy. New principles of democracy came into being. Throughout the world, regimes changed on the issues of bread and self-respect. But in this country, there was no “Rousseau” to give voice for the deprived, oppressed labourers walking on foot. To create a workers’ state no Louis Blanc was to be seen. There were no leaders like Montesquieu or Frederick Bastiat. The self-proclaimed neo-Gandhians of the

country busily chanted bhajans and kirtans ^{162(*)} in ashrams and the executive head of the country did not come out of his palace. The country's leadership was engrossed in promoting self-image. For him it was 'I and my TV often talk together.' ^{163(*)} This was the situation. When the rulers do not listen, then at least the court would recommend that the administration issue directives and so the social activists filed many public interest litigations and petitions. Here too, lay an attempt in futility...

Gradually the people on foot started to lose the ability to think. Some workers were seen talking to themselves. They mumbled. Those who loved each other, those who walked hand in hand were cursing each other now. Sometimes it came to blows. An odd change slowly came upon them. Some had gone insane. They had lost their mental balance. Few malnourished travellers sat slumped under a tree, utterly numb to the surroundings, to the clothes they wore. This was the condition. How many will survive and live on was left to chance.

Till yesterday, the labourers who took care of each other, shared their pain, understood the pain and suffering of others, walked with each other mutely, now had started behaving strangely. Thinking that this situation would also befall upon them, the four of them were devastated.

They entered the town of Rewa. They had walked for a long time. They came walking to a junction. Journalists from different newspapers, news channel reporters, and their cameras had gathered at the junction. They talked loudly, were shouting on top of their voices the same thing - 'How the government is taking special care of the labourers, giving food packets, taking care of people's health, providing drinking water, and how the government is making modern clinics inside railway coaches at railway stations for the sick people...' These media persons competed praising the government shouting from their bellies to their throats.

"Today a pregnant wife of a labourer as she underwent labour pains was taken in an ambulance to a public hospital where she delivered

a baby. The baby and the mother are fit and fine...” One such type of news came from the collector’s office. This sensational news was swooped up by the newspapers and channels. Their TRP rating was to increase because of this news.

The woman who gave birth last night in the bushes with the help of Ramswaroop and the woman shown in the media happened to be the same.

They were thoroughly disappointed when they left Rewa town. They saw exactly how the rulers and administration mocked the agony of the poor, how they capitalised on pain and suffering. Like eating butter on the scalp of a corpse. They left for the next journey and Deepali became nauseous. She constantly searched for a medical store. She wanted to buy some medicines. There were less doctors in this area, and clinics were rare. Rarely somebody conducted health business here, so the medical shops were less and those existed were shut.

They searched for a good place. They wanted to cook. They were hungry. They had got up in the morning and started the journey on empty stomach. It was noon. They stopped under the shade of a tree before a village. They brought water from nearby to cook. They lit the stove and baked the phulkas. The honey bottle they had was empty by now. But there was ghee for the phulkas. They ate phulkas with ghee. After a hearty meal, they lay down. The fatigue and meal diffused their bodies to such an extent that they slept only to wake up in the evening. No one among them was keen to walk ahead. But they did not mention it. Regardless of the displeasure in walking, they walked again in the evening for two to three hours to reduce the distance.

They thought of going past Joginhai and stay near Mangawan village. From Mangawan village, one road goes towards Allahabad. Many travellers went ahead on the road to Allahabad from Mangawan itself. From there a road goes straight to Mirzapur. Mirzapur was Deepali's village. Everyone became happy as Deepali's village was to come soon. Still, they were to spend two more nights with Deepali. Mirzapur, an important district of Uttar Pradesh, is famous for the carpets and brass utensils. She was happy as her home was close, but since noon she felt unwell.

She spoke little and searched for the medical store the entire time on the road. Since they rested in the afternoon, she could not search for the medical store. Certainly, there were no medical shops nearby and now it was night-time. Since she did not speak at all,

everybody was vexed. They thought that she changed maybe because her village was near. Usually, she chattered all the time. She always joked. She was always full of queries, enthusiastic to understand things around and quite prompt to take care for someone who falls ill, to make someone eat if one has not. Mishraji still had fever. She always kept painkillers, analgesics in her purse. She remembered to give him the tablets on time without fail. She was the doctor of this caravan. All were used to her presence.

At night, they stopped at Radhe Radhe Ashram's wall compound near Chandeh station. The devotees had not visited this ashram for the past two months. Many people who were supervisors and workers had left for their villages. The donations which the ashram used to receive in the form of items and food grains, had stopped lately. A senior priest lived in the ashram. Few people lived in the ashram such as the servants of the priest, and some paid servants who used to serve the devotees. Only those servants who could not leave for their villages stayed back facing starvation.

The ashram now seemed dreary lonely place. They spread their sheets touching the wall compound of the ashram. They already had finished their afternoon meal. They now had only four phulkas. Taking phulkas one by one in their hands they ate it applying ghee. When they discussed several topics, they tended to forget that they were half-starved. The dose of fodder for the brain which they received from the discussion infused them with a different kind of energy.

Presently, no one knew how, a cobra slithered near Deepali from the ashram's garden. She became alert at the right time. She caught her breath in fear. It was a powerful animal. Ramswaroop and Mishraji at once pulled Deepali away from the cobra. The cobra spread its hood and hissed. Arif somehow pushed the cobra away with a stick. The cobra went away for sure but the fear in them did not lessen whatsoever.

Many such incidents took place on the way, Deepali was bit by a scorpion. Ramswaroop was bit by a poisonous insect and his face

had swollen up. At another time Ramswaroop almost stepped on a snake unknowingly. Again, four or five travellers were bit by honeybees. Once, even bears came and sat in front of a family! They had seen many people with the swollen legs and arms due to bites from jungle mosquitoes, worms, and such. They had stayed even in places where tigers terrorized them. In some places they came across leopards. They were not much scared then but today all of them were really scared. That serpent had come remarkably close to Deepali. They removed their sheets from that place. Deepali was still disturbed. She was breathless. Moreover, she was troubled by stomach-ache. Her hands and legs trembled. They usually never slept at any random place. They would inspect the place thoroughly and only when they found it safe, after cleaning it well they would lay their sheets. Today they felt safe near that ashram as well. Maybe due to the growth of foliage and less footfalls of people the snake came there. In any case they could not sleep now. Deepali's pain had increased. Here legs and arms had cramps, and an odd weariness had set in. They came to a petrol pump ahead at a distance and stopped there. The petrol pump was of course closed. Since the place was clean, they spread their sheets there itself. All of them slept there soundly. Only Deepali stayed awake. The image of the hooded serpent kept coming in front of her eyes. She felt as though it would bite her and then she would suddenly sit up jolting in fear. She could not fall asleep how much ever she tried.

Indeed, they got up in the morning and were ready, but were quite aware of last night's event and the trouble Deepali underwent. Panditji felt that she had a problem of acidity being half asleep, walking half-starved. Somehow, he convinced her to get ready "We have seen so many nights like this, spent so many nights starving, we have faced many incidents together and now your village also have come so close. You just need to spend a maximum of two nights with us. You will be the first to reach home," they all persuaded. She began to walk slowly with them. Her legs were heavy, felt the heaviness of her own body and had cramps. She felt nauseated. Her hips also ached.

The Mangawan crossing was right in front. From Mangawan, a highway went towards Allahabad. Many people going to Tari Kalan, Gangeo, Tikuri, Lalwari, Parasi villages came and stood here at the last lap. Looking at the crowd at the junction, the police had closed all the shops, big and small. Many migrant labourers were to turn via this junction to go towards Mirzapur, Varanasi, Mugalsarai. Less crowd could be seen on the road ahead compared to previously. Ahead was the Uttar Pradesh border.

They were to leave Madhya Pradesh border now. They had crossed Madhya Pradesh region's forests, hills, springs, streams and now were to leave Betwa river behind and go towards the Ganges. The Uttar Pradesh border check post near Hanumana village awaited them.

Mishraji's fever subsided and rose often. Deepali's troubles had increased. They wanted to stop at some good place and make tea. The sun burnt like yesterday as well. They were irritated. The flaming heat baked them while they walked. They were tired. They stopped under the shade of a tree near a petrol pump. As usual they lit the stove. Now the flour was just enough for two occasions.

They still had to spend four to five nights. They prepared tea. Some sugar, jaggery, tea leaves were still left. They felt refreshed after drinking tea. Arif had already wettened the flour and kept it ready. After having tea, when Deepali went to the water tank nearby, she

fell hard. Hearing her scream, all went running. She shouted aloud as her legs were already in pain and furthermore, she slipped and fell. They pulled her from the tank holding her hands.

She was scared and sweated. She trembled. Blood oozed out of her right leg. No wound was to be seen. The blood flowed. Nobody could understand a thing. She did not allow anyone to touch her. Ramswaroop stretched his hand a little to wipe the blood, but she prevented him. She herself cleaned the blood awkwardly. They were surprised not to find any injury. Blood flowed from her thigh. In a short while, the blood clots came out from the other leg. Her waist area was covered with blood. Pandit Mishraji realised what exactly had happened and he gave her the saffron towel hanging around his neck. All were stunned.

No one uttered anything for two minutes. She was not ready to take Panditji's towel. She already had used Ramswaroop's towel. Panditji folding his towel neatly into a square gave it to her and said only two words – “there is no greater religion than this.”

Her legs ached. She nauseated and everyone considered that she had acidity. She tried to get sanitary napkins but there was no shop to be seen on the highway.

When she had left from the city, she had already completed her menstrual period. Now because of the continuous walk for a month, she faced more trouble than usual. She was to reach her native place in about two days. But nature was not ready to wait for her to reach home.

She was not the only one who faced the menstrual period on the highway. Many women workers walked for forty to fifty days on the road. For these women, thrown out of the city and without any work, the sanitary napkins like Whisper, Stayfree were luxury. Now, with nothing to eat, and walking on empty stomachs, to get these expensive napkins was a question indeed. Just as Deepali used the cloth, the same way they must have used something too.

She went to the bushes at a distance beside the road and placed the Mishraji's towel inside and came out. At that time, in front of the petrol pump a poster peeked out showing Mahatma Gandhi wearing his spectacles, with a slogan 'Swachh Bharat, Swasth Bharat' ^{164(*)} and along with it a huge digital board of the PM wearing a stole around his neck blocked the sky.

Her gaze went to the board and then to Mishraji who had no towel around his neck.

The pain of menstruation became unbearable for her. Her stomach hurt incessantly. She was already weak, moreover the daily walk of twenty to thirty kilometres on the dusty, rough road on a frugal meal once a day! Sometimes the night journey and sometimes walking in the hot sun, sometimes climbing up the hill which would take the breath away and sometimes descending through chasms and valleys. No good place to sleep; sometimes under the foothill or sometimes in the jungle, in the fields and at some other time at the toll station, or in a closed dhaba... The fear of worms, snakes, scorpions, jackals, dogs, all sort of creatures, fear of rain, gusty winds, jungle, dry plains, acacia thorns, over and above the thugs and stares of men, all these fears had become unbearable for her.

Her cheeks had sunk. Her usually tidy, clean hairs were dishevelled. She almost looked like a dry stick. Her eyes too had sunk. Dark patches under the eyes were distinctly visible. She had trouble in her legs when she walked. Her entire body ached. Fatigue spread throughout her body. The hip-ache continued to trouble her. But she did not complain. Even if she had complained it was of no use since all of them were just as miserable as her.

Now, her village was just two days away. Even taking it easy, it would take a maximum of three days. She would be the first among them to reach home, which is Mirzapur. After crossing Madhya Pradesh border is Mirzapur, the first town in the district of Uttar Pradesh. She had many relatives in nearby villages beyond the border. But she had resolved not to approach any relative. Those whom we consider as our own keep us away in times of trouble, this experience of Mishraji had taught her a lesson too. Due to the covid scare, the relatives ran afar all the time. The children did not come forward to cremate their own parents. They no more belonged to their father and mother. The people looked at outsiders with suspicion.

“Do gaj ki Duri” ^{165(*)} had alienated humans for good. Humans became solitary and unsociable. A feeling of estrangement had

arisen between humans. This pandemic had succeeded in bringing out inhumanity within humans in an instant. Deepali continued to groan. She was unable to walk due to the cramps in her legs. Her back also ached. She kept lying down. Under the circumstances no one wished that she should walk ahead. Arif massaged her back and Mishraji her legs.

The three of them were not at all related to her. They now seemed remarkably close; she was a best friend to all the three. She felt they were her comrades in true sense of the word. A comrade does not take part easily just for joy's sake. A comrade is a companion of sorrow. Even when starving, a comrade would share a single bread into four pieces, a comrade understands another's sorrow, during emergency the comrade runs to help. The activists in her university raised slogans against multinational companies, spoke against Dalit atrocities, and discussed about Adivasi human rights over a cutting cup of tea till late in the night. She saw in them her old colleagues those who struggled for human rights, clenched their fists, and shared a bidi amongst themselves, the same people who took care of sick students. The old friends had again met her in a new form. That is why she called Arif, Mishraji and Ramswaroop comrades. "No thanks in comradeship!" Ramswaroop said and recited a poem of Baba Nagarjuna.

The talk of rights and daily bread,
Whoever has on the tongue,
Whoever the person,
Will certainly be called a communist.

- **Baba Nagarjuna**

Today they left for their journey early. Sun was yet to rise. The birds chirped. In the small villages on the way the chickens clucked Kock-a-doodle-doo!’ The roosters sounded one after another. Early in the morning, the farmers, large and small, taking cow dung from their cow sheds came to dispose them in public waste dumps. Some women dabbed the yard in front of their houses with cow dung mixed in water. This was the time to milk cows and buffaloes. As they walked, they searched for a cow shed. At one place they got milk. After drinking fresh warm milk, they felt contented. They did not forget to ask the farmers for hot milk for Deepali. She felt a bit energetic after she drank the hot milk boiled at home on the mud stove for their children.

She felt better today compared to yesterday. The pain was little less. But Mishraji’s fever showed no signs of lessening. Mishraji travelled with a mild fever. His coughing continued. When the coughing fit began, he choked for breath. He had to walk ahead ignoring his cough and fever. His area had come nearer and beckoned him.

They wanted to camp next somewhere near Mauganj. They swiftly cut the distance to Mauganj. This village as such was on the way. Now since the bypass road and a large bridge was constructed, they could reach Mauganj faster. Concurrently, they changed their mind and decided to go further to the next village instead of going into Mauganj village. By whatever means, they had to cover the maximum distance till noon. They walked constantly. Ahead was the village called Sinaha. Beyond Sinaha was the village of Hanumana. Madhya Pradesh ended there. Next was their region – UP. As their country and their home was near, they had new strength and enthusiasm. They looked at milestones and boards all the time. Even if there was difference of one or two kilometres they were irritated. Still their pace did not slow down.

They came to Sinaha village around twelve in the noon. In front of them was the Gorama dam. The channels carrying water were dry. There was no water in any of the canals. A large pipeline was laid

to supply water. The pipeline had valves at many places. They water flowed from it. The sizzling summer made them extremely thirsty. They were to cook for the last time today as the flour they had was now almost over.

The grains, oil, flour, nothing was left with them, only some jaggery and tea leaves remained. They now ventured to do their final cooking. They shook off all the flour, made it wet and started to make phulkas. In all, twelve phulkas were ready. All of them took bath. Mishraji wanted to bathe, but nobody allowed him to because of the fever. “After recovering, take a nice dip at the Banaras Ramnagar ghat at home but do avoid trouble of taking bath now.” They explained. But he was not in a mood to listen.

Arif made jaggery tea and called everyone to eat. When all of them came, Arif put forward a poser, “We have twelve phulkas in all. Our journey is for four more days. Now decide what to do. There is no guarantee of getting anything to eat on the way. Nobody will offer us alms. What to do and how?”

All of them decided to eat only one phulka along with the tea and eat the remaining phulkas sparingly.

In any case, they did not want to allow Mishraji to take bath. They picked up their goods and left for Hanumana border ahead. Mishraji was irritated with them, and angry. All of them explained to Mishraji and tried to calm him down as though he was a child and told him that they would go to a good place in the evening and take bath. At last, Mishraji just wiped his body with wet cloth.

Taking care of each other, making fun, and teasing each other, they moved ahead cutting the distance. Their discussion revolved eagerly around where to meet and when, and to talk on the mobile everyday after reaching their homes. Panditji had already announced that he will be the first and foremost person in Deepali’s wedding. Ramswaroop said in jest that he himself would conduct the delivery of Deepali’s baby. Arif resolved to oversee the whole lot related to catering and cooking during Deepali’s marriage. On

which Ramswaroop would add that he would seek a husband for Deepali. Deepali would laugh spontaneously making faces at them with phony disapproval. Laughing and poking fun at each other, and pulling pranks, all of them covered the distance of around 3-4 kilometres each hour. Now since they had only jaggery and tea leaves left, they thought of obtaining food items as usual.

Deepali's town was supposed to come late tomorrow night. She was to arrange the flour, oil and other items needed for the next journey after reaching her place. Therefore, they had very less to worry about.

They walked continuously, lingered in between, rested, and walked again and somehow reached close to Madhya Pradesh check post. They had to cross the border to go to Uttar Pradesh. They had decided to go to their state whatever the case, how much ever they would be tired. Once in their state, the rest could be taken care of, they thought.

They reached UP border at eleven in the night. A crowd of people had already gathered there. Under a shade, some five to ten people lay down while four to five people slept under a tree. Starved, malnourished, feverish people in big numbers could be seen on the road. Some sat on the ground cross-legged. Their ribs and bones could easily be counted even at night, such skinny people they were. The Uttar Pradesh police were stationed in the front. They did not allow anyone who came on foot from outside to cross. A few vehicles passed. Only those who had Covid negative report could cross the border. The last forty-eight-hour report was needed and there was no Covid test centre at the border. To do the Covid test one had to go back to the town and those towns never wanted them!

They were miserably confounded unable to think what to do next. The migrant workers who sat there for the last two three days were stuck. They were unable to go forwards nor backwards. Some people tried to enter another way evading the police. Anybody taking the other road had to negotiate a steep climb and

exceptionally narrow path to cross over a mountain, and if one falls nothing would be left, even the existing bones which were at least visible now. One had to pass the high mountain valleys and jungles. They could not even reach their rightful home and die there.

Mishraji had left Kashi, Rampur and came to Mumbai for work, so did Arif. Since they were residents from the same ghat they were to travel together. To reach their native village, the police high-handedness became a deterrent all the time. In their minds, they were quite enraged with the government.

The number of workers was increasing at the border and the UP government could not afford to prevent its own people from entering the state. The people at the border waiting to enter went on to grow in numbers. The situation could go out of control anytime, and the MP government pressured constantly ‘take the people inside, don’t keep them here in our state.’ Some people of UP had an inkling that their own government did not allow its own people inside, and that these people were stuck at the border. Many phone calls and exchanges later, an order for entry finally came to the check post. At last, at the end of the long torturous wait they were accepted in their own territory.

They crossed the border and moved ahead late in the night, but after covering a short distance they felt exhausted. A full one and a half days they had stood waiting at the check post. Whenever they found a bit of time there, they spread themselves on the ground, sat and again went to the check post to repeatedly request “let us go.” Thus, without travelling they were tired. Also, the ailing Mishraji could not walk steadily at night as he was unable to see properly. Still, he said, let us cover some distance and-walked. They were famished. The massive plateau of Bhaisor stretched ahead. There were rocks on both sides of the road. Where to stop and where to sleep in this rocky terrain, they had no clue. They searched for a place to stay. Mishraji had to be aided by hand and only then he could walk. Over and above, there was unfinished roadwork. Since only the road roller work was completed, palm sized stones spread all over the road. They stumbled on these stones when they walked. Their toes broke. The night was pitch dark. Nothing was visible ahead. They stopped before a closed dhaba. Following them, many workers also stopped there.

“Today we must spend the night here somehow. Let’s wake up early tomorrow and start our next journey, we could manage something or the other on the way, now our region has begun, for time being let’s eat our dried phulka...” So, they thought and began to prepare tea. Somehow the stove got lit, they brought water from the handpump near the dhaba. Tea was ready. They got a share of one phulka each. Mishraji could not gulp anything down his throat. “Eat something, today we will eat only half a meal. Tomorrow we will get the next meal at Deepali’s village, to walk and reach there you need strength, so put something into the stomach...” all of them explained to Mishraji. After having tea, they lay down there itself.

Deepali’s village was just forty kilometres away. “If we cover the distance by tomorrow, then we can consider that we have won the battle” they reassured each other. Ramnagar of Varanasi was just fifty kilometres ahead From Mirzapur. At about the same distance

further away on other side, was Ramswaroop's village. After Mirzapur, everyone's path was to diverge.

The problem lay only with Mishraji. The fever had wilted his body. He was exhausted throughout. His fever was on the rise. Every bone in his body hurt. The cough did not reduce. They had made extra tea for Mishraji. They heated it and gave it to him often whenever needed all night long.

From time to time, they got up due to Mishraji's cough and slept to wake up again. Early morning they fell into a deep sleep. Mishraji too snored.

They woke up earlier in the morning and began to prepare tea. They made a stove of dried twigs and prepared tea. It was nearing 7 am but Mishraji was still asleep. To avoid the sun rays hitting Mishraji's face they tied a sheet to a tree for shade. They decided not to wake Mishraji and wait until he wakes up himself. They left Deepali with Mishraji and went into the jungle.

The Bhaisor plateau of black stones, vast and wide, stretched ahead. The gentle early morning sunrays changed colour of the plateau. The plateau looked beautiful. A forest lay beside the plateau. Beyond the forest was again the plateau. A lake could be seen at a distance. Even though it was summer, ample water remained in the lake. In the forest were palash trees, bael and red sandalwood trees. Ramswaroop broke off the peels from the bark of the sandalwood tree. He gathered the tender leaves of the bael tree and plucked a creeper to reduce Panditji's fever. He also plucked the leaves of Khandu Chakka herb and brought it. Those leaves helped reduce swelling in the eye.

Ramswaroop, Arif and Deepali approached Panditji. He had got up from sleep. But the fever had not reduced. They applied sandal paste to Panditji and gave him wild vegetable leaves to eat. They heated Khandu Chakka leaves and applied them on his eyes. Panditji felt a little better and everyone became animated. He had red rashes all over his body. It was fiery enough. They made a paste

of sandalwood leaves and applied on his body. They all felt refreshed after eating the wild creeper and left for the next journey.

It was around ten o'clock. They started to climb the ghat. When climbing, the piled-up heaps of gravel was a constant hindrance. The serpentine ghat was exceedingly long. On one side a road went to Allahabad and on the other side a road went to Mugalsarai. There were hill ranges on both the directions. The huge machine dumpers brought to cut the hills and make roads, lay there as it were. The workers had left the work half done and left for their villages. They walked finding whatever path they could. It was twelve noon. The summer heat was terrible, drenched them in sweat all the time. The ghat was tiring. The burning sun was ruthless like the administration. It seemed that it was on the side of the oppressors. Somehow, they had to cross the mountain. The monkeys which always romped on that way had vanished too.

Somehow, they climbed the high hill and came to the top when the temperature soared suddenly. The mercury was so high that it gave a feeling as though one was walking on fire. Even birds like kites that fly high up in the sky searched for shade. As if this was not enough, the bicycle tyre tube also burst at that desolate place. The cycle was of use to carry the luggage and to carry sick Mishraji seated on it. Even it had become a traitor. As there was no tool for repair, the punctured bicycle became a burden, and they abandoned it there itself.

Gradually they all suffered sunstroke. The heat stroke made them nauseous. Deepali retched. Arif who otherwise was tough, fell in dizziness. Ramswaroop panted. The condition of sick Panditji worsened. Panditji who had recovered a little in the morning was unable to walk now even a few steps. They had misjudged the afternoon temperature. In excitement of going home and their village being so close, they made haste and that was where they went wrong.

They walked a little and sat down again. Now Mishraji gave up. He asked all of them to go ahead. "You don't risk your lives for

me, you leave, go ahead, I will follow you somehow..." he began to say. Mishraji's fever had shot up. "Whatever happens I will not leave Panditji," Arif declared. "Pandat friend, I am from your village, we are from the same ghat, I will not leave you and go." Mishraji's eyes welled up in tears listening to Arif. Nobody had an idea what could be done in this time of crisis. Finally, all agreed. "We are friends, and how can anyone be left alone like this? The ball of fire may rain havoc, but it must pass through the sky, the moon must rise, this path, this valley must end somewhere, so far, we walked together, and we will walk together. Nobody will leave anybody alone. Not only now, but also ahead."

"The home is close, only a small distance to go, we will walk slowly but together, we would do whatever, but we will go..." Deepali instilled courage in Mishraji.

Deepali recited a poem by Martin Luther King ----

If
 You can't fly then run,
 If
 You can't run, then walk.
 If
 You can't walk then crawl.
 But whatever you do,
 You must move on,
 You must go forward...

- Martin Luther King

Mishraji could not take a single step forward, but he realised that his friends, his close companions would not abandon him midway but because of him their lives would be in peril, and they would also die. Then Mishraji got up, slowly took steps one by one and walked.

The sun disappeared beyond the skies in search of a new horizon. Then came the night of glittering stars. It must have been around seven o'clock in the evening when they reached the Lalganj road,

climbing down the ghat, breathless and tired. After walking a short distance ahead, they somehow managed to reach Durjanipur. Four to five households stood together on the road. They requested earnestly for food to the owners. Those gentle folks gave them dinner and water to drink. For the moment, the food crisis being solved they spread their sheet under a tree at the same place and tumbled into a good night's sleep. When Ramswaroop awoke in the morning, Mishraji was not around though his bag still lay there. In panic, worrying about Mishraji Ramswaroop awoke Arif and Deepali. "Mishraji cannot go ahead all alone, he must be close somewhere," thinking thus they began to look for him. They searched for a long time, yet Mishraji was nowhere to be seen. They were perplexed and wondered what to do next. "You two move ahead, I'll get our friend Pandit and come along...," suggested Arif asking Deepali and Ramswaroop to go ahead. Both dismissed the idea.

Deepali's town was nearby, at hardly around twenty-five kilometres. She had resolved to reach home today howsoever late it may be. But she winced at the thought. "We did such a long journey together, toiled together, suffered a lot, endured all the pain together and now when the span has shrunk to a short distance, how can I walk away," she kept on saying intermittently.

They continued their search for Mishraji. When they peered from side to side, a sound of coughing reached their ears. Mishraji had hidden himself inside a pipe. They were stunned seeing him and were scared at his condition. The blood lay splattered in the pipe. Mishraji had vomited blood. Mishraji had hidden himself deliberately. He worried about the three of them not reaching home because of him and was dismayed that he was a burden to them. When all got angry listening to this, Mishraji started crying profusely: "There's no hope for me now. My old parents are at home and my son... My wife left him in my care, she herself washed away in Gangaji. I am the sole mother and father of my child... Where will they have money for my treatment? I was their only hope and support and here I am dying... This lockdown, this

pandemic will not spare me. I won't be living... Now who will look after my son, my old people?" Panditji wept bitterly and coughed severely.

Tears welled up in everybody's eyes. Deepali encouraged Panditji assuring that her village was close by and that she would certainly help him in treatment. She comforted him and convinced him to come along. He dragged himself slowly with them. His otherwise swift and fast paced legs were not ready to cooperate. Arif and Ramswaroop walked with him supporting him in each conceivable way.

It's dark, said the King
It's dark, said the Queen.
It's dark, said the Minister.
It's dark, said his Assistant.
All claimed it's dark..
Well...it differs morning to morning.

- **Dhumil**

On the road they all took care of Mishraji. They constantly gave him company. Deepali walked holding Mishraji's hand giving him mental support. She tried to make him smile by her wit or asked him various questions about his favourite Ganga Ghat. Ramswaroop kept him alert asking him posers like, if Bismilla Khan were to be alive, whether he would get permission to play shehnai in the temple of Baba Vishwanath, and so on.

At times, Arif gently made Panditji drink water. With one arm around Panditji's waist, he walked with his luggage in the other. "Pandat, I'll get you home. Let's dive deep into the Gangaji, swim across Tulsi Ghat, what do you say? You will be all right, definitely! Absolutely fit and fine! Don't worry...," he comforted him. Ramswaroop was attentive to his medicines. He also urged him to get hold of himself, tried to cheer him up talking about his plans to come over to Banaras University to finish his education and the jolly time they would have together during their daily rendezvous. So, they slowly walked together. They took a long time to cover a small distance, but it hardly concerned them in comparison to Panditji's health.

They came up to Rajapur road. A crowd of people had gathered on the road. An ambulance stood nearby accompanied by a police van. Within a short span of time the crowd swelled up. They slowly approached the mob that stood there. Just ten minutes away on one side of the highway was Rajapur.

The police were chasing the crowd away. Arif spotted four or five of their labourer friends and acquaintances in that crowd, and so

they too joined the crowd to find out what happened. The moment they approached these labour friends of theirs, their friends started to cry. They were at loss to understand what it all meant. Ramswaroop went near the ambulance. A young girl of around age thirty lay in the ambulance. It was the same girl who walked before them in another group. She had gone to Gujarat for work. A neighbouring woman had taken her there for work to support the old parents at home. This girl, this lady and her husband all were expelled from Gujarat. They too walked and had recently met Ramswaroop's group at the border. They were from Rajpur. Covering the distance of almost one thousand five hundred kilometres on foot they had nearly reached their native place. But since last four days they had nothing in their stomach and without food, they had no energy left to move even a step forward. The drop in haemoglobin in their blood made their legs swell up like elephant's. The girl had collapsed at this place, lost her consciousness and she lost her life too at the entrance to her village. There was no blood left in her body. With the bare hope of reaching her village someday, she had somehow walked, often stopping, and sitting on the road in between. The local administration reported, she died due to the overwhelming joy of having reached her place. For sure, tomorrow the government will not hesitate to declare her death to be natural. She had died out of starvation and the devastating drop in her haemoglobin; it was a clear-cut case of murder and not a natural death. Throughout the country countless labourers were being murdered on road in this manner. Such corpses lay in many places.

While the police were busy keeping the crowd at bay, the local landlord, the almighty noble, appeared on the scene along with his retinue. Following him were the girl's mother and father. They were weeping at the sight of their daughter lying dead on the road. They tried to awaken her, fondled her cheeks, caressed her hairs. On the way, the landlord had already told them that she died trembling in joy, unbound joy having seen her native place.

The citizens of this modern independent India die in joy, happily and readily give up their life in the sheer joy and excitement of reaching their native place! Her name also got registered in the list of people dying happily. The sole purpose of her life was to die in excitement.

One cannot help but wonder, will her name be engraved on the pillar of martyrs in front of the village Panchayat?

It must have been ten o'clock at night. They were at the edge of Mirzapur. The work on a new rail line was under way in Mirzapur. So, they had to pass under a bridge. The main road from Mirzapur leads to Bhadohi from Natwa Police Post and the other road goes through Mirzapur city via K.B. Polytechnic. Deepali's house was behind that polytechnic college. Deepali had already decided to take Ramswaroop, Mishraji, and Arif to her house. "Let's call a good doctor and get Panditji checked and treated properly. If necessary, we will directly admit him in a good hospital," she was intent on her plans. It was a miracle that Mishraji had reached this far in his condition. It was the victory of their comradeship. Without them, Mishraji would not have seen Mirzapur today. Mishraji was unable to walk properly. His face and eyes were swollen. One of his eyes was so red, as though blood had clotted in it. His eyes watered continuously. He panted and trembled like an old man. Still, he was not willing to go to Deepali's home. Even so, she was firm in her decision to take him home and was hell-bent on it.

After much deliberation and coaxing, Mishraji finally agreed to go to her home. By this time, they were looking for roads to enter the Mirzapur city. The excavation work of the new railway line made huge piles of debris on the road. It was difficult to walk. The entire place was strewn with lots of clutter and scrap all over. The heaps of stones, sand, scrap was a big hindrance while walking. A shed built right in the middle of the road for security guards, added piles of nails, ropes, chains, stacks of cement sacks, big iron rings for centring work, stock of ballies and bamboos ... all sorts of construction material blocked the way. It was impossible to go further through this chaotic place. JCB machines stood on the other side. In front of it again there were high mounds of mud and sand. It was impossible to climb them. So, they came up to the main road going into the city.

The police had set up their permanent post on the main road. The city administration personnel sat beside them registering the people coming from outside. After checking Aadhaar card, voting card,

the person was directly taken to the Civil Hospital. The person would undergo a Covid test there. The way the accused are brought before the judge, in the same manner all sort of travellers, labourers, students all coming from outside would be presented in front of the medical officer. Bony, disordered labourers like them would be isolated for nine to fourteen days in the name of quarantine. They would be treated as suspected Covid patients. Their hands would be stamped with a clearly visible quarantine stamp of black ink.

Even if the suspected patient's Covid report came out negative, s/he was not allowed to go home. The staff would suppress the report and would ask for a bribe to be allowed to go home. Relatives of big shots, MPs, MLAs, Ministers, their friends, and aides were privileged to home-quarantine facility. But this facility was not easily available to them too. They too had to grease the hands of the medical officer. They had to use the influence of higher ups and social connections. The rate of bribes was also standardised and fixed. Those who did not have any recommendation, money, or any sort of attractive inducement whatsoever, would be sent straightaway to quarantine camp. The camp was nothing but a chaotic place. Water, bedding and such facilities were not available. Inferior quality food packets were served as food. Milk, breakfast, eggs, vitamin tablets etc. meant for the patients vanished on the way. It was widely known that during Covid time a medical officer paid off his heavy loan of twenty-five lakhs rupees in a flash and another bought a bungalow worth one crore rupees. The supplier who provided food packets in this flurry of amassing wealth had gone to such an extent that at his house a full-fledged Satyanarayan Pooja was conducted with eleven priests wishing and praying that the Covid should stay on, and he should get the goods and orders forever. In contrast the quarantined people were deprived of even the basic facilities. They were made ill through all kinds of inconveniences like lack of proper toilets, drinking water and so on...

The police stopped these four at the gate of Mirzapur and bombarded them with all sorts of questions and enquiries like where they all came from, where were they headed, where was their Aadhaar card, voter card, resident certificate so on and so forth. Finally, they made Deepali to sit on one side and showed the rest of the three their way out.

“Let them also come with me to my house.” Deepali pleaded with the authorities.

“There is an order to keep outsiders out of our city, and you too cannot go to your house now. You must be quarantined.” was the curt reply from the authorities. Deepali got scared and said, “Then please do quarantine all of us.” This was of course of no use, instead the police officer got enraged and snarled at her, ‘People from outside the city cannot be quarantined. Don’t you understand what is once said?’ He threatened these three to leave with a stick in his hand. There was no other choice. All three of them turned to go back; Deepali came running to them crying. Mishraji tried to console her, Arif also explained to her, “We will come to Mirzapur again. Once this pandemic phase is over, we will surely meet; it’s just a matter of a few days, stop crying...” All the three of them tried to encourage her. But she was in no mood to listen. She continuously wept holding their hands tight in hers. Arif and Ramswaroop’s eyes dimmed in tears. She gave Arif her ATM Card password and said, “Around four to five lakhs must be in this account. Use it freely. Take Panditji to a good hospital, take care of him, see to that he is ok.” While she talked to Arif, more and more tears rolled down from Mishraji’s swollen eyes. He wept bitterly, overly shaken up to say a word. He held her hands tightly. All four of them cried and hugged each other. However much they tried; they could not control their tears. In these days of the pandemic, even blood relatives did not show up, acted alienated but these four people had forgotten their caste-religion and purely acted in the human spirit.

The world will be resurrected on the shoulders of only such people.

The four of them looked at each other with misty eyes, saying we will meet again. They told each other to take care of themselves. For Deepali, the joy of reaching her place was nothing compared to the grief of separating from her friends. An ambulance came to pick up Deepali. As Deepali walked toward the ambulance, they cried to no end. They felt as though they lost someone very dear and near to them forever with no hope of meeting again. “Let’s charge our mobiles as quickly as possible, let’s be in touch on mobile,” with these parting words they said goodbye to each other with heavy hearts. Deepali sat inside the ambulance with her belongings like a prisoner. The three of them kept gazing in that direction until she disappeared. Yet, the fact that she was already at her own native place and was going to be in the quarantine centre in the college next to her house, was a somewhat comforting thought.

They came back to the highway. In front was the road leading to Natwa Police Station. From there Ramswaroop's route was to diverge. He had to go fifty to fifty-five kilometres further. The distance was around the same or maybe twenty odd kilometres more for Mishraji and Arif to trudge. Ramswaroop had to do the night journey alone. That route scarcely had travellers. He was to continue by crossing Lal Bahadur Bridge. He decided to travel as much as possible at night, take some rest in the morning and start again...

Mishraji was anxious and concerned about Deepali. He kept worrying if she would be alright, what would happen to that delicate and fragile girl, if the administration would inform her family and so on. Ramswaroop and Arif, on their part, assured him, “She is not at all fragile, but quite a strong and courageous girl. Without whining she has travelled so much with us and now she is in her town. Her family people will certainly pick her up. You just take care of your own health. No matter what happens, you must reach Varanasi.” With these words they tried to pacify him, encourage him, and gave him strength to walk further.

“Let’s all sit together on the banks of the Ganges and talk about this journey. I am going to complete my education at Banaras. Before long I shall write a book on our journey. Shouldn't we write our own history, friends?” Ramswaroop cheered them up while saying goodbye to both with a heavy heart. He took both the hands of Panditji and bade him farewell without looking at him. His steps had become heavy. He looked back repeatedly at them and they at him.

At last, they went their separate ways.

Panditji felt extremely exhausted as today two of his companions had left. Arif took utmost care of Mishraji all the time. Mishraji by himself could not even take a step forward. But how much care Arif alone could take? Earlier there were three of them, someone carried his luggage, the other supported the sick Panditji on his waist. Now this responsibility of three people was solely on Arif's shoulder. Carrying belongings of both in one hand and supporting Panditji with other, was like walking on a tight rope. He was baffled and could not figure out how to handle and what to do. There was not a single grain of food in their empty stomachs. They were left with only jaggery and some tea powder. Though it was late, in the night itself he somehow lit the fire in the square next to Mirzapur and started preparing tea.

He could have travelled further on hungry stomach. But the sick Panditji's fever and cough was getting worse. He was panting. The poor exhausted Panditji needed tea at least. Also, Panditji could not see properly in the night. Within this short span of the journey tonight he had fallen twice and at one time Arif also fell while taking care of him. It was dangerous to travel at night now. He thought to stop there itself and start the next day in the morning light after a good night's sleep and rest. So, he halted at a deserted place near Bharuahana police chowki. As there were no vehicles, no cars plying, an eerie silence had spread all around the area on the street. There was a passenger shed in front. It was filled with dust and dirt due to lack of transportation and traffic for several days. The people from the Municipal Sanitation Department had not turned up for the last one and half months. Only the iron shed looked a bit clean. Sweeping a little, Arif laid down Panditji to sleep and rested their baggage on the floor. A pile of dried cow dung lay nearby. He set fire using those cow-dung flakes.

The illness now had begun to show its effects on Panditji. He started hallucinating. He talked to Deepali in delirium, sometimes calling out to Arif as though he was Ramswaroop. Arif thought this might be due to the high fever. He was solely playing the roles of three people, Deepali, Ramswaroop and himself. While he helped

Panditji drink his tea, Panditji was asking Arif, “Where is Deepali? Has her body pain eased or not? Has she taken her medicine?” Arif would reply “She is sleeping.” Suddenly Panditji thinking Arif as Ramswaroop would say, “Rame, I must learn many things from you. Want to understand Kabir. I lived in Kashi, but still never grasped him. I need Kabir. After dying in Kashi, one attains heaven, attains salvation, so they say. Kabir rejected all this, right? I also don’t want to die in Kashi. I don’t want that kind of salvation. I have experienced the real heaven among you, among solid, real people. I want to be amid you people, die among you. You people are my relatives. My discriminating Brahmin caste, my priesthood ... all that is humbug. Where did Arif go? He was to make Galouti ^{166(*)} kebab ...” he went on blabbering. Arif consoled him sometimes in Ramswaroop’s disguise, at other times he would become Deepali or he himself. In short intervals Arif made him drink water. He somehow also managed to make him drink hot tea. Panditji drank tea and slowly drifted into sleep murmuring incoherently.

The physical and mental fatigue of the day made them both fall into a deep sleep. Arif slept next to Panditji as usual.

Arif woke up a little earlier than usual in the morning. He felt energetic after waking up from a good night's sleep. At least Deepali had reached her village, Ramswaroop also was on his way to his village and within two-three days they themselves would be in their homes. Panditji also slept well last night. ‘Now once Panditji is taken properly to Banaras, there is no need to worry. Reaching there he can be admitted to that Heritage Hospital in Banaras. Being in our own place, it should not be that difficult. Besides, Mamu’s son Muhammad is always there! Proper treatment, medicines, discount on the bills... the whole thing will be available under one roof. Panditji will soon be back on his feet as before...’ such thoughts were playing on his mind. Arif recalled Panditji saying “I am not going to do this business of Pandit. Whatever happens after reaching our place, if necessary, I’ll fry

fritters and sell them, but not this. Or maybe I can open a shop of Kachori-Puri with you.”

'As Panditji says, it's a very good idea to start a Lassi or a Kachori Puri shop here in Banaras. Pandat will handle the cash and I will fry Puris and make Lassi. It will be fun.' Arif dreamt in excitement.

“Pandat, my friend, it's morning, get up, got to go ahead, we will take bath in the Gangaji, come, get up...,” he called Mishraji coming back to reality. Mishraji was fast asleep and showed no sign of getting up. Arif had tea and again tried to wake him up. But Panditji did not even turn on his side. A horrific doubt arose in his mind, and he began to shake Panditji.

Pandit Brij Mohan Mishra from the Ghats of Kashi did not get up. He was in eternal sleep. Pandit Brij Mohan Mishraji did not see his house on the Ramnagar Ghat of Banaras. Without even getting infected by Corona, Pandit Mishra died out of exhaustion due to Covid Lockdown.

'Our friend gave up on his life, ditched us, the bloke came near the house and died! He was supposed to read Kabir ... I wanted to open the Kachori-Puri shop with him...', Arif, thunderstruck by the realisation of what had happened, collapsed into despair. He tried to scream loudly, tried to cry; his voice was stuck in his throat and froze. Only tears flowed...

Arif walked day and night carrying Panditji's ashes in a bag on his shoulder. It was impossible to tell apart between his stomach and the back of his thin frail body. Nobody was with him apart from the Panditji in his shoulder-bag. He looked like a zombie walking the streets. His ruffled hairs were entangled into thick dusty tufts. The beard had grown. The clothes had become stiff with a colour of leather, worn out and dirty. It was the result of sleeping on the ground for so long. They were drenched in sweat and dried on the body itself. Layers of dust had made the clothes thicker than usual. He did not have any other goods with him; the shoulder bag was completely empty except for the Panditji inside.

He did not say anything to anyone. People were afraid of his blank, hollow eyes. All the hotels big and small at the Chunar road were closed. The continuous walk had consumed him thoroughly leaving him bone tired.

He felt sleepy. At last, he slept on the veranda of a closed house.

Even though the sun hit his eyes, he did not wake up. It was past ten o'clock in the morning. Someone from the house poked him with a stick and woke him up. He stood up. Looked around. In front, there were rows of houses, hotels, tea stalls, samosa stalls along the road. Highway work was going on in full swing. The roofs and verandas of the houses jutting ahead on the road were smashed. He only looked around with a blank gaze. He did not ask anyone for anything. Maybe he was thirsty. He was looking for water. That man again poked him with the stick from a distance. He left the place at once.

He was looking for a way. The villagers did not allow any people from outside to stop there, especially mental patients, beggars, travellers. They drove him out. Now almost fifteen days had passed since he left Mirzapur. He was so profoundly sunken in his state of mental agony that he was not able to make out whether he came to Chunar from Varanasi or whether he was going to Ramnagar via Mirzapur. Again, his steps treaded on the road back to Mirzapur. Clueless, he covered a lot of distance. He stepped down in a water

canal flowing nearby and drank lots of water. Then turned towards a mango tree nearby. He picked up the mangoes from the pile of mangoes as though he himself kept them there. He again drank some water and eating mangoes retraced his steps on the same road from where he came. He had returned to the same place at Chunar. The man who had poked him with stick, was still around. The moment the man saw Arif, he dashed inside his house and sprang back with a big heavy cane to beat him up. But by that time Arif was on the run straight towards Ramnagar.

He went straight ahead speedily crossing the fields, the wilds, ups and downs on the way. His property was only a shoulder-bag. Inside that shoulder bag was a small bag which sheltered his dear friend Pandat, the one who was to take care of the cash in his shop. He held the shoulder-bag close to his chest. He neither looked at anyone, nor asked anything. Since the last five-six days he had not taken any food. He crossed Parsodha village and stopped at the square in Narayanpur. Hunger and thirst had made him restless. He was constantly on the lookout for water. Finally, he saw water in a farm by the road. The water was gushing through a channel dug for the plants. He took the water in his palms and drank sip by sip. He glanced around to checkout for fruits. But there were none. His journey in trance continued except for the brief spells of awareness of hunger and thirst.

He covered almost about twenty kilometres. He would sit intermittently on the road and would resume his walk again. In between he would check his bag for its contents. Then came up to the square in Katariya village. There he saw a board of the construction department. The Dargah of Hazrat Imam Husain in front appeared somewhat familiar to him. A little further was a Sheetala Mata Temple. He stopped next to the temple and rested there for a while sitting with crossed legs. The sun was setting. Chilly wind blew from the river Ganges. It was slightly cold. Flocks of birds were flying back to their nests. In front was a big old tamarind tree. He saw the bats which hung on the tree until now, leaving the tree for their nocturnal journey. He walked faster

now. His pace steadily increased. He panted and gasped but moved on again steadfastly. He too began to cough now. Every single bone in his body, his shoulder blades, the chest ribs all were distinctly visible.

At last, he reached within the boundaries of Ramnagar area. All the roads coming to Ramnagar were sealed by the administration. So, he directly arrived at the city administration health camp near the police check post. He was not simply willing to talk to anybody. After questioning, he mumbled hesitantly with great difficulty.

'Mumbai, at post Rampur Tulsi Ghat, Masjid, Raj Mahal.' He held out his Aadhar card in front of them. He had nothing with him except a small bag in the shoulder-bag. Thinking him to be some sort of odd crazy person, the medical officer checked his temperature from a safe distance. After the initial checkup, the officer took his swab for Covid test and sent him to the far away quarantine centre at Rampur Municipal School. His hand got stamped there with the black ink and was immediately put away in room number four of the school.

During quarantine, he got a Puri-Bhaji packet in the morning and at night. He would get five Puris and dry potato veggie. Out of it he would eat just two or three Puris and the rest he would keep separately with himself neatly packed. Each room in the school, each classroom was transformed into a quarantine room currently. Five to seven people were quarantined in each room. The daily proverbs written by the students on the blackboards were intact and still readable. Charts, too, still hung on the walls of the room. Information about epidemic diseases was written in one corner, while the Mother India hung in another corner was slightly tilted. Her colour had faded. Since nobody was ready to stay with him, he was alone in class VII, division-C room. The rest of the people freely mingled with each other, talked to each other amicably. They kept coming outside to sit on the ground together. But he never came out his room except to go to the toilet or for drinking water. All the time he would sit next to the window staring blankly at the piece of sky visible from there. He never ever kept down the bag on his shoulder. Even while sleeping he used to sleep with the bag held closely to his chest. The bag had become an inseparable part of his body. To drink water, he used to go to the tap outside, drink water with his cupped palms and again return to his room to sit in a corner. He would go on sitting with bent legs and his chin thrust between the knees. Of late, a fear of people had grown inside him. He stayed completely absorbed in himself and sometimes suddenly for no reason would shudder at something. At other moments, at any random time of the day or night he could be seen talking with his shoulder-bag all alone. He never cursed anybody, never used foul language, never ever attacked anybody, not even tried to run away from that place. The rest of the people were afraid of his inaction and his blank, vacant, hollow eyes.

His family members came to meet him once. He just kept staring at them with his blank lifeless eyes. They were saddened to see his plight. In his neighbourhood, the word had already spread that he had gone mad. He did not speak a word with his family folks. Ammi had sent for him his favourite kheer ^{167(*)} but he did not even

look at the kheer; but went on gazing at the cloths, towels, sheets etc. given by Abba. Nonetheless, he took the slippers, even checked twice or thrice, whether they fitted him properly or not. Realising he was not speaking, his Abba, Chachu ^{168(*)} went back broken-hearted. His family felt that he was possessed, or some evil spell must have had been cast upon him. They decided to take him to a Pir ^{169(*)}, Fakir, Dargah once he was released.

Today was the fifth day since he got quarantined. Now his covid test report was soon expected. He did not have any fever but coughed all the time. Last night he did not eat anything, only drank water, and slept. He looked restless. His body was nothing but a mere skeleton. He looked like a living corpse. His grown dishevelled hairs, long beard, the gaze fixed into the void and the rare occasional murmur coming out of his mouth all this gave the impression that he was a Pir, Fakir or an Auliya ^{170(*)}

Today, the seventh day, all his reports came up negative, so the next morning he was to be sent home. He was even told so. He said nothing and just looked at the medical officer blankly.

Some people were going home after completing the quarantine period this morning. They woke up early in the morning and got ready to go home. All of them collected their belongings, finished all the formalities, and left for their homes as well. Yet, he slept. Finally, the scared ward-boy ventured to wake him up hesitatingly and brought him before the medical officer. He was handed over his Aadhaar card, voting card and the ATM card kept in the drawer. Seeing the ATM card, some old memory stirred inside him. In tremor, he stuttered. But no word came out of his mouth. He gripped the shoulder bag tightly, pushed open the iron door of the quarantine centre, and walked unsteadily towards Pandit Brij Mohan Mishraji's house clutching the ATM card.

Annexure v1.11

(Those fifty Days) (Final Book v1.19)

Page-5

1. ***“Tu kahta kagaj ki lekhi, main kahata aakhan ki dekhi” :***

Lines by Poet Sant Kabir (1398 – 1518), a well-known Indian mystic poet and saint. In this verse Kabir says, for you the truth is what is written on paper and scriptures, but for me truth is my own experience witnessed by my eyes. Kabir is an important figure in both Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam, especially in Sufism. He is known for being critical of meaningless and unethical practices of all religions, primarily in the Hindu and Muslim religions.

Page-7

2. ***Vadapav :***

Vadapav is a popular vegetarian fast food dish native to the state of Maharashtra, especially in Mumbai. The dish consists of a deep-fried potato dumpling placed inside a bread bun (pav) sliced almost in half through the middle. It is generally accompanied with one or more chutneys and a green chilli pepper.

3. ***Lota :***

In India, a lota is a small, spouted, and rounded vessel that is used to carry water or drink from it.

Page-8

4. **Mumba Aai :**

Mother Goddess Mumba of the native Koli community of Mumbai. Aai is mother in Marathi language.

5. **BHU :**

Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi aka Banaras, Uttar Pradesh

Page-10

6. **Ambedkar Jayanti :**

Ambedkar Jayanti or Bhim Jayanti is observed on 14 April. It marks Dr. Ambedkar's birthday who was born on 14 April 1891. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who died in 1956, was an Indian jurist, politician and social reformer, economist, head of the committee to draft Constitution of India. His birthday is also referred to as 'Equality Day' by some in India. He inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement after renouncing Hinduism.

7. **Madan Mohan Malviya :**

Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861-1946) was an Indian scholar, educational reformer, and politician notable for his role in the Indian independence movement. Malaviya strove to promote modern education among Indians and co-founded the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) at Varanasi in 1916.

8. **Bhikhari Thakur :**

Bhikari Thakur (1887–1971) was an Indian Bhojpuri language poet, playwright, lyricist, actor, folk dancer, folk singer, and social activist, popularly known as

"Shakespeare of Bhojpuri". He is and most popular folk writer of Purvanchal and Bihar. Thakur is known as the father of the 'naach' folk theatre tradition. He is also credited as the first person to cast male actors in female roles. His works were mostly based on the problems of society like the plight of migrants and women, and poverty and caste discrimination.

9. Launda Dance :

Launda Naach (dance), a prominent folk art from Bihar and Bhojpuri-speaking eastern Uttar Pradesh, is a well-known folk art that includes music, dance, humour, satire, joke, banter, and drama where males imitate women in shows that go on all night. In 19th century, this idea of transforming the centuries-old art form into a people's theatre was conceptualized by Bhikhari Thakur.

10. Mahapandit Rahul Sankritayan :

Rahul Sankritayan (1893 –1963), referred to as Mahapandit (Greatest Scholar) was an Indian patriot, polymath and polyglot who knew more than thirty languages, travelled, and taught at well-known universities without formal education, an activist who was jailed thrice for his anti-British writings and speeches. His published works ranged from travelogues, sociology, history, religion, philosophy, autobiography, biography, folklore, fiction, science, drama, essays etc.

11. 'Bhago Nahi, Badalo' :

A popular Hindi book 'Bhago Nahi, Duniya Ko Badalo' by Mahapandit Rahul Sankritayan (Do Not Run, Change the World).

12. Thali Bajao, Tali Bajao :

It's a catchphrase of the appeal made by the PM during the initial days of the Covid pandemic. The PM asked the Indian citizens to clang plates, clap hands and light lamps on 22 March 2020 at 5PM from their balconies, terraces, doorsteps etc. to make Covid Virus pandemic go away. This was the day of Janata Curfew i.e. nationwide lockdown.

13. Rashtra Ke Naam, Jai Shri ram

A popular slogan of the Hindu Nationalist forces in India praising and asserting victory to the Hindu God Ram as the god of the whole nation.

Page-11

14. Garba

Garba is a form of group dance which originates from the state of Gujarat, India. Traditionally, it is performed during the nine-day Hindu festival Navaratri.

Page-12

15. Krantiba and Krantisurya

Krantiba is a title given Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) for his revolutionary work in Indian society which extended to many fields, including eradication of untouchability and the caste system and for his efforts in educating women and oppressed caste people. Krantiba indicates Father of Revolution. He and his wife, Savitribai Phule, often referred as Kranti Jyoti Savitribai indicating flame of revolution, were pioneers of women's education in India. They started the first school for girls in 1848 in Pune.

16. United Maharashtra struggle

United Maharashtra (Samyukta Maharashtra) struggle was a movement that advocated for a separate state of Maharashtra consisting only of Marathi speaking population and Mumbai as its capital. This came to a fruition in 1960.

17. Independent Labour Party

The Independent Labour Party (ILP) was a political Organisation formed under the leadership of B. R. Ambedkar in 1936. It opposed the caste and capitalist structures in India, supported the Indian working class and sought to dismantle the caste in India.

Page-13

18. UP

Uttar Pradesh, a state in North India, is commonly abbreviated as UP by Indians in slang.

Page-15

19. Bihari

A native or inhabitant of Bihar - one of the states in India

Page-16

20. Bharat Bandh

This phrase indicates nationwide lockdown.

Page-17

21. **Ashadhi Yatra in Pandharpur**

An annual yatra or pilgrimage to Pandharpur is a religious procession of lakhs of devotees from all over Maharashtra and neighbouring states to the famous Vitthal temple in Pandharpur, part of Solapur district of south Maharashtra. This journey of about fifteen to twenty days on foot by devotees across villages is accomplished with singing of bhajans, telling religious stories, and engaging in other religious activities.

22. **Bholenath**

Another name of the Hindu God- Shiva describing him as lord of innocence.

23. **Pani-Puri**

Pani-Puri is a very famous common Indian street food. It is a deep-fried breaded sphere filled with potato, onion, or chickpea, often spiced with tamarind chutney, chili powder.

Page-18

24. **Mahapandit**

Mahapandit is a title of a learned man, great scholar, or a great teacher from Brāhmin caste.

Page-19

25. **Dargah**

A Dargah is a shrine or tomb built over the grave of a revered Muslim religious figure, often a Sufi saint or dervish. Unlike mosques, people from all backgrounds of

life, irrespective of caste, colour, religion etc. visit the tomb to seek spiritual remedy for problems like Blackmagic, diseases, etc. for themselves and their families.

26. Majuma attar

Majmua attar, a popular perfume in India is made from ingredients in plants, herbs, floral, essential oils etc. It is known for its soothing effect on mind.

27. Ved-Pathshala

The Veda Pathshala specializes in teaching the ancient Indian traditions: the Vedas, Vedic chanting, various Hindu temple rituals: pujas and homas. The Vedas are the oldest scriptures of Hinduism.

Page-20

28. Nagpuri, Banarasi, ... Madrasi etc.

A native or inhabitant of Nagpur city (Maharashtra), Banaras (UP), Madras (Chennai, Tamilnadu)

29. Kamathipura

Kamathipura is a neighbourhood in Mumbai known for prostitution, one of the oldest red-light areas in Asia.

30. Paya, Keema, Kaleji, Korma

Paya, Keema, Kaleji, korma are Indian nonveg cuisines of meat. Paya, meaning feet in Urdu, is made from trotters or hooves of cow, goat, water buffalo or lamb, Keema is minced meat cooked with a variety of spices, Kaleji is mutton liver and korma is meat or vegetables braised in yogurt or coconut as base.

31. Laatshahi Baba's Mazar

A mazar, often also colloquially known as a 'dargah', refers to a shrine built over the grave of a revered Muslim saint whose name it usually bears.

Page-21

32. Qazi-e-Shahar

Important Officers in Mughal Empire for the administration of justice, religious activities, and rituals.

33. Lungi

A multi-coloured loincloth or wrapper cloth worn by men in India as a casual wear and in some regions formal wear.

Page-23

34. Dhaba

A dhaba is a roadside restaurant in India on highways, and regarded as truck stops. They serve local cuisine, and most are open 24 hours a day.

Page-24

35. Cutting tea

A cutting chai is half a cup of tea, and therefore priced less. It is usually offered at roadside stalls. It is very popular in Mumbai.

36. Bidi bundles

Bidi is an inexpensive cigarette, locally produced usually from cut tobacco rolled in leaf. It is widely smoked in

India by the working-class population both rural and urban.

Page-25

37. Halal and Haram

Halal (permissible) food eaten by all adherents to Islam in accordance with its life principles and morality. Conversely, haram foods are those prohibited.

38. Heto community

An ancient African community forced to stay outside village.

Page-26

39. Chapati

Chapati, also known as chapathi, roti, poli, phulka, is a staple food in the Indian subcontinent. it is unleavened flatbread made of whole-wheat flour known as atta, mixed into dough with water, oil/ghee (optional), and salt (optional) and other optional spices. They are roasted on a tava (flat skillet).

40. Panchsheel Flag

A Buddhist flag designed in the late 19th century as a universal symbol of Buddhism used by Buddhists throughout the world. It is a tribute to the Panchsheel principles (five precepts) of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect and embodies the essence of Buddhism and Jay Bheem movement.

41. Aloo-Bhaji

A common Indian vegetable dish in daily meal made from boiled or fried potatoes along with other spices and oil.

42. Sanatan Dharma

It is widely accepted that Sanatana Dharma is another name for Hinduism. 'Sanatana' means eternal, and 'Dharma' signifies the path of righteousness. The roots of Sanatana Dharam go back to the Vedas, the oldest known texts of Hindus.

Page-27

43. Thal Ghat

Thal Ghat (also called as Kasara Ghat) is a ghat (mountain incline or slope) section in the Western Ghats and is located on the busy Mumbai–Nashik route leading into Mumbai. The railway line, which passes through the ghat is one of the steep rail lines in India.

Page-28

44. Ahilyabai Holkar

Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795) was the Rani (Queen) of Indore, within the Maratha Confederacy, the seat of the Holkar Dynasty in Madhya Pradesh. She defended the Malwa state against intruders and personally led armies into battle. She was known for the construction of various Hindu temples and Dharmashalas across the Indian Subcontinent. She was also known for breaking traditional gender rules 18th Century in India.

Page-32

45. **Bhai, Bhaijaan**

It means "brother." The -jaan suffix means "life" and here it means "my life" as in "my dear."

46. **Namskar**

Namaskar is a greeting, often accompanied by a hand gesture in which the palms are together, used in India.

47. **Ayat**

Ayah, in plural ayat, is a verse" in the Quran, one of the statements of varying length that make up the chapters (surah) of the Quran and are marked by a number.

48. **Adivasi**

The Adivasi are heterogeneous tribal groups across the Indian subcontinent. They are claimed to be the ethnic indigenous people of India, original inhabitants prior to the Dravidians and Indo-Aryans. But the Constitution of India does not use the word Adivasi, instead referring to them as Scheduled Tribes and Janjati.

Page-33

49. **Vipassana Centre of Igatpuri**

The Vipassana International Academy is a renowned meditation centre located in Igatpuri, Maharashtra. Also known as Dhammagiri Meditation Centre, it is considered as the world's largest meditation centre. It is known to offer various courses on Vipassana, an ancient meditation technique.

Page-36

50. **Ashrams**

A place of religious retreat for religious Hindus to meditate and be instructed in spiritual matters, pray or practice yoga away from the rest of society.

51. **The king spoke, the army moved; the qazi spoke, the beard shook ...**

A Marathi proverb literally meaning when king orders, army moves, but when Kazi, the Muslim officer for justice speaks, nothing moves except his beard. It summarizes the glaring injustice of the situation where the powerful, rich people can do anything, and the poor are at their mercy.

52. **Banana Republic**

The term “banana republic,” refers to a small, poor, politically unstable country that is weak because of an excessive reliance on one crop and foreign funding. The term originated to describe the experiences of many countries in Central America, whose economies and politics were dominated by U.S. based banana exporters at the turn of the 20th century.

Page-37

53. **Bihari babus**

Bihari Babu is a gentleman, middle-class person from Bihar. Babu is a title equivalent to mister or sir used in addressing a man who is an educated indigenous clerk who can write English.

Page-38

54. **Chhatrapati Warriors Tarun Mandal**

Name of a local Hindu religious youth organisation. Such organisations are found across Maharashtra started in the name of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, the famous Maratha king.

55. **Vedas and Puranas**

The Vedas are regarded as the most respected and ancient books in Hinduism written in Vedic Sanskrit. They are a group of hymns, prayers, and ritualistic formulas the ancient sages passed down verbally and later collected in writing. On the other hand, the Puranas are a large collection of myths, folklore, legends, and stories collected over many years.

56. **If you sow babul tree, how can you get mangoes!**

A saying synonymous to “What you sow, you reap”. Babul is a thorny tree commonly known as Acacia.

Page-39

57. **Roti**

Synonyms to Chapati with slight variation in the preparation process.

58. **Pooja, Satyanaryan**

Pooja is a daily Hindu religious ritual to worship God. Satynarayan is a special Pooja done to mark special events.

59. Hom-Havan

A Havan, also known as Yagya, is a Hindu fire ritual performed on special occasions by a priest usually for a homeowner. This ritual involves offering substances to holy fire while chanting mantras. It is believed to invoke blessings and fulfil desires.

Page-41

60. Jumma or Jumuah

Jumma are prayers on Friday at noon performed in a mosque. Considered as the holiest day of the week, Muslims offer weekly prayers as core part of Islamic beliefs.

61. Eid

There are two types of Eid: Eid after the holy month of Ramadan and Bakri Eid. These are the two major holidays celebrated by Muslims.

62. Jamaat

An Islamic council or assembly

63. Maulanas

Maulana is a title preceding the name of respected Muslim religious leaders, in particular graduates of religious institutions, or scholars who have studied under other Islamic scholars.

64. Bagara rice

Bagara Rice (Bagara Chawal, Bagara Annam, or Bagara Khana) is a traditional Hyderabadi dish made using rice, onions, herbs, and spices. It is best served with salan or korma/curry/meat.

65. Salaam-Dua

Salam from Arabic meaning "peace" but is also used as a general greeting and enquiring about each other's well-being.

Page-42

66. Anganwadi centres

Anganwadi is a type of rural childcare centre in India. It was started by the Indian government in 1975 as part of the Integrated Child Development Services program to combat child hunger and malnutrition. Anganwadi means "courtyard shelter" in English.

Page-43

67. Kumbh Mela

Kumbh Mela is a major pilgrimage and festival in Hinduism. Millions of devotees irrespective of caste, creed, or gender, especially sadhus, babas from akhadas and ashrams, religious organizations, or are individuals living on alms gather approximately every 12 years, to celebrate every revolution Brihaspati (Jupiter) completes, at four river-bank pilgrimage sites: Prayagraj (Ganges-Yamuna-Sarasvati rivers confluence), Haridwar (Ganges), Nashik (Godavari), and Ujjain (Shipra).

68. After all, I am a fakir, I shall pick up my handbag and leave!

Indian PM Narendra Modi said in response to his opposition, "I am a fakir. I will walk away with my little belongings" Fakir is a person who owns nothing, lives on alms, a wandering monk and dedicates his life to worship of God.

Page-44

69. Khichdi

Khichadi is an Indian dish, part of regular meal for many Indians, made with rice and moong lentils, spices, and some other optional ingredients.

70. Puri-bhaji

Puri bhaji is a dish of puri (deep-fried rounds of flour) and bhaji (a spiced potato dish which may be dry or curried). It is a traditional breakfast dish in North India.

Page-45

71. Sangh Seva Samitees

This refers to various volunteer committees launched by RSS – Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, commonly known as Sangh, a Hindu nationalist right wing organisation. It is the main ideological and organisational backbone of BJP regime in India.

Page-46

72. Inquilab Zindabad

Inquilab Zindabad is a Hindustani phrase which translates to "Long live the revolution". Although originally the slogan was used by leftists in British India, today it is used in India and Pakistan by civil society activists during protests.

Page-47

73. MP

Madhya Pradesh, a state in North India, is commonly abbreviated as MP by Indians in slang.

Page-48

74. ITI

The full form of ITI is Industrial Training Institute, and it is a government training organization responsible for providing high school students who have passed matriculation and are interested in industry-related education for gaining some technical knowledge to start earning rather than higher education. The training covers many trades like plumbing, carpentry, domestic painting, electrician, and many other technical disciplines.

75. Kambarmodi : (coatbuttons/tridax daisy)

Kambarmodi or coatbuttons is a species of flowering plant in the daisy family. It is best known as a widespread weed and pest plant. Traditionally, it has been in use in India for wound healing and as an insect repellent.

76. Khandu Chakka' leaves : (Ehrteia Laevis Roxb./ Ajan Vruksha)

Khandu Chakka has been extensively used as a traditional remedy for the treatment of a diverse range of ailments related to the respiratory system, the gastrointestinal tract, the reproductive system, and against several infections. It is used by tribal communities in Asian countries for the treatment of various disorders.

77. Poli

Synonyms to Chapati with slight variation in the preparation process.

Page-49

78. Mian

The Mian or miyan is a title used in Muslim community of Indian subcontinent and addressed in conversation.

Page-50

79. Tendu : (Tembur/Indian Persimmon /East Indian or coromandel Ebony)

Tendu or tembur is a wild fruit tree from India. It grows in very large numbers in the forests of Central India. Though its fruits are edible, the tree is economically important for its leaves which are used for making an improvised type of cigarette or Bidi which is smoked in India.

80. Baheda : (Bahera/Belleric Myrobalan)

Baheda is a large deciduous tree common on the plains and lower hills in South and Southeast Asia. Its fruit is used in the popular Indian herbal treatment of a great number of diseases like Asthma, Bronchitis, Hepatitis, Diarrhoea, etc.

81. Amla : (Indian Gooseberries)

Amla is an Indian gooseberry which is a round, sour, yellowish green fruit about the size of a golf ball. It is an extensively used in treating various diseases because it is known to have immunity-boosting ability.

82. Hirada : (Black or Chebulic Myrobalan/ Country galls)

Hirada refers to the black medicinal tree and its fruit. Its traditional Ayurveda uses are for bowel regulation and is used as a gentle laxative.

83. Bael (Stone Apple)

Commonly known as Bilwa or Bael (stone apple) is an important medicinal plant. It is called the tree of Lord Shiva.

84. Kavath : (wood-apple/elephant-apple/monkey-fruit)

Kavath is used to make a fruit juice with astringent properties and jams. Ripe fruit can be used as pickle or chutney.

Page-52

85. Ganja

Ganja is one of the oldest and most used synonyms for marijuana.

86. Mandal Dispute

Mandal Commission was set up in 1979 by the government to identify the socially or educationally backward classes to consider the question of seat reservations and quotas for people to redress caste discrimination. Its recommendations for implementation of reservation for under privileged and socially weak castes in government jobs and public universities was met with widespread protests and counter-protests.

87. Nizamuddin Markaz

Nizamuddin Markaz is a mosque located in Nizamuddin West in South Delhi, India. It is the birthplace and global centre of the Tablighi Jamaat, the missionary and reformist movement started in 1926. The mosque continues to serve as the headquarters of the Nizamuddin faction of Tablighi Jamaat.

88. Tablighi Jamaaat

Tablighi Jamaat meaning 'Society of Preachers' in Urdu, is one of the most influential missionary movements in 20th-century Islam and has spread to more than a hundred countries with millions of adherents worldwide. It claims no connection to political agenda and aims for the spiritual reformation of Muslims by preaching core teachings of Islam at the grassroots of society.

89. Tablighis

A member of Tablighi Jamaat.

90. NSA

The National Security Advisor is the senior official on the National Security Council of India, and the chief advisor to the Prime Minister of India on national security policy and international affairs.

Page-53

91. Surma

Surma, aka Kajal, Kohl is a popular and traditional eye cosmetic for applying to the eyes as eye liner. The name 'Surma' derives from the Urdu word for antimony.

Page-54

92. Mahatmas, Sant-babas

Hindu Saints are called Mahatmas or Sant-Babas as their title.

93. Ayurvedic Medicine

Ayurveda, a natural system of medicine, originated in India more than 3,000 years ago and is based on ancient writings that rely on a “natural” and holistic approach to physical and mental health. Ayurveda treatment starts with an internal purification process, followed by combination of products (mainly derived from plants, but may also include animal, metal, and mineral), diet, exercise, and massage therapy, yoga, and meditation and lifestyle changes.

Page-55

94. Bhajiya and gulgule

Fritters and Dumplings

Page-56

95. “Ma ...chod...,boo..chod...”

Derogatory words or foul curses

Page-59

96. Hadis

Hadis or Hadith is a collection of narrative records of traditions or stories about the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, what the prophet said and his actions. Hadith is revered and accepted as a major source of

Sharia law, moral ethos, and second in its authority to the Quran.

Page-61

97. Soorma Bhopali

Soorma Bhopali is a famous imaginary character in the blockbuster Hindi action film 'Sholay' in 1975. The unique comical character was portrayed as native from Bhopal, hence the name Bhopali.

Page-63

98. Wahe Guru Da Khalsa, Vaahe Guru Di Fateh

The Punjabi phrase "Waheguruji Ka Khalsa Waheguruji Ki Fateh" holds significant meaning in Sikhism. It is a prayer and greeting that Sikhs use when they meet each other. The phrase "is translated as "The Khalsa (Sikh community) belonging to Waheguru (God), and the victory belonging to Waheguru."

99. Sikhs

Sikhs are a religious minority in the north-western state of Punjab, India where they form a majority. They are also scattered around different parts of India and the world. The Sikh religion dates to end of the fifteenth century and was founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539). Sikhism is a distinct religious tradition that maintains its own distinctive features, including founders, scripture, worship, ceremonies, and traditions done in their temple called Gurudwara. The Gurus of Sikhism were always against the traditional caste system. Sikhs strongly believe in the idea of sharbat da bhala ('welfare of all') and are often seen on the frontlines to provide humanitarian aid across the world.

100. Langar

In Sikhism, a langar is the community kitchen of a gurdwara maintained and serviced by Sikh community volunteers. It serves vegetarian meals to all free of charge, regardless of religion, caste, gender, economic status, or ethnicity. People sit on the floor and eat together.

Page-64

101. Dupattas

The dupattā is a long shawl-like scarf traditionally worn by women in the Indian subcontinent to cover the head and shoulders. The dupatta is used most as part of the women's traditional shalwar kameez outfit.

102. Satsang and Gurubani

Gurbani (the Guru's words) a Sikh term, very commonly used by Sikhs to refer to various compositions by the Sikh Gurus and other writers of Guru Granth Sahib. Satsang is the congregation of the community of people who meet and worship in the gurdwara in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib, which is the Sikh holy book.

Page-65

103. Gurmat

Gurmat is counsel or tenets of the Guru, more specifically the religious principles laid down by the Guru. It covers doctrinal, prescriptive, and directional aspects of Sikh faith and praxis.

104. Sevadars

Sevadar or sewadar, is another Punjabi word for a volunteer who performs seva. Seva in Hinduism and Sikhism is the concept of selfless service that is performed without any expectation of reward for performing it.

105. Sat Sri Akaal

The greeting of the Sikh's 'Sat Sri Akaal' (Truth is the Timeless One) reminds themselves and the others that we are all part of that one divine existence, and timeless, present in every being.

106. Bahujan

Bahujan is a Pali term frequently found in Buddhist texts, with a literal meaning of "the many", or "the majority". In a modern context, it refers to the combined population of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, Muslims, and other minorities, who together constitute the demographic majority of India.

Page-66

107. Azaan

Azaan is the Islamic call to prayer. It is recited five times a day, a few minutes before the prayers.

108. Rela

Rela is a folk dance in Adivasi culture, which brings the community together. Like flowers in a garland, people dance, hand in hand rhythmically in circles with one another.

Page-69

109. Sumos

The Tata Sumo is a SUV (A sport utility vehicle) produced by the Indian automobile manufacturer Tata Motors. In rural areas Sumo vehicles were largely used for local transport as a shared and affordable transport system where no other means were available.

110. Baadwaale Ganesh temple

A Hindu temple of god Ganesh at the bank of river Betwa. The name Baad or Baadh is related to the legend of flood in the river and unharmed Ganesh idol.

Page-71

111. Saali

A Hindi swear word used in slang as an insult.

Page-73

112. Kshatriyas

Kshatriya is one of the four varnas (social orders: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra) the second highest varna of Hindu society and is associated with the warrior aristocracy. It represents power and authority.

113. Chutney

A chutney is a spread typically associated with cuisines of the Indian subcontinent. Chutneys are made in a wide variety of forms, such as a tomato relish, a ground peanut garnish, yogurt or curd, cucumber, spicy coconut, spicy onion, or mint dipping sauce.

Page-74

114. Palash : (Parrot Tree / Bastard teak / Flame of the forest)

Palash also known as dhak, palas is revered as sacred tree by Hindus. The Palash flowers, bearing a dazzling orange-yellow shade and resembling a fire, provide the general term for the tree as Flame of the forest.

115. Bhakri

Bhakri is a round flatbread often eaten in the cuisines of the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Karnataka in India. The bhakri prepared using jowar or bajra or rice flour is coarser than a regular wheat chapati.

116. Phulka

Synonyms to Chapati with slight variation in the preparation process

Page-76

117. Panchnama

The word PANCHNAMA literally means “record of observation by five people”. A Panchnama is a document having legal bearings that records evidence and findings that an officer makes at the scene of crime.

Page-77

118. Khurachan ,Chirounji ki Burfee

Burfee or burfi is a type of milk-based sweet from the Indian subcontinent with a fudge-like consistency.

Khurchan, Chironji Ki Burfi are famous sweets in Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh..

Page-79

119. Tantra-Mantra

Tantra-mantra is a term used to describe the esoteric mystical and ritualistic religious traditions typically associated with Shaktism in the Hindu tradition and Vajrayana in Buddhism. Generally, they fall under the category of occult practices.

Page-83

120. Charoli : (Chironji/Cuddapah almond)

Charoli is a deciduous tree of the cashew family native to the Indian subcontinent. Its seeds are used for making sweets.

121. Khirni Fruits : (Rayan Fruits)

The Khirni fruit tree is naturally found in the tropical wilderness of India and have been a significant source of livelihood for the Indian tribal population.

122. Nimboli : (Nim Fruits/ Margosa)

Nimboli commonly known as neem, margosa, nim tree or Indian lilac is a tree native to the Indian subcontinent. Its fruits and seeds are the source of neem oil. It has anti-bacterial and anti-fungal properties.

123. Bhilawa fruits : (Bibba/ Indian marking nut /Malacca beans /Marany nut/Oriental cashew nut/Marsh nut)

Tree of Bhilawa fruits is a native to India. It is closely related to the cashew. It is used as medicine to heal wounds,also traditionally used to mark clothing by washermen.

Page-84

124. Sagwan Tree : (Teak)

The Sagwan tree, also known as teak, is widely harvested for its wood. The tree is an evergreen tree that is grown in tropical regions. The wood is widely used for boats, construction, veneer, furniture, etc.

125. Ain(*) Tree: (Indian laurel/ Black murdah / Crocodile-bark tree / Silver grey wood / White chuglam)

Ain tree wood is used for furniture, cabinetwork, joinery, paneling, specialty items, boatbuilding, railroad cross-ties, decorative veneers and for musical instruments. Its characteristic bark is often tapped and used as a source of potable water in the summer by forest folk.

126. M80 bike

An Indian two-wheeler bike manufactured by Bajaj and quite popular throughout India for daily commuting as well as for carrying various sort of luggage like fodder, milk cans in rural India.

Page-86**127. Sarpanch**

A sarpanch, or president is the head and main decision-maker, elected by the village-level constitutional body of local self-government (village council) in India. The sarpanch is the focal point of contact between government officers and the village community and retains power for five years.

128. Meethi Vihir

A well of sweet water

129. Gram Panchayat

In India, Panchayati raj is followed in the rural areas for self-governance. The Panchayati Raj consists of three levels: Gram Panchayat at the village level, Block Panchayat at the intermediate level and Zilla Panchayat at the district level. Gram Panchayat (village council) is a basic governing institution in Indian villages. It is a political institution, acting as the cabinet of a village. The people directly elect the members of the gram panchayat.

130. Zilla Parishad

The Zila Panchayat is the third tier of the Panchayati Raj system in India and functions at the district levels in all states.

Page-88**131. Daal-Bhat**

Daal-Bhat is a staple food in India and neighbouring countries. It consists of steamed rice (Bhat) and a cooked lentil (Daal).

Page-91

132. Ambil

Ambil is a traditional summer drink in India made with fermented finger millet flour or its grains. It is nutritious, probiotic-rich, and supports digestion.

133. Sattu

Sattu is a type of flour, mainly used in northern India as a part of regular diet. It consists of a mixture of roasted ground pulses and cereals and good source of protein.

Page-93

134. Maida

Maida, maida flour is a type of wheat flour originated from the Indian subcontinent. Finely milled without any bran, it is used extensively in India for baking breads and biscuits, several varieties of sweets, and traditional flatbread.

Page-94

135. Ber : (Indian jujube / dessert apple / Indian palm)

Ber is an Indian jujube, sometimes called dessert apple or Indian palm.

Page-96

136. Raza Academy

Raza Academy is a Sunni Muslim Islamist group based in Maharashtra, India mainly printing and publishing books written by Aalahazrat Imam Ahmed Raza and other writers. It was also established for educational

awareness amongst minorities, for raising voice against the atrocities on the minorities and for all minority related matters.

137. Satpura Range

The Satpura Range is a range of hills in central India. The range rises in eastern Gujarat running east through the border of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh and ends in Chhattisgarh. The range parallels the Vindhya Range to the north, and these two easts–west ranges divide Indian Subcontinent into the Indo-Gangetic plain of northern India and the Deccan Plateau of the south.

138. Chunabhatti

In Hindi and Marathi language lime-kiln is called Chunabhatti.

Page-98

139. Chikkis, Papdi

Chikki called Peanut Brittle in English and Gajak in Hindi is a popular winter sweet snack in India. This nutty and crunchy sweet is made with just two key ingredients viz. jaggery and peanuts. Papdi is another popular sweet India which is made of gram flour, ghee, sugar and milk. It is usually cube-shaped or served as flakes, and has a crisp and flaky texture.

140. Gujju-marwadi owner

Gujju is synonym of a community, hailing from Gujarat region. Marwadi or Marwari is any of an Indian ethnic group originating from the Rajasthan region of India, more specifically Marwar region. But this term is typically used for members of Gujarati-Marwari business

community who are adept in augmenting their wealth through their business skills.

Page-101

141. Samosa

A samosa is a very popular Indian spicy snack with a savoury filling, including ingredients such as spiced potatoes, onions, peas, meat, or fish.

Page-102

142. Sharadamata temple

The Holy Maa Sharda Temple is situated in Village Maihar of Satna District in Madhya Pradesh. Maa Sharda is a Hindu goddess in motherly form, also called Sarswati-goddess of learning. Each year crores of devotees visit here.

143. Dharmshalas

A dharamshala is a public resthouse or shelter in the Indian subcontinent. Dharamshalas are built for religious travellers at pilgrimage sites.

Page-103

144. Darshan

In Indian religions, Darshana, also spelt Darshan is the auspicious sight of a deity or a holy person.

145. Lahya : (White puffs)

Lahya is the Marathi term for popped grains. They can be made from Jowar, Rice, and Bajra. It is eaten as snack as

well as given as a part of Prasad (religious blessed offering) to devotees in Hindu temples.

146. Batashahs, Pedas

Batashas are the Indian traditional aerated sugar candies which can be conveniently stored for indefinite periods. Typically, batashas along with puffed rice, pedhas (another milk based sweet) are inseparable part of the ritualistic offerings made at religious places in India.

147. Prasad

Prasada is a religious offering in Hinduism, especially food cooked for devotees after praise and thanksgiving to a god. Sometimes Prasad can be just puffed rice and batashas.

Page-104

148. Kachoris

Kachori is a sweet and spicy deep-fried snack in North India. It is usually a round flattened ball made of fine flour filled with a stuffing of baked mixture of lentil and other spices.

Page-116

149. Ammi

Ammi is mother in Urdu language. Muslims call their mother Ammi.

Page-117**150. Mon-key Baat (Mann Ki Baat)**

"Mann ki baat" is a Hindi phrase that is often used to refer to an intimate conversation or discussion where one person shares their innermost thoughts and feelings with another. It became the propaganda title of a radio program hosted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, where he shares his thoughts and ideas with the public. The political opponents termed it as "monkey baat".

151. Swasth Bharat

A part of PM Modi's government slogan 'Samruddh Bharat, Swasth Bharat' meaning 'Prosperous India, Healthy India'.

152. Raidas

Guru Ravidas is popularly known by different names like Raidas, Rohidas, and Ruhidas. He was an Indian revered mystic poet-saint, renowned philosopher of the Bhakti movement during the 15th century. He taught removal of social divisions of caste and gender and promoted unity in the pursuit of personal spiritual freedom.

153. Chandaal

Chandala or Chandaal is a Sanskrit word for someone who deals with the disposal of corpses, and is a Hindu lower caste, traditionally considered to be untouchable.

Page-118

154. Kalat

Kalat is a musical instrument, a type of clarinet used traditionally by Indians during celebrations, religious rituals, and wedding processions etc.

155. Meri Pyari Beheniya

A popular Hindi song about sister's wedding, hence frequently played in musical bands on Kalat/clarinet during wedding processions.

156. Matangs

The Matang caste formerly classified as a criminal tribe under the Criminal Tribes Acts of the British Raj is associated with a group of people historically considered as an "untouchable" or Dalit community in India which faced social discrimination and exclusion based on their caste status. The community was believed to be associated with occupations that involved working with animal hides and leather as well as village security and professions such as rope making, broom making, musicians, cattle castration, leather curing, tanning, shoemaking, midwifery, executioners, and funeral directors, scavenging and handling carcasses.

157. Sirdars or Sardars

A title as in commander, in India. It was used as a title of royalty and nobility. It has also been used to denote a chief or leader of a tribe or group.

158. Brahmavarta

A region on the bank of river Ganges in Kanpur district of Uttar Pradesh where many Marathi families migrated from Maharashtra during battles of Panipat.

159. Battle of Panipat

Here the reference is to the Third Battle of Panipat (1761), fiercely fought between the Maratha Empire and the Durrani Empire. The Maratha army was accompanied by roughly 200,000 non-combatants, several of whom were pilgrims desirous of making pilgrimages to Hindu holy sites in northern India.

Page-119

160. Indirabai

The third Prime Minister of India - Mrs. Indira Gandhi from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 until her assassination in 1984. She was India's first and, to date, the only female prime minister. She was a central figure in Indian politics and the leader of the Indian National Congress.

Page-120

161. Begumpura

Begumpura ("land without sorrow") is a stateless, classless, casteless society imagined by poet Guru Ravidas in his poem written around 500 years ago in India still influences people today and is seen as a precursor to the ideas of socialism. It became the guiding light for anti-caste intellectuals.

Page-121

162. Bhajans and kirtans

Hindu religious devotional songs are called Bhajan. Bhajans are usually sung by a group of devotees together in front of deity of a temple as well as in some other religious ceremonies at home or public programs. Kirtan is narration of religious stories. It is usually performed by a one leading person and accompanied by chorus of singers with musical instruments.

163. I and my TV often talk together

It is a political teaser related to the image building propaganda of ruling party leaders on TV and other media.

Page-126

164. Swachh Bharat, Swasth Bharat

Swachh Bharat, Swasth Bharat (Clean India, Healthy India) is a slogan of Indian Government's Swachh Bharat Mission. Launched on the anniversary of the birth of Mahatma Gandhi, it aimed to achieve "open defecation free" India and general awareness of cleanliness among the public.

Page-127

165. Do Gaj Ki Doori

The expression "Do Gaj Ki Duri" meaning "keep distance of two yards" is a popular slogan by the Indian government during the covid period, to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Page-141

166. Galouti kebab

Galouti kebab, is a succulent and juicy dish made from minced meat and host of spices which has almost become synonymous with the city of Lucknow, India.

Page-145

167. Kheer

Kheer is a pudding or porridge popular in India, usually made by boiling milk, sugar or jaggery, and rice or other grains.

168. Chachu

In India, the term "chachu" is often used to address or refer to the paternal uncle with familiarity and affection.

169. Pir

Pir is a title for a Sufi spiritual guide, saint, or a Muslim religious instructor especially in mystical sects

Page-146

170. Auliya or Awliya

A saint, holy person with mystic capabilities who act as guardian, defender against evil.

