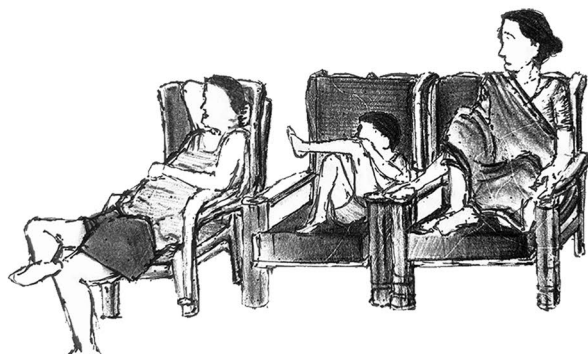




Of inheritances, rats,
letters & anxieties



This work is produced at the School of Environment and Architecture during the Monsoon Semester of 2024-25 by Akanksha Thakur, Aditya Mahajan, Avantika Padalkar, Atisha Bhuta, Ayush Patil, Chetasvi Patel, Gargi Somani, Gauri Shinde, Jayesha Chimanpure, Khushboo Tejawani, Krisha Dharaiya, Neha Shah, Paarth Vedak, Prachi Shah, Pranav Kadambi, Sanskriti Agrawal, Sapna Chopda, Shivam Vishe, Swara Chaudhary, Zahra Bagasrawala for the module titled 'Storytelling and Urbanism' conducted by Prasad Shetty.

June, 2024

School of Environment and Architecture

This book is a compilation of four fictional narratives that delve into the notion of 'Making Home.' The stories are located across four temporal geographies of Mumbai. They are contemporary, and point at the urban conditions that seem to be emerging from the layers of life sedimented over the multiple histories of the city.

Inspired by the works of George Orwell, Saadat Hasan Manto, Edgar Allan Poe, Vladimir Nabokov, and Charles Baudelaire, the book crafts an image of the city that depicts current urban landscapes through detailed descriptions of land distribution, merchant trade, industrial dwellings, and the intricate service systems.

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दावे आणि हक्क



"मटणाहा वाटण खपले ते जाऊन आण जा" संगीता ताई वरच्या आवाजात ओरडून म्हणाली. मंडपात होणारे तिखट जेवण आणि लागणारे मटण फक्त संगीता ताईच उत्तमरित्या बनवू शकत होती. आप्पा आणि तात्यांच्या शेतीचं काम ती आणि तिचा नवरा फार पूर्वीपासून सांभाळायचे. कधी काही अडलं नडलं तर आप्पा त्यांच्या मदतीला नेहमी धावून जायचे, त्यामुळे ते आप्पांना खूप मानत असत. आता तर ती ह्या कुटुंबाचा एक भागच बनली होती.

परंपरेने प्रत्येक लग्नानंतरचा एक दिवस असतो जेव्हा, घरातील सखी आणि चुलत मंडळी हे एकत्र जेवण करतात. तसंच काही जणांसाठी हा दिवस अगदी उपवास सोडवण्यासारखा असतो. गावाकडे ह्यालाच 'तिखट जेवण' म्हणतात.

ह्यावेळी, संगीता ताईच्या हाताखाली, बाकी जमलेल्या बायका जेवण बनवण्यात मग्न असतात. पुरुष मंडळी काही हवं नको ते बघतात. हे जेवण चुलीवरच्या आगीवर मोठ्या कढ्या आणि तव्यांवर शिजत राहते. संपूर्ण वातावरणामध्ये या स्वादिष्ट मसाल्यांचा आणि शिजत असलेल्या जेवणाचा घमघमाट पसरलेला असतो. भाज्या चिरणं, वेगवेगळ्या प्रकारची पीठं मळण, गंज ढवळण ह्या सगळ्यात महिलांचा हात बसलेला असतो.

सुकं खोबरं, आलं, लसूण आणि बाकी मसाल्यांची घट्ट अशी पेस्ट म्हणजेच 'वाटण' आणण्यासाठी जवळ असलेली सायली जाते.

"हो ग मावशी, आणते."

मावळत्या संध्याकाळच्या वेळेत, कुटुंबातले सगळेजण एकत्र आले होते. त्यातील पुरुष मंडळी संगीता ताईने बनवलेल्या मटणाचा आस्वाद घेत एका टेबलाभोवती प्यायला बसले होते, तसेच घरातील स्त्रिया मात्र नेहमीप्रमाणे गप्पागोष्टी करत मज्जा घेत होत्या.

पंधरा वर्षांची लाजरी सायली, ही तिच्या भावंडांच्या शोधात असतानाच, तिसऱ्या मंडपातून एक आवाज येतो..

"अगं सायली, चाकण्याला अंडी संपली आहेत, जाता- जाता ती संगीता ताई कडून घेऊन ये ना," तो आवाज तिच्या प्रशांत काकाचा असतो.

चाळिशीत असलेला लठ्ठ प्रशांत पूर्ण गावात त्याच्या प्रेम प्रकरणांसाठी कूप्रसिद्ध असतो. यामुळेच गावातलं कुठलंच घर त्याला मुलगी द्यायला तयार नव्हतं. सुरुवातीपासूनच त्याने बऱ्याच व्यवसायात हातपाय चालवले होते. सध्या तो चिनी वस्तूंचा व्यवसाय करत होता. निरनिराळ्या आकर्षित वस्तू, जसे अदृश्य शाईचा पेन, लाईट पेटणारी खेळणी, वेगवेगळ्या सुगंधाचे खोडरबर इत्यादी, तो शहरातून आणून गावात विकायचा. आधीच्या व्यवसायाप्रमाणेच, त्याचा हा प्रयत्नही ठप्प पडण्याच्या मार्गावर आहे. सध्या तो एक नवीन शक्कल लढवत असतो, त्याचा गावच्या जमिनीवर डोळा असतो, ही जमीन गाहाण ठेवून येणारा पैसा त्याला नवीन व्यवसायात गुंतवायचा असतो.

गावांमध्ये लग्न आणि लग्नाचे विधी अंगणात करण्याची पद्धत ही जुनीच आहे. यासाठी शेजार-पाजार्यांच्या घरामधील जागेची तडजोड केली जाते. आळी मध्ये प्रत्येक कानाकोपऱ्यात एक वेगळेच उत्साहाचे वातावरण असते. प्रत्येक घर, घराचा ओटा, अंगण पाहुण्यांनी गजबजलेला असतो.

लग्न हे एका मंडपात होत नसतं, रिती-भातींसाठी एक, जेवणासाठी दुसरा, तसंच पिण्याच्या कार्यक्रमासाठी दोन्ही मंडपापासून दूर, एक खास मंडप मागीलदारी बनवला जातो. तोच तो पुरुषांनी व्यापलेला 'तिसरा मंडप'. गावातली लग्न अशाच पद्धतीने पार पडत असतात.

खूप शोधाशोध केल्यानंतरही वेंधळ्या साईलीला काही तिच्या भावंडांचा पत्ता लागला नाही. तिने आप्पांना सुद्धा विचारून झालं.

"अहो आप्पा तुम्ही तरी पाहिलं का राज दादा किंवा जेनी ताईला?"

"मी कुठे, माझी तर अर्धी लाकडं मशण्यात पोहोचली आहेत."

आता ती प्रशांत काका कडे राज दादाला फोन करायला गेली.

"अरे दादा कुठे आहेत तुम्ही, कोणच दिसत नाहीये"

"इथे इथे जरा मागीलधारी वळून बघ", राज मागून हात दाखवत म्हणाला.

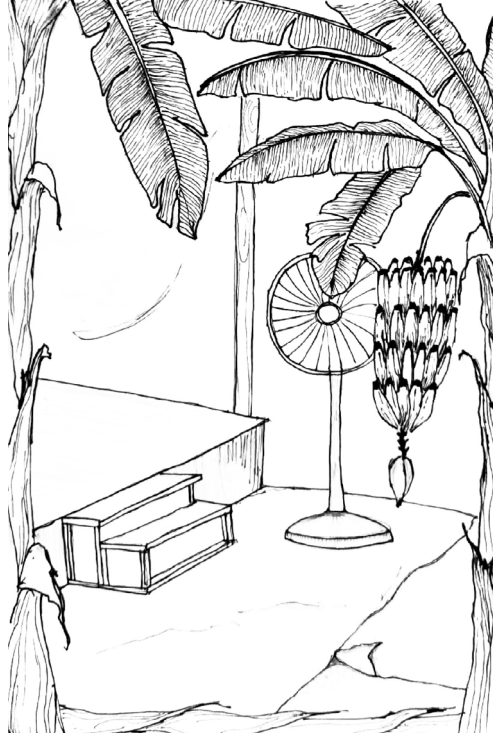
एक अंगण आणि एक मागीलदार याशिवाय गावाकडचं घर, घर वाटत नाही. शेतीसाठी लागणार सामान, कपडे धुण्याचा एक कठडा आणि घरातील बाकी वस्तू ठेवण्याची जागा, म्हणजे मागीलदार. अशाच एका मागीलधारी ह्या घरातील सर्व पوراंच्या गप्पा रंगल्या होत्या. कौस्तुभ आणि जेनी पायऱ्यांवरती, सिएरा कठड्यावरती तर राज आणि रोहन झोपाळ्यावरती बसून बिचाऱ्या सायलीची टिंगल करत होते.

"किती तो गोंगाट नुसता या लहान मुलांचा." सिएरा म्हणाली

"आपण लहान असताना पण एवढीच मजा करायचं हा ताई." रोहन सीएराला टोकत बोलला.

प्रशांत आणि केशव मदन तात्या आणि माईची मुलं होती. तात्या, त्यांच्या मुलांना अगदी पाच वर्षांचे असतानाच सोडून गेले. त्यांच्या जाण्यानंतर माईची तब्येत ही खालावली, कालांतराने तीही गेली. आई वडील गेल्यानंतर त्यांचे काका काकी, आप्पा आणि आप्पीनेच त्यांना स्वतःच्या मुलासारखा वाढवलं.

अतिशय हुशार केशव वीस वर्षांचा असतानाच कामाच्या शोधात शहराकडे वळाला. गावात असतानाच त्याने ITI चा कोर्स केला होता. आज तो मुंबईमध्ये त्याचा 2BHK फ्लॅटमध्ये, त्याची बायको पूजा आणि मुलगी आर्या सोबत राहतोय. बाबांच्या पावलावर पाऊल ठेवणारी आर्या, UPSCच्या एक्झाम ची तयारी करत होती. अभ्यासाकडे दुर्लक्ष होऊ नये म्हणून आर्या लग्नाला आली नव्हती.



आप्पा आणि आप्पी यांची स्वतःची तीन मुलं होती. कॉलेजमध्ये असतानाच, त्यांची एकुलती एक मुलगी आक्का, एका ख्रिश्चन मुलासोबत पळून गेली होती. याच कारणामुळे, आकाच्या भावंडानी तिच्यासोबतचं नातं तोडलेलं. पण अक्काच्या मुली सीएरा आणि जेनी त्यांच्या मामाकडे सतत येत जात असत. मोठ्यांच्या ह्या वादामुळे लहानांमध्ये कधीही दुरावा आला नाही.

आप्पांचा मोठा मुलगा चंदू, त्याची पत्नी शैला हिच्या सोबत शेती सांभाळायचा. चंदू समजूतदार तर शैला अगदी विरुद्ध. ती नेहमीच तिचा खरं करायची. चंदूचा मोठा मुलगा कौस्तु हा एक गराज सांभाळायचा आणि लहान रोहन हा फार्मसी शिकत होता.

आप्पी ही अतिशय कडक आणि शिस्तीची होती, तिला कामात कोणताच हलगर्जीपणा चालायचा नाही. ऐकदा वाडीत काम करत असताना ती पाय घसरून पडली, मणक्याचा मोठा ऑपरेशन करावं लागलं. वयानुसार तिच्या कमरेचा त्रास आणखीनच वाढू लागला आणि नंतर नंतर तर बिछान्यातच पडून राहिली. शैला आणि चंदूला घर, आप्पी आणि शेत हे सगळं सांभाळायला जड जात होतं. शैला चंदूच्या मागे सतत कटकट करायची. शेवटी नाईलाजाने चंदू ने अप्पीला वृद्धाश्रमात नेऊन ठेवलं. मुलांमध्ये कोणीच काही बोललं नाही पण, अक्काला मात्र हे पटत नव्हतं, ती नेहमी अप्पीला वृद्धाश्रमात बघायला जायची आणि तिची विचारपूस करायची.

आप्पांचा लहान मुलगा संतोष सुद्धा एका कंपनीमध्ये कामानिमित्त शहरात स्थायी झाला होता. साधा भोळा संतोष हा, त्याची पत्नी सोनाली आणि मुलगी सायली यांच्यासोबत आनंदाने राहत होता. तो बऱ्यापैकी चांगलं कमवत होता आणि त्याला गावाकडच्या जमिनीत काही रस नव्हता.

सगळ्यांमध्ये आप्पांना एक वेगळाच छंद होता, जुनी पुस्तक दिसली की ह्याचं काय करता येईल याचा ते विचार करत बसायचे. जुन्या वह्यांची उरलेली पानं काढून ते त्यातून एक नवी कोरीवही बनवायचे. उन्हाळा सुरू होताच, गावातील मुले आप्पांना त्यांच्या वह्या आणून देत असतात. आप्पांचा जादुई हात फिरतात ह्या वह्या नव्या होऊन जायच्या. उन्हाळाभर आप्पा हे काम करण्यात गुंतलेले असायचे.

लहानपणीच्या गप्पागोष्टी सुरू होत्या. आज जिथे मंडप उभा आहे, तिथे एकेकाळी भात शेती असायची आणि बांधावरती ताडीची उंच उंच झाड होती. सकाळ-सकाळी भंडारी ह्या झाडावर एक मटका लावून त्याचा रस काढून द्यायचा. यालाच 'नीरा' असं बोलतात, दुपारनंतर ह्याच नीरचे ताडीमध्ये रूपांतर व्हायचे.

"लांब लांब पर्यंत घर दिखाशी नाय न आता बघ. तुमच्या तात्या न आप्पाए दिही गेले ही जमीन कसण्यात". संगीता तार्ई म्हणाली.

"या सगळ्या जुन्या गोष्टी ग, गेले ते दिवस राहिल्या त्या आठवणी. ते दिवस राहिले नाहीत आता आणि तेवढी जागा तरी कुठे उरली आहे". हेच काय ते शैला शांत आवाजात बोलली.

जिभेला वळण नसलेली, उद्धट अशी शैलाची गावात ओळख होती. सगळे एकत्र जमलेच आहेत तर जमिनीचा विषय आत्ताच काढायची चांगलीच संधी तिने शोधली. ती नेहमीच भांडणाच्या सुरात बोलणं चालू करायची. कधीच कोणाचं काही ऐकून नाही घ्यायची, ना दुसऱ्यांना बोलण्याची संधी द्यायची. समोरच्यांना त्यांचे विचार मांडू द्यायची नाही. तिच्या ह्या स्वभावामुळे कोणालाच तिच्याशी बोलायला नीट जमायचे नाही, आणि कोणाची हिंमतही व्हायची नाही.

"ये या बाजू या शांतूस घर बघ ना" संगीता ताई बोट दाखवत म्हणाली.

"नाहीतर काय अर्ध तर आपल्या जागेत आहे" तात्यांचा मोठा मुलगा प्रशांत म्हणाला.

एकेकाळीत तात्या आणि त्यांचे शेजारी शांतू यांचे खूप जवळचे संबंध होते. तात्या गेल्यानंतर यांचे संबंध दुरावले. आता शांतूला होतं त्याच जागेवर, एक नवीन घर बांधायची इच्छा होती.

तिसऱ्या मंडपातून जात असतानाच सायलीने हे सगळं बोलणं ऐकलं.

"ह्या मोठ्यांना, प्रॉपर्टी सोडली तर दुसरा विषय भेटत नाही का बोलायला?"

"अग सायली, माणसं भेटतात आणि वस्तू मिळतात." सिएरा सायलीची चूक सुधारत म्हणाली.

"जाऊदे, नेहमीच झाले ते,"

"काय करतील ही लोकं कोणास ठाऊक, माझ्या तर आई-बाबांनी खूप मेहनत घेतली आहे या जागेसाठी. काय माहित कसे हिस्से करतील?, तसंही मला माझ्या गैरजसाठी अजून मोठी जागा लागणार आहे." कौस्तुभ बोलला

राजला हा विषय कुठे जातोय याची जाणीव होत होती. विषय बदलत राज म्हणाला "आपण आर्या ताईला व्हिडिओ कॉल करूया का ? खूप दिवस झाले बोललोच नाहीये तिच्याशी आणि आली पण नाहीये ती. नेहमीचा अभ्यास घेऊन बसली असेल.

केशवभाई ची मुलगी आर्या, तिच्या बेडरूम मध्ये पुस्तकात डोकं घालून बसली होती. अभ्यासाने कंटाळून ती तिच्या घराच्या बाल्कनी मध्ये जात होती, इतक्यात तिला राजचा फोन आला,

" काय ग आर्या ताई, अभ्यास करतेस ना?"

"हो रे, आता बसून थोडा कंटाळा आला होता, तर जरा बाहेर बालकनी मध्ये बसली होती. बोल, बाकी कसं काय? तुमची मज्जा चाललेली दिसते."

राजला टोकत मध्येच जेनी मागून येऊन म्हणाली "आम्ही मस्त मागीलदारी बसलोय पण, ह्या मोठ्यांचं मात्र परत तेच सुरू आहे प्रॉपर्टीप्रॉपर्टी"

"जाऊदे ग जेनी, तसेही आपल्या आईला काही मिळणार नाहीये, ह्या मोठ्यांचे राग-रुसवे संपतात का?" सियेरा बोलली.

कॉल सुरू होऊन दहा मिनिट झाली होती, की शैलाचा आवाज मुलांच्या कानी पडला.

"पोरांनो, चला जेऊन घ्या सगळ्यांनी. आप्पा, पोरांसोबत तुम्हाला पण जेवण वाढू का?" शैलाने विचारलं.

"हा वाढ, कितीसा खाणार आहे मी, तसही माझी अर्धी लाकडं तर मश्यात पोहोचली आहेत."

"आप्पा, तुम्हाला माहित असेल ना, इथे आधी कसं होतं सगळं!, शांतू त्यांचा आधी फक्त गोठा होता इथे आणि मग 88 साली त्यांना आपल्या आजोबांनी घरासाठी जागा दिली." तात्यांचा मोठा मुलगा केशव म्हणाला.

"मला किती आठवतंय आता, तशीही माझी अर्धी लाकडं तर मश्यात पोचली आहेत."

"आज एवढी करोड रुपयाची जागा देऊन बसलेत." शैला म्हणाली.

"गव्हर्नमेंट सर्वे केला ना तर खरंच समजेल नक्की काय केलं आहे ते आजोबांनी." प्रशांत म्हणाला

शांतूला असं वाटायचं, त्याच्याकडे सगळे कागदपत्र आहेत, पण खरं तर ही सगळी कागदपत्र बेकायदेशीर आणि बोगस होती. याची त्याला जाणीव होती. आप्पांच्या मुलांच्या भांडणामध्ये, कोर्टकचर्यामध्ये, आपल्याला ह्या घरावर पाणी सोडावा लागेल याची त्याला भीती होती.

"हा विषय आता इथे नको, आधी जेवण आटपून घेऊया." सोनाली म्हणाली.

दुसरा दिवस

तिखट जेवणाच्या दुसऱ्या दिवशी, फक्त घरातील सदस्य खूप वेळानंतर जेवून एकत्र जमले होते. हा त्यांच्या सुट्टीचा शेवटचा दिवस होता. सगळेजण परतीच्या तयारीत बागा भरून बसले होते. सात दिवस लग्नाच्या आवाजात गजबजलेलं हे घर आता शांत होणार होता. रोजची तीच धावपळ चालू होणार होती. जे कुटुंबक क्वचित एकत्र येतं ते आता परत विखरणार होतं. उकडत्या मे महिन्याचे दिवस होते, अशा गर्मीमुळे सर्व ओट्यावर थंड वाऱ्याचे दिलासे घेत बसले होते.

दुपारचं जेवण झाल्यानंतर, जुन्या आठवणी जागवत आणि प्रशाने आणलेली ताडी सगळे पीत बसले होते. ओट्यावरच्या झोपाळ्यावर संतोष आणि केशव झोके घेत होते, चंदू चर्टईवर, शैला आणि सोनाली पायऱ्यांवर तर, पाठीच्या त्रासामुळे जमिनीवर न बसू शकणारी पूजा जवळच्या खुर्चीवर बसली होती. आप्पा मात्र आपल्याच धुंदीत वह्या विणण्यात मग्न होते.

ह्या क्षणी मिळालेल्या संधीची जाणीव करून देत पुन्हा शैला चंदूच्या जवळ गेली आणि त्याच्या कानात कुजबुजली. "हीच ती वेळ आहे, आताच काय ते बोलून घ्या, नाहीतर आपल्या स्वतःच्या घराचं स्वप्न, स्वप्न बनून राहील. आज सगळे गेले की परत भेटायचा योग लवकर येणार नाही." तिने ठामपणे आग्रह केला.

खरं सांगायचं झालं तर, हेच दोघे होते जे आप्पा आणि घराची काळजी घेत होते. दुरुस्ती पासून ते डाग- दुजेपर्यंतची सर्व जबाबदारी ह्यांनी गावात राहून पार पडली. तिचं हे ठाम मत होतं की, घराजवळ असलेल्या जमिनीवर, भविष्यात नवीन घर बांधण्यासाठी तेच त्या जमिनीला लायक आहेत. आजूबाजूच्या गोंगाटाने तिची चिडचिड आणखीन वाढली आणि ती आवाज चढवून बोलली, "तुम्ही बोलणार आहात, की मी बोलू?" तिचा स्वर संकोच सोडत नव्हता.

“भाई, प्रशांत दादा मला जरा बोलायचं आहे.”

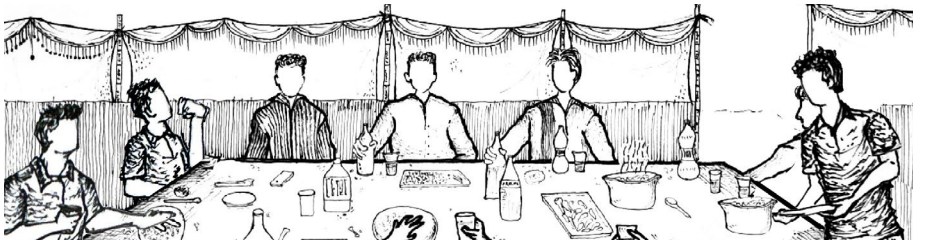
क्षणभर खोलीत स्मशान शांतता पसरली. शैला आता कोणता विषय काढेल, याची चाहूल काही जणांना लागली होती. मागच्या आठवड्याच्या उत्साहाचं आता कोणत्यातरी वेगळ्याच विषयात रूपांतर होत होतं.

चंदू प्रशांत कडे वळून म्हणाला, “प्रशांत तू मागे एकदा पोल्ट्री बदल म्हणत होता ना त्याचा काय झालं?”

प्रशांत होकार देत म्हणाला, “आपल्या गावाजवळ आसपास कोणतीही अशी मोठी पोल्ट्री नाहीये, शिवाय आपल्याला अंडी विकून पण बरच उत्पन्न काढता येईल. म्हणून मला असं वाटत होतं की ...आपल्या गावात एक पोल्ट्री हवी. मी ह्यासाठी लागणारी गव्हर्नमेंट सबसिडीची सुद्धा चौकशी केली आहे. बघू कसं काय होते ते.”

चंदूने ह्याचा विचार केला, “हमम... विचार तर छान आहे आणि तशी ही आपली स्वतःची जागा तर आहे. त्यावर आता आपण सगळे एकत्र जमलोच आहोत, तर ह्या विषयाचा न्याय-निवाडा इथेच लावून टाकूया. तसही आप्पांच वय होतंय आता, भविष्यात पुढे काय होईल काय सांगता येत नाही.”

आप्पा वहीचे कोरी पानं जमा करत असताना म्हणाले, "जे काय आहेत ते करून घ्या आताच, तसंही माझी अर्धी लाकडं तर मश्यात पोचली आहेत."



केशव हसून म्हणाला. "उगाच काही पण बोलू नका आप्पा, तुम्ही एकदम ठणठणीत आहात. पण खरंच, आपण नशीबवान आहोत की आपल्याकडे आपली स्वतःची जागा आहे. आजकाल नुस्ती छोटी जमीन विकत घ्यायचं म्हटलं तरी केवढा तो पैसा! मुंबईत घर घेण तर राहिलच, आता जी जागा आहे त्याचं काही केलं पाहिजे.

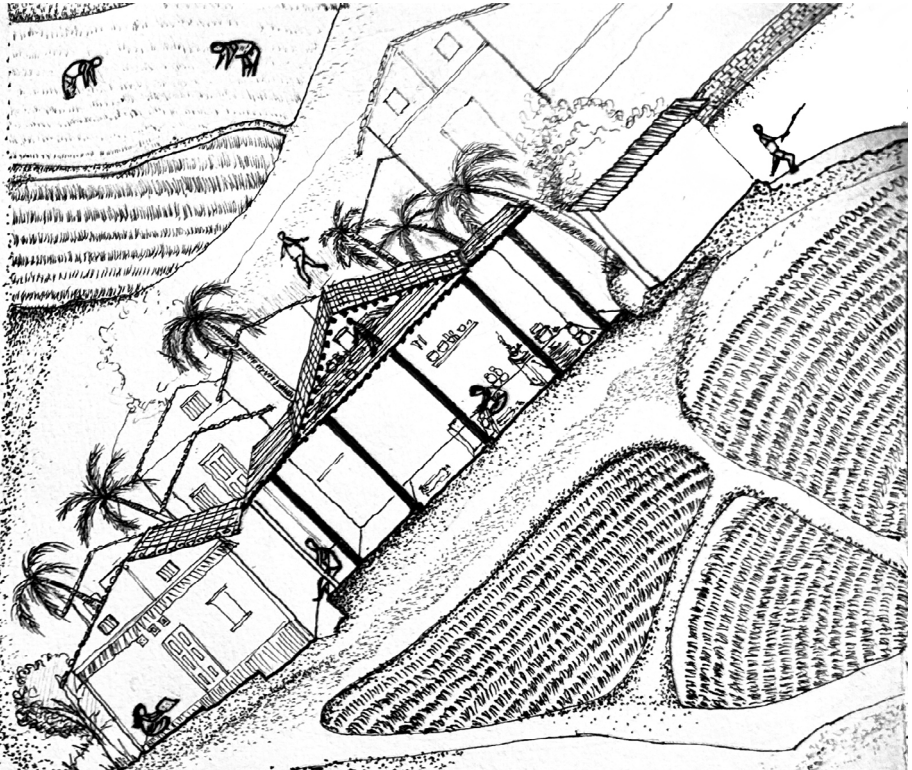
केशवला कौटुंबिक जागेच्या वाटण्या करून, त्याला त्याचा भाग विकायचा असतो, कारण त्याला आलेल्या पैशातून शहरात स्वतःचा घर विकत घ्यायचं असतं.

चंदू ने होकार दिला, "जमिनीच्या वाटण्या आपण आत्ताच करून घेतल्या पाहिजेत, सर्वच जमिनीचे समान वाटे करून टाकूया."

संतोषने सुद्धा याला मान्यता दिली, "हो बरोबर आहे, जमिनीचे पाच समान हिस्से करूया."

शैलाने चिडून विचारलं, "पाच?"

"हो मग" संतोष म्हणाला "अक्का सुद्धा आपल्या कुटुंबाचा भाग आहे, तिचा पण ह्या जमिनीवर हक्क आहे."



शैलाचा पारा आणखी चडला, "आता इथे आपाची फक्त चार मुलं आहेत. तुमच्या बहिणीला आपल्या घरातील लग्न समारंभ कधीच महत्वाचे वाटलेच नाही. नाही इथे कोणत्या सणाला येत, नाही कधी आपणांना बघायला आल्या, नाही त्यांनी त्यांच्या लग्नाआधी कोणा घरच्यांचा विचार केला, आणि तुम्ही म्हणतायेत की त्यांचा या जागेवर हक्क आहे?" संतोष थोडा रागावूनच म्हणाला, "अहो वहिनी, असं काय बोलतात, अक्का आमची बहिण आहे, ती नेहमीच आपल्या कुटुंबाचा एक भाग असेल."

वातावरणातल्या तणावाची जाणीव करून देत चंदू ने मध्यस्थी केली, "शैला शांत हो. आपल्याला नीट विचार करून निर्णय घ्यायचा आहे. अक्काची स्वतःची काही कारणे होती पण त्यामुळे ह्या कुटुंबातला तिचा संबंध तुटत नाही. आपण अक्का सोबत अस करू शकत नाही. आम्ही एकत्र खेळलो आहेत, एकत्र वाटलो आहेत, एकत्र लहानाचे मोठे झालो आहेत. लहानपणी अक्का आपल्या सर्वांची किती काळजी घ्यायची, विसरलास का दादा ? जरा तरी विचार करा.."

"विचार करा ? त्यांनी केला होता का विचार काही न बोलता पळून जाताना?" शैला वैतागून म्हणाली.

भयानक तणावाचे वातावरण निर्माण झाले, प्रत्येक जण आपलं मत मांडण्यात एकमेकांवर ओरडू लागले. सगळ्यांसाठीच हा खूपच चिंतेचा विषय बनू लागला, आरो-प्रत्यारोप वादू लागले.

सगळ्यांपेक्षा जास्त संतापून केशव म्हणाला, "शैला, इथे प्रश्न कोणी काय केला आहे त्याचा नाहीये. ह्या कुटुंबातील सर्वांना समान हिस्सा मिळाला पाहिजे, हा त्यांचा हक्क आहे."

संतोषने मध्यस्थी केली, "तुम्ही भविष्याचा विचार करा. भांडण करून काही होणार नाही, अजून प्रॉब्लेम्स वाढतील."

शैला आता तर कोणाचंच काही ऐकून घेत नव्हती, "तुम्हाला बोलणं सोपं वाटतं, पण जो करतो त्यालाच कळता."

पुढे प्रशांत म्हणाला, "असं नाही की अक्काला तिचा हिस्सा देऊ नका, पण ज्या मुलीने आई वडील, परिवार कोणाचाच विचार केला नाही, कधी गावाकडच्या घरी लक्ष दिलं नाही, त्या व्यक्तीला समान हिस्सा देणे हे मला तरी पटत नाही."

नक्की ह्या जागेच्या वाटण्या कश्या होतील? कोणाचा हक्क जास्त आहे हे कसा सांगता येईल? आता तर सगळ्यांचाच बोलणा बरोबर वाटायला लागलं होत. सगळ्यांचीच चिंता बरोबर तर होती, सगळेच जण भविष्याचा विचार करतात.

आप्पा या सगळ्यांमध्ये थोडे घाबरले होते, सगळेजण दुरावतील याची त्यांना चाहूल लागली होती. त्यांना हे सगळं सहन होण्यापलीकडे पोहोचलं होतं. त्यांनी त्यांच्या परीने यांना खूप समजवण्याचा प्रयत्न केला, नाही कोणी समजण्याच्या मनस्थितीत, नाही कोणी ऐकून घेण्याच्या!

चंदू आणि शैला, हे घर आणि शेत जमिनीवरचा आपला हक्क ठामपणे मांडत होते. घर आणि जमिनीत अनेक वर्ष केलेली पैशाची गुंतवणूक आणि शारीरिक मेहनत यावर ते जोर देत होते.

चंदू ठामपणे बोलला, "आज या घरात राहून एवढी वर्ष झाली, पूर्ण घराला एकत्र ठेवलं, शेत जमिनीवर लक्ष ठेवलं, मला माझ्या हक्काचा मिळालाच पाहिजे."

शैला ने होकारार्थी मान डोलावली, "बरोबर आहे. तुम्ही आपापले बाहेर जाऊन राहिलात, तुम्हाला कळणार नाही आम्ही इथे कसं सर्व सांभाळलं."

प्रशांत शब्द जपून वापरत होता, "आपल्याला सर्वांच्या सोयीनुसार विचार करावा लागेल. भविष्यामध्ये कोणाला काय लागेल काही सांगू शकत नाही. आताच आपण शांतपणे एका डिसिजन वरती येऊयात. भांडून काही होणार नाही."

"बरोबर आहे, मी ही तेच म्हणतो," केशव म्हणाला.

नेहमीच संयम आणि शांतता राखणाऱ्या संतोषचे एकच म्हणणे होते, "आप्पा आणि तात्यांची मिळून पाच मुलं आहेत तर, सातबार्यातही ही पाच मुलांची नावे असायला हवी."

शैला नाक मुरडून म्हणाली, "पाच, कोण पाच?"

योग्य शब्द शब्दाच्या शोधात प्रशांत म्हणाला, "आपण प्रॅक्टिकली विचार करायला हवा, मी म्हणून चंदूला घर द्यायला हवं, कारण तो खरच या घरासाठी धडपडला आहे."

"हो मग, घराचं काही काम करण्यात कोणी काही मदत केली आहे का? कोणी आणि कसं केलं हे सगळं? तीन वर्षांपूर्वी अख्खा रिनोवेशन केलं, कोणी एक रुपया पण नाही दिला. आम्हालाच करावा लागलं सगळं." शैला ठोकावून बोलली.

खोलीत एक अस्वस्थ शांतता पसरली. प्रत्येक व्यक्ती आपापल्या भावना आणि कधी न बोललेल्या विचाराने ग्रासली होती. भांडण सोडवायचा तर राहिलंच बाजूला, पण हे वेगळाच आरडा-ओरडा करत राहिले होते. हे भांडण आजूबाजूचे लोक ऐकत होते. नंतर गावातली वयस्कर माणसं त्यांच्या अंगणात जमली आणि काही जण हा वाद मिटवण्याचा प्रयत्न ही करत होते पण सगळ्यांचे प्रयत्न व्यर्थ ठरले.

हा चाललेला सगळा गोंधळ आप्पा फक्त ऐकत होते आणि अचानक कोणाचेच लक्ष नसताना खुर्चीवरून उठून उभे राहिले, "अरे गप्प बसा!! काय चालवला आहे तुम्ही हे? भरल्या घरात कसले भांडतात, लोकांना नुसता तमाशा दाखवायचा लावलाय," त्यांचा हा आवाज ऐकून सगळेच जण त्यांच्याकडे वळाले.

ही वाद घालणारी घरातलीच माणसं, प्रॉपर्टीच्या विषयात फार खोलपर्यंत पोहोचली होती. कोणीच मागे

हटायला तयार नव्हतं. आप्पांच्या डोळ्यात पाणी आलं, त्यांचा चेहरा पडला होता आणि खूप चिंतेत दिसत होते. आता काय हे,” एकत्र येत नाही.” असं बोलून ते गप्प उभे राहिले.

शेजारची वयस्कर मंडळी सुद्धा या परिस्थितीचे गांभीर्य समजत होती. त्यांना विषयापासून भरकटवण्याचा प्रयत्नही केला, पण त्याचा काही एक उपयोग झाला नाही. शेवटी आप्पा स्वतः त्यांच्या खुर्चीवरून परत उठून त्यांना थांबवायला गेले.

“अहो आप्पा तुम्ही केला उठतात. यात तुम्ही काय बोलायला जाऊ नका. ये काय सुधाराशी नाही. “संगीता ताई म्हणाली.

“इथे माझी अर्धी लाकडं मशनात पोहोचली आहेत पण ह्यांना कसली पडली आहे ते तूच बघ.” आपांनी संगीताला सांगितलं.

आप्पा पुन्हा एकदा चंदूला समजवायला म्हणून त्याच्याजवळ जात असतानाच लुगड्यात त्यांचा पाय अडकला आणि तोल गेला. सगळ्यांची एकदम खळबळ उडाली. कोणालाच काय करू ते समजत नव्हतं.

ही सगळी गडबड पाहतात कौस्तुभचा लहानपणीचा मित्र, प्रणय त्याची फोर व्हीलर घेऊन आला.

“कौस्तुभ आणखी चर्चा नको, चल त्यांना गाडीत बसव पटकन पाटील कडे नेऊया.”

केशव, चंदू आणि कौस्तुभने अपांना हॉस्पिटलमध्ये नेलं. इथे शैला, सोनाली आणि पूजाला दिलासा देण्यासाठी आळीतल्या बायका ओट्याला लागून असलेल्या मंद उजळलेल्या ओसरीमध्ये जाऊन बसल्या. आप्पांची आराम खुर्ची आता रिकामीच राहिली होती. सगळी छोटी भावंडं एका खोलीत शांत बसून राहिली होती शेजाऱ्यांची चप्पल आणि घरातल्यांच्या गाड्यांनी अंगण भरून गेले होते.

आधीच सगळ्यांची निघण्याची तयारी झाली होती. पॅक बंद बागा एका भिंतीला लागून उभ्या करून ठेवल्या होत्या. खोली काही फारशी सजवली नव्हती पण खोलीच्या मध्यभागी एक लाकडी खाट



आणि दोन-तीन लाकडी खुर्च्या ठेवल्या होत्या.

जेनी पायावर पाय ठेवून भिंतीला टेकून बसलेली, “कालपर्यंत तर सगळं नीट होतं. आज काय होतंय समजत नाही. ताई आजोबांना नक्की काय झालं?” तिने आणखीन घाबरत विचारलं.

सीएरा खुर्चीच्या कठड्यावर एका बाजूने बसली होती. ती होकार देत म्हणाली, “हे नेहमीचच आहे ग, आणि याची कालच ठिणगी पेटली होती.”

जेनीच्या बाजूला बसलेली छोटी सायली म्हणाली, “मला पण ह्या गोष्टीचा राग येतो. हे सगळे एकत्र खुश नाही राहू शकत का? त्यात आता आप्पा!”

रोहन खोलीत शिरताच म्हणाला, “हे नक्की काय चाललं आहे?” त्याचाही चेहरा चिंतेने ग्रासला होता.

“आम्ही आता तेच बोलत होतो, वेळ कशी पटकन बदलते.”

हे सगळं समजतात आर्या सुद्धा इथे येते. ती बाहेर सगळ्यांचा चहा पाणी बघते आणि खोलीत हात पुसायला येते, “कठीण आहे बाबा! यांचं एकत्र आले की नेहमी काही ना काहीतरी निघतच.”

रोहन क्षणभर विचारात पडला, “काय माहित, हे जमिनीचे वाद असेच गुंतागुंतीचे असतात. सगळ्यांकडे कारणं आहेत.”

दुसऱ्या दिवशी चंदू आणि प्रशांत हॉस्पिटल मधील तणावपूर्ण रात्र घालून घरी आले होते. त्यांनी सगळ्यांना ओसरीमध्ये बोलावले आणि म्हणाले. “आप्पांच्या तब्येतीत काही सुधार नाही आहे.

आपल्यापैकी कोणाला तरी त्यांच्या सतत जवळ राहावं लागेल.”

हे ऐकताच संतोष ची कारण सुरू झाली, “सायलीचे दहावीचे क्लास चालू आहेत, अजून सुट्टी घेऊन चालणार नाही.” पुढे केशवही म्हणाला, “मला चाललं असतं, पण आज काही केल्या घरी जावं लागणार. आर्याची एंट्रन्स जवळ आहे.”

आता तर आप्पांजवळ हॉस्पिटल मध्ये राहिला ही कोणी तयार नव्हतं. हे जो तो आपल्या बोलण्यातून स्पष्ट करून देत होता. यांचा हे बोलणं चालू असताना, रोहन हॉस्पिटल मधून घरी येऊन सांगतो, “आपांना आय सी यु मध्ये शिफ्ट केला आहे, त्यांची तब्येत आणखीन खालावली आहे.”

या सगळ्यांच्या कारणांना कंटाळून शेवटी संगीता ताई म्हणाली, “मे जाऊ गा आप्पादरी हॉस्पिटल मीने राहायला?” पुढे कोणी काहीच बोललं नाही. संगीता ताई जायला तयार आहे हे सगळ्यांच्याच पथ्यावर पडलं.

एक आठवडा होऊन गेला. संगीता ताईच आप्पांना रोज दुपारी डबा घेऊन जायची.

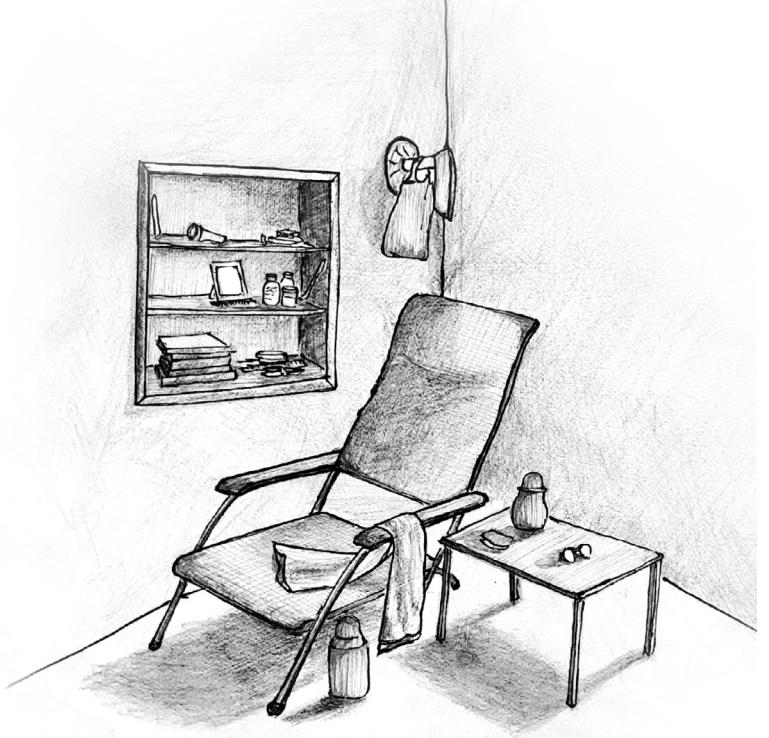
अशाच एका दुपारच्या वेळी ती घरी आलेली असताना चंदूला हॉस्पिटल मधून फोन येतो, “आप्पा कोमात गेले आहेत. घरचं मोठं कोणी असेल तर हॉस्पिटलमध्ये या.”

हे ऐकून सगळेच थक्क झाले. कोणालाच हे क्षणभर खरं वाटलं नाही.

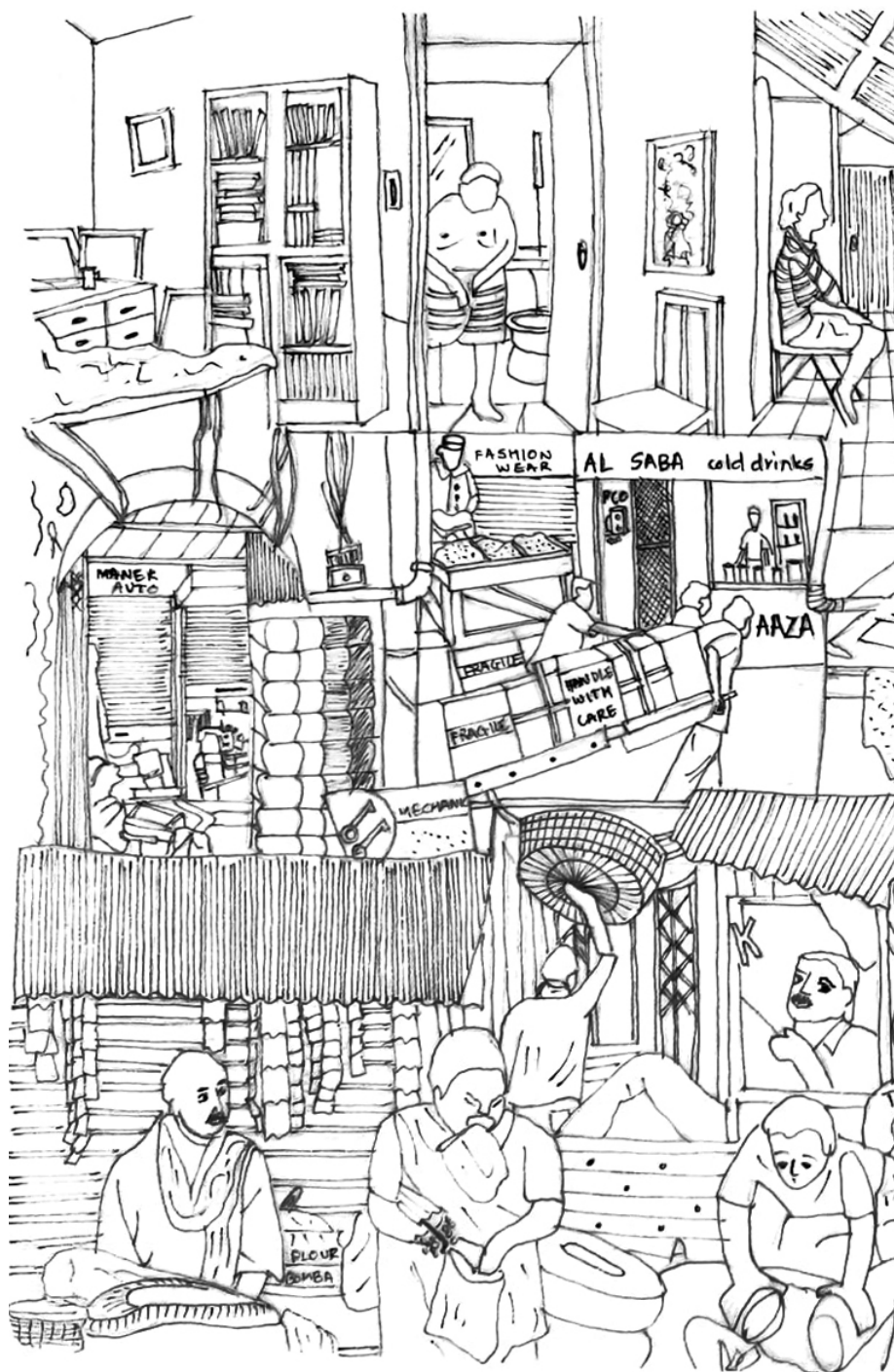
“निस्ता पाय निहरून डोक्याला लागून ना कोण कोमात जाते गा?” संगीता ताई म्हणाली.

आज या गोष्टीला पूर्ण दीड वर्ष झालं. आप्पांना आता घरी आणलं होतं आणि त्यांचा सांभाळ करायला शेवटी एक नर्स ठेवली होती. ती नर्स आणि संगीता ताई मिळूनच आप्पांचा सांभाळ करायचे.

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Papers, Gold and Rats



I stared at the clock on the pale blue wall, the colour of which was weathering out because of the dampness. I woke up late, again. I lived in a small room thrice the width of the almirah kept in the corner. A mori across the kitchen was where my mother was getting rid of spider webs. I quietly brushed my teeth to avoid a morning lecture from her and after breakfast I stood in the corridor leading to the stairs outside my home in my striped shorts, watching people go about their day. As the rooms were small and not well-lit, the ladies sat outside in the passageway peeling peas and listening to music. My cousin Niyati was playing with her friends in the small courtyard lined with plants and I could see Aditya hanging clothes on the ropes across my room when he smiled at me. As I headed towards the toilet at the far end of the chali, I said hello to Jayesh kaka who had been bedridden for over a year.

“Dukaan jaane ke pehle istry ke kapde Suresh bhaiya se le aa” my mother called out loudly. I pretended to be late for work to avoid the task assigned. *“Late utha, tab tujhe kaam yaad nahi aya? Tere papa kabke dukaan ke liye nikal gaye hai. Is ghar mein koi meri kisi bhi kaam mein madad nahi karta”*, she murmured while she wore her slippers. Just as she was about to step out, a man wearing a white shirt and black pants blocked her path at the door, asked her for my grandfather’s name, handed her a piece of paper, and left abruptly without saying a word.

After the notice arrived, the entire area was immediately filled with non-stop blabbering. *“Itna jaldi khali karne ka notice kaise aa gaya!”*. Someone else shouted, *“Abhi chillao mat, raat ko milkar dekhte hai kya karna hai iska.”* Upon reading the notice, my mother’s first instinct was to call my masi. A conversation with her sister managed to calm her down. I never understood their relationship but figured that she was closer to her sister than anyone else. She then called my father and told him about the notice when he decided to come back home to assess the situation and some time later he was back from his shop in Dadar market.

“Kidhar hai woh notice?”, my father asked as he put his bag right above the fridge. Mother handed him the paper, which was stained with the besan on her hands. Father held the paper and removed reading glasses from his pocket. He stood up after reading it and went to Rajan uncle’s house, our neighbour, and my mother followed him. Rajan uncle was one of the oldest residents and a know-it-all kind of a person, a retired journalist who sat in his chair outside his kholi with a newspaper and peanuts.

His son moved to Delhi for his job and now lives with his wife Sharda. His only motive in life was to listen to old songs on his radio and hand out free advice to anyone who had the time to listen.

A few men were gathered outside his house discussing the impacts of the notice. “*Ye umar mein ab hum kaha jayenge?*” said one uncle. Another said, “*Kya pata building wapas banne mein kitna time lagega, aur kab naya flat milega? Bacho ka school, meri dukan, Mamta ka parlour sab kuch yahan par hai, yahan se dur jakar sab manage kaise hoga?*” Rajan Uncle boastingly said, “*Mera bhai Malad mein ek builder ko janta hai jo saste me flat karwa dega. Main toh yahan se jo flat milega woh bechkar wahi jaane ka soch raha hu.*” Adding to this, another uncle said, “*Flat mile toh achha hi hai. Tum sab aise hi pareshan ho rahe ho, sab ho jayega. Building me lift aajaegi or toilet ghar ke andar. Redevelop hone ke baad flat ka bhaav bhi badh jaega- fayda hi fayda hai.*”



The chawl had to be vacated as it was going under redevelopment. These discussions had been going on for a while now and finally, the process was going to start. The crowd slowly dispersed but my parents stood there. My father dragged a chair next to Rajan uncle to discuss the shifting process when my mother subtly asked Rajan uncle, “*Woh Malad wale flat ka kya bol rahe the aap? Kitne me padega woh aur area kitna hai?*”

Upon her inquiry, Rajan uncle folded his newspaper and told us that his brother had recently shifted to Malad with his family. I asked my dad, *“Kya aapko bheed mein yahan se waha karna hai roz?”* The same builder had constructed numerous buildings in the nearby area and his brother was negotiating a deal for Rajan uncle as he was considering purchasing a flat shortly. *“Mere bhai ne paanch saal pehle 350 sq. feet ka 1BHK ka flat kharida tha. Unki society mein parking, 24 ghanta pani, garden, lift sab hai. Isse zyada aadmi ko kya chahiye, sab toh hai!”* he added happily, with a spark in his eye.

From the look on my mother's face it was clear that the idea of staying in a big flat in Malad intrigued her. I was impressed when I heard about the amenities that were being offered. My parents stood up and greeted Rajan uncle, thanked him for the advice and the three of us returned home.

The silence at home was broken by my mother's concerns, *“Hum bhi Malad mein woh flat ka puchkar dekhe kya? Flat hua toh iski shaadi karne ke bare mein bhi soch sakenge,”* she continued looking at me. The thought of the daily commute seemed daunting to me, out of concern, I asked my dad, *“Kya aapko bheed mein yaha se waha karna hai roz?”* Although it was quite far, both Papa and I would have to travel to Dadar daily, he seemed okay with it. He looked at me with a confident smile and replied in a bold voice, *“Mein manage kar lunga, meri chinta mat kar. Hum bhi Rajan ji ke sath flat dekh toh lete hai ek baar. Fir sochenge kya karna hai.”*

“Nidhi, hum shayad Malad shift hone ka soch rahe hai. Rajan uncle ke koi bhai hai jo humko waha par flat dikha sakte hai.” she was offline so I had to wait for several minutes before she replied. *“Mere papa toh soch rahe the ki builder jo flat dega hum wahi reh lenge. Meri choti behen ki school bhi yahi hai aur unki kirane ki dukaan bhi. Abhi kuch decide nahi kiya baate chalu hai,”* she texted back.

“Beta, idhar aa,” my mom called out. I put my phone down immediately and went to her. Rajan Uncle was going to see a flat in Malad on Sunday and we could accompany him, she said. He had offered to put in a good word with the builder for us.

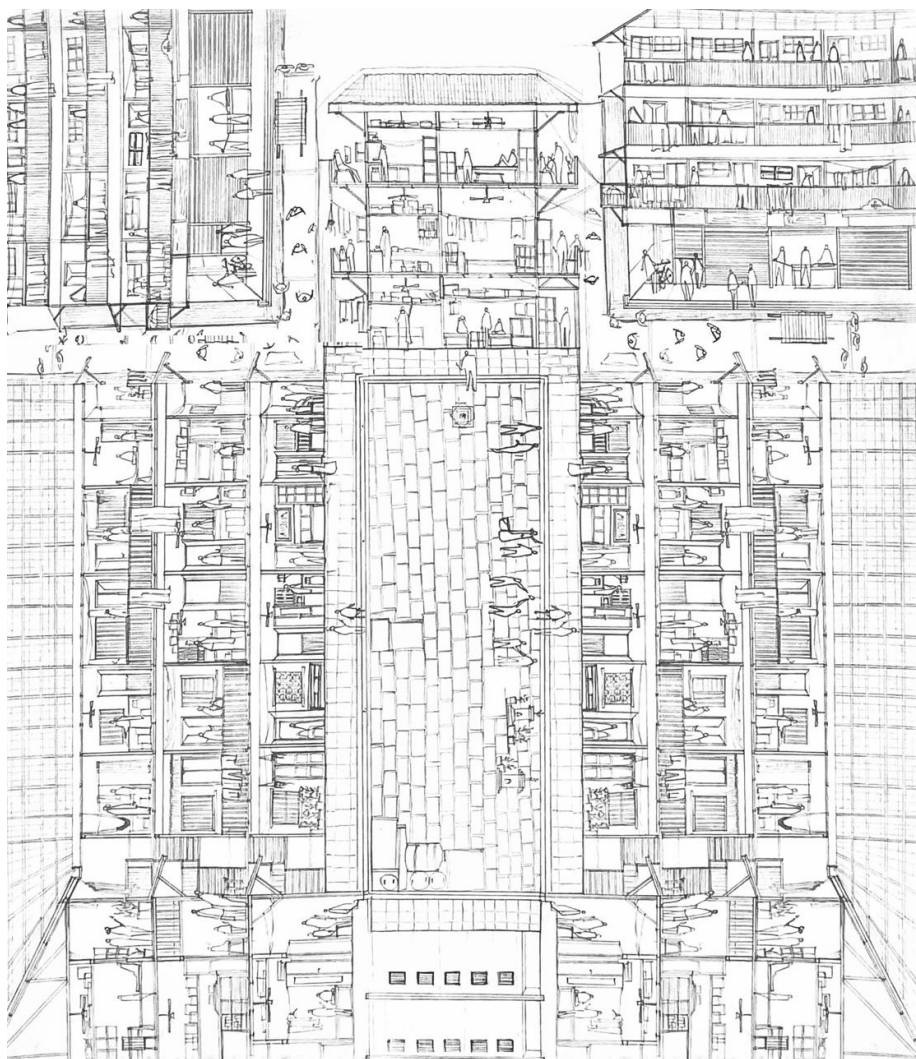
Early in the morning, my parents and I left with Rajan Uncle to meet the builder and got a slow local from Lower Parel station, got down at Malad, where we took a rickshaw to the builder's office. The board outside the sales office said, *‘Sai Estate, your dream home.’*

Rajan uncle's brother, Pratik bhai was waiting there for us when he called someone and immediately a man of average height and a fit build with neatly combed hair came out and led the way to the office. It looked luxurious with posters of the builder's earlier projects all around. The office faced a manicured garden on the outside. Pratik Bhai introduced us to Rohan, the sales manager, *"Ye humare rishtedaar hai, idhar flat main invest karne ka soch rahe hai."* *"Aapko jaisa flat chahiye mil jayega, aur jitna bada chahiye utna mil jayega."* Rohan replied. He gestured to his colleague Nancy to give us a tour of the sample flats. There was a spacious living room just as you entered followed by a passage that connected two bedrooms with attached bathrooms. It had a kitchen on the left of the living room that led to a small balcony. She bragged about the society having a swimming pool, gym, clubhouse, garden, and a separate play area for kids.

"Isse badhiya flat aapko pure Malad mein nahi milega sir! Yaha se station bhi nazdeek hai. Market, hospital, bacho ke liye school sab idhar hi hai." Rajan uncle shrieked with joy and confirmed that he was more than ready to invest. My father firmly questioned, *"Kya rate hai ek 2BHK ka?"* We were handed a glossy pamphlet with all the rates which mentioned a 1 BHK would cost 1.4 crores and a 2 BHK would cost us around 2 crores. The amount was a huge sum of money but seemed like a good investment. *"Aap Pratik bhai ke pehchan wale hai isliye pehle hi rate kam bataya hai. Abhi likhwa lo 1 ya 2 hi flat bache hai, woh bhi bik gaye toh ye rate me itni achi property nahi milegi sir."*

We returned home, discussing ways to gather the money needed for the down payment. A decision had to be made before those flats were sold out. In the past few years, because of COVID-19, the textile business has been down as many people preferred to buy garments or textiles online instead of going to the market, which made business scarce. The decision to move was overshadowed by the financial uncertainty. Father told us that half the amount for the downpayment could be managed but the rest of the savings from his business were all invested, some in a fixed deposit, and the rest was stuck in a long-due textile shipment. He had also been purchasing some gold biscuits but could not sell them as the current market gold prices were very low.

"Mere bhai ko puchu agar kuch udhaar mil jaaye usse?" my mother asked softly. Father was not very fond of mama but since we needed all the help we could get, he agreed. Mother added, *"Aap aapke kaka ke bade bete se puch kar dekhiye na."*



Woh toh electronics ke vyapari hai. Abhi nayi gadi li aur Bali bhi ghoomkar aaye. Me meri behen se bhi puchkar dekhti hu.” My parents started recalling relatives whom they thought could be of some help. *“Crawford Market mein Anandbhai ki dukaan hai unke paas jaa sakte hai.”* my father said suddenly.

Anandbhai was a distant cousin of my grandfather and a trusted Zaveri. Father believed that he could help us. His primary clientele consisted of buyers seeking high-quality gold biscuits and jewellery. He traded gold at rates he determined, negotiating terms that would maximise his profits. Anand Bhai's business was not limited to selling gold but also offered loans, which made him a loan shark who was based on flexible arrangements, often spanning weeks or months, built on mutual trust and respect.

Next morning before going to the shop we left for Zaveri Bazaar. We parked our scooter near Crawford Market and realised that place was no less than a madman's utopia. There were shops crammed in every corner of the street and set out on the footpaths along with haath gadis, and items were hung on walls or in crevices between two buildings. Vendors spread their pile of clothes on the street along with peculiar everyday items ranging from watches, socks, rings, scents, or clothes. There was constant shouting, pulling, pushing in motion and nobody seemed to give up their passion for striking the perfect bargain. The entire stretch of the market was decorated with fresh fruits and vegetables, plastic tumblers, and gleaming metalware while the air was filled with the aroma of spices, fresh produce, and sizzling food. At one corner you could smell chole kulche and at the other, chaat.

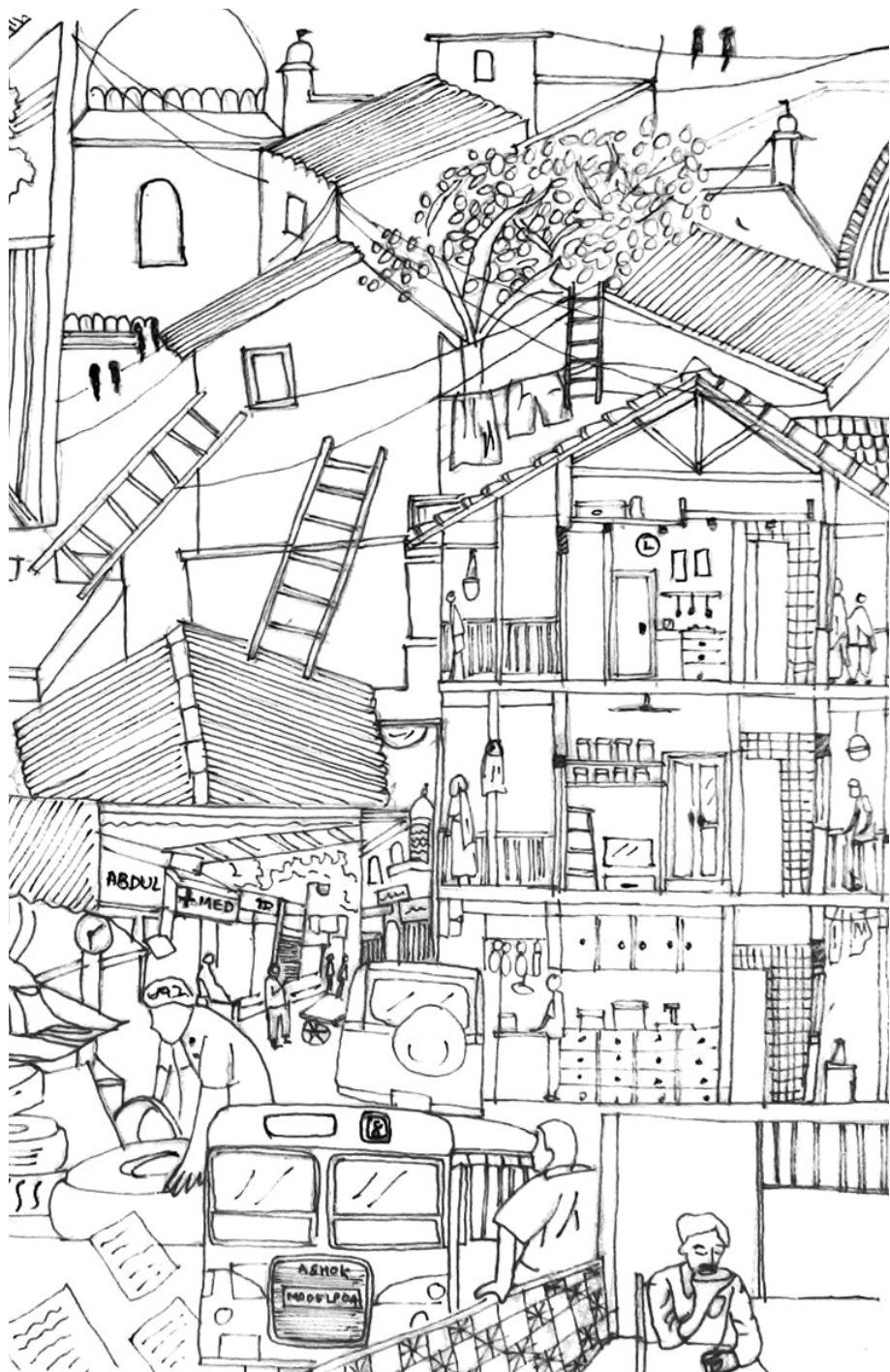
I tried talking to my father about buying some house items but was interrupted by a skinny boy hell-bent on selling dustbin bags to me. Another salesman pursued me with crockery until I yelled at that imbecile for not letting me go about my business peacefully. He smirked at my frantic behaviour as if he was taking joy in my troubles and was immediately in pursuit of another lady who passed by. As we walked ahead the hawkers were replaced by men wearing khaadi kurtas and dhoti with a white cap and a gold chain around their neck. We asked one of those men if this was Zaveri Bazaar. *“Haan yehi hai Zaveri Bazaar”* they replied. I moved towards Anand Bhai's shop as guided by Google Maps.

It was a small gala with delicate glass doors that welcomed customers into a well-lit, clean - air conditioned space. Inside, shelves with glass sliding

panels displayed a dazzling array of ornaments. Each shelf was meticulously organised, with specific categories of jewellery neatly separated for ease of display. Anand Bhai welcomed us with a smile and asked us to sit comfortably. He wore a white dhoti-kurta, a pen tucked in his kurta pocket, his specs hanging with a black thread around his neck with a thick gold chain. He asked us the purpose of our visit. *“Aapko Kirtibhai yaad hai aapki kaki ki beti ke husband, main unka beta”*, my father told him. They made small talk about our relatives after which my father then told him the purpose of our visit. He explained the situation of our chawl and how we aspired to purchase another flat.

“Agar flat ke liye 10 lakh udhaar mil jaate kuch mahino ke liye, toh bohot madad ho jaegi. Shipment aate hi paise lauta dunga. Aapke saath toh saalo ka rishta hai, dekhiye agar kuch ho sakta hai.” Anandbhai hesitated initially as we did not provide him with any collateral. He confided in his colleague sitting nearby, then asked us multiple questions about our shop and chawl home and did a complete background check before approving the loan. After a series of questions, he said, *“Ha bhai sahib, bejhijhak le jaye, aap toh ghar ke hi ho.”* Anand Bhai then proceeded to explain the terms of the loan. He decided by his discretion that the interest rate would be 15% of the total amount, and the repayment schedule. It was fixed upon by both parties that the loan would be issued for three months after which full repayment was expected. He asked us to wait for twenty minutes while he packed the money and made a record of the transaction.

Now that we had managed to borrow the money, we realised we had not eaten anything since morning. So, we stepped out to eat at the chain of food hawkers right outside Anand bhai's shop. There were a variety of things to choose from like dosa, pani puri, and chaat. I placed an order for two masala dosas and waited on the side for it to arrive. After finishing my dosa my eyes turned towards the dustbin placed nearby and noticed that it was an overflowing mess. There was leftover food, plastic bottles, and used tissues scattered on the ground that were being feasted upon by a bunch of rats and flies. I tried to ignore the sight and went inside the shop. The bundle of money was kept ready, wrapped in a newspaper, rewrapped in black polythene, and then put in a plain white bag before handing it over to us. He wrote the account of our transaction in his diary and gave us a copy of the receipt he made. Before leaving the shop out of curiosity I asked if this piece of paper was enough to maintain a record.



He smiled and confidently replied, *“Aise hi bohot len den karte aa raha hu mein pichle tees saal se. Record se zyada bharaose aur rishton par chalta hai mera karobaar.”*

The following Sunday, we returned to the sales office. My mother and father greeted Rohan and the formalities commenced without delay. We re-read the final details of the apartments and went through the clauses. Once everything was in order, we handed over the down payment and with a few signatures from both parties, the transaction was complete. Rohan handed us a payment receipt along with property papers and congratulated us for securing the flat.

On our way back home we took some sweets to celebrate our new purchase. My mother gave the first piece of mithai to Rajan uncle, and my father thanked him after which she was on her phone and got busy calling her relatives to share the news of our new flat. My father got busy texting family members to let them know about the same. Very soon my WhatsApp was filled with ‘Congratulations’. Taking this chance I quickly took the mithai box kept on the side table and headed straight towards Nidhi’s house, texting her to meet me near the stairs. When she arrived, I handed her a piece of mithai and she congratulated me on the new flat we had just bought. *“Tension mat le, dukaan aate rahuga tab milenge.”* I said knowing she wasn’t completely happy with where I was to shift soon.

Three months passed by, since we had booked the flat in Malad. We were now staying in a transit facility provided by the developer just two lanes away from our old house. One night the doorbell rang, on opening the door, Rajan Uncle rushed in and told us that our builder had gone bankrupt. My father, usually composed, was visibly shaken, while my mother tried to make sense of what had happened and how it would affect us. Our hope of living in our new home in Malad was far-fetched.

We locked the door to our house and left immediately on-site the next morning. Several others were there along with us complaining about the same thing and demanding back for the money they had invested in the flat of that building. Multiple discussions were going on predicting the future of the building. We joined the public gathered, presenting our case and seeking any shred of information to recover our investment. My father brought the paperwork with two copies we had received from the builder, hoping it would serve as proof of our payment to solidify our claim. After several hours of arguments, we learned that there could be no immediate outcome to the problem.

We returned home tired and ate dinner. My father called a cousin in the real estate business to find out how to proceed. After consulting him we got to know that the time when construction would resume was highly uncertain. The only thing that could be done was consult a lawyer and wait.

In the aftermath of this investment, my family was focused on saving money to repay Anandbhai. Our shipment was still stuck and so was the repayment money. The due date was coming closer and something had to be done. Father had managed to put together half the money from his bank account but the other half was yet to be arranged. We left to go to my uncle's place right across the street in the hopes of getting the remaining amount. When we reached his place, my aunt offered us water and a small plate with the sorts of namkeen they had in their house. *"Aap dono aaj yahan pe kaise, meri yaad achanak kyu aai?"* my uncle asked tauntingly. My father, filled with embarrassment, said, *"Bhai mujhe aapki madad chahiye. Humein aap se paanch lakh ki sakht zaroorat hai."* He immediately questioned as the amount was not a small one. Upon knowing the reason, he followed it up with a huge lecture and a look of disappointment. However, after a few heated conversations, he offered his support. This gesture eased our worries momentarily. We assured him that we would pay the full amount back once we earned the profit from selling the textile to be received in the shipment of Calcutta.

My father started his scooter and we cautiously drove to Zaveri Bazar with the money. What we saw next could be amusing and sad at the same time. There was a crowd gathered outside Anandbhai's shop gossiping and one of them making a video. It was overlapped by cries of a voice that seemed familiar. As we moved closer we realised it was none other than Anandbhai. We asked the group of Patiwalas standing there talking, *"Kya hua Anandbhai ko, sab inki dukaan ko gherkar kyu khade hai?"* After a brief pause, he replied mockingly, *"Arre bhaiya kal raat inki dukaan mein AC ke pipe se chuhe ghus aye aur saare kagzaat, jisme woh udhar ka record rakhte the woh kutar liye. Ab kisko kitne paise diye aur kitna wapas lena hai woh kise pata."*

Weaves and Knots

It takes two hours and forty minutes for a flight from Patna to Mumbai. I've made this journey thrice usually for some small trips only.

Saving one more reel in the "to-do-Bombay" folder, I put my phone on aeroplane mode as the air hostess began with the usual list of instructions. I rummaged through the bag-pack as I struggled to find an envelope.

"Waah, tumhe Bambai mein naukri lag gayi!" my grandfather had exclaimed when I told him of my plans of moving there. He had stayed in the city for almost twenty years, and always seemed to slip in a wistful nostalgia whenever the city was mentioned. *"Meri ab jaaneki umar rahi nahi, mein bahut khush hu tum jaa rahe ho! Udhar rehke hi tumhe bohot kuch jaan ne milega! acha suno, tum jaa hi rahe ho toh mujhe ek cheez bhijvaani hai, zara dekhke aana, post vagere mein nai bhijvani mujhe!"*

Finding the envelope in my bag, I pulled it out remembering my grandfather saying, *"Yeh ek hi tareeka tha ki mein tumhe aaram se Bambai ke baare mein bata saku, tum jaa hi rahe ho, toh yeh sab jagah waqt mile toh dekhte aana. Jo baksa maine tumhe diya hai uski kahani bhi mein likhke bata dunga. Papa ke phone pe photo bhejna ya video call zaroor karna. Abhi toh sab hi badal gaya hoga, abhi toh har jagah uchi uchi imaarate hoga."*

I remember my father telling me, grandfather was the first one from our village to go to bombay where he worked and lived for twenty years. With the contacts in Bombay, he started trade between the smaller factories that were established there and our village. During industrialisation, Bombay had a lot of small scale enterprises that manufactured umbrellas, plastic hair clips, diyas, etc. Though the trading from the city has stopped now, we have established a good name for ourselves.

As the air hostess continued her demonstrations, I carefully removed the pages out of the envelope he had written hurriedly, his neat handwriting becoming an untidy scrawl.

'Sapno ki mahanagri' - Mumbai. Bees saal baad idhar vaapis aake itni hi chamatkari lagti hai jitni bachpan mein aaya tha tabhi lagi thi. Mein mere uncle ke saath pehli baar Bamabi aaya tha, hum talkies gaye woh mujhe abhi bhi ek dum acchese yaad hai. Camera, record karne ke dusre saadhan dekhke bada maza aaya tha mujhe. Bollywood se itna pyaar ho gaya ki actor banne ke sapne dekhta.

The thought seemed so ridiculous I could hardly believe it.

“Hum Deepak, Deepak Pandey, Patna wale, hum Bambai hero banne aaye hai, maa ko bata ke aaye hai, ke tohra Deepak hero banjai ba. Humko ek role de dijiyega, please, please agar aur kabhi jarurat pade, toh hume jarur yaad kijiyege.” 100 se jyada studio ko ye baat bol chuke hai, sala aaj tak koi ek role dene ko hi taiyaar nahi. 20 saal baad jab mein hero banne ke liye Bambai aya, tab toh pura sheher hi badal gaya tha, har jagah bada bada chimney khada ho gaya tha, dhua nikalta tha usme se, pata chala ki ye sab kapde ka mill hai. Jaha najar ghumaai, mill hi mill. Bambai aate hi pehli jagah mein gaya, vo tha bombay talkies, udhar jaake pata chala ki ab waha factory ban gaya tha, udhar security ne bola Yasraj jao, toh Yasraj gaye, role nahi mila, phir rajshri gaye, waha bhi role nahi mila, takriban 100 studio ko puch liya, par role hi nahi mila. Ab kitne din tak mein aise role ke liye bheek manguga, mene fir Kishan bhai ke gang ke liye plaza ke bahar ticket black karna chalu kiya.”

When I came back to Bombay to become a film star, the entire city had changed. First thing I did was that I took a train to Malad, which was on the outskirts of the city. It was where the iconic Bombay Talkies was located, the studio was about a kilometre walk from the station. The moment I neared the area of the talkies I knew something had changed, it no longer seemed the place I had so often thought of.

There were repair shops, and smaller industries. Twenty years back, they were limited only to the main road. Now, however, even the shed inside had some or the other kind of factory. I returned back to Parel a bit disheartened. I knew Kishan bhai was the one who could help me with something. We belonged to neighbouring villages; he knew his way around and his tales were well-known.

Everyone here in this chawl had migrated with some intention of making it big in Mumbai. Mere saath 5 log rehte the, Raju, Shyam, Baburao, Sadanand aur Ganpat. Sab ek se ek namune the. Raju ek kaarkhane me kaam karta tha jo chhata banata tha, har roz Parel se Dahisar jaata tha. Shyam Century mill me kaam karta tha aur Sadanand Jupiter mill me. Baburao din me bank ke peon ki naukri karta aur raat me marathi natak me chhote role karta tha. Aur Ganpat, Mazgaon dockyard me majdoor tha, apne aap ko deewar ka Bachchan samajhta tha. Bachchan ko bahut chahta tha.”

Apart from these our neighbours also came from various places, there were traders from Gujarat, workers of small enterprises from villages neighbouring my own,

from the coast - who either worked in mills or did odd jobs. Everyone worked in different shifts and the passageways, the balconies and the aangans were big enough to ensure enough space for everyone.

A lot of the time was spent near Rakesh's Stall, drinking tea. It was between the mills and the chawls which was a convenient distance for people living in the chawl or working in the mill. The tea stall was never empty, there was always either a shift beginning or ending, or a police-wala taking a break, or a clerk trying to drown his boss' scolding in that cup of tea.

I spent quite a lot of time at such places - tea stalls, newspaper stands, dhabas and lunchrooms since it was there that the sale of tickets took place. I thought even if I couldn't become an actor I could start with a job somewhere connected to the industry, so I sold movie tickets in black until I could figure out what to do.

Around the area were chawls where everyone who lived in the mills worked. They were usually one or two storeys with a common passageway that ran along both sides. Andar bahar aate jaate humesha koi toh baat karne mil hi jata. "Aree beta aaj chai peene nahi aaye ghar? Maine banayi thi tere liye." Har shaam niche rehti hui ek dadi yeh puchti. Unke pati mill mein hi kaam kiya karte the, thode saal pehle hi guzar gaye. Unke liye sab hi bete jaise hai.

I could not even begin to comprehend this world. I had grown up in a fairly well to do household, and grandfather was one of the most respected people of our town. This person who sold tickets in black and lived with five other people did not seem like my grandfather at all. I had seen a few of these settlements the last time I was there but I did not pay a lot of attention to them, the tall glass buildings that had risen up behind them had taken my fancy.

The everyday routine was fairly simple, once you get accustomed to it. Tip-toeing and trying not to fall over Shyam and Sadanand who would have just returned from their shift at the mills and fallen asleep, we would make our way to the long queue that awaited us outside the toilets. The noise of aunties cursing in different languages as they would fill up blue plastic containers of water would jerk us out of our sleepy state. Despite the unwritten rule of never breaking a line, there would be at least a squabble every day. "Bhaiya samajhiye na, late ho jayenge shift ke liye, pagar kaat denge aajka."

After getting fresh, we would make our way to the chai tapri. The passageway had

transformed from a thoroughfare, to a newspaper room. The old uncles were least concerned by the screaming aunties or the kids playing with marbles. Instead they would raise their voices and complain, “Yeh chhat se yeh saal bhi pani girega, baarish shuru hone se pehle gaav chale jaana chahiye. Kya hoga Mumbai ka, har roj kitne log aa rahe hai! Kitni mehengai badh rahi hai! Yeh bache log kitna shor karte hai; as we would pass they would occasionally stop their ranting to ask if a movie ticket was available at a cheaper rate. “Aaj kitne mein film ka ticket de rahe ho?” they would ask, and then continue with their conversation.

“Sir, would you like anything to drink or eat? We have vegan and gluten free options as well.” the air hostess said.

Still feeling disoriented and like a total outsider, I realised it might be better to continue reading the letter once I had actually seen the place. If I did finish the letter, I would know what was to be done with that box.

Catching up on some sleep I woke up to the announcement, *“Bahar ka taapmaan pettis degree hai. Aasha karte hai aapki yatra humare saath sukhad rahi ho. Aapka samaan teen number belt pe aayega.”*

Turning off aeroplane mode, the first thing I did was google the place. It was near Dadar, which was around 30 kilometres.

The speed at which Bombay operates hits you as soon as you set foot outside the airport, the movement of buses, cars, rickshaws is enough to overwhelm anyone who has not grown up here. I made my way to the apartment which I had rented, in Dahisar. I settled in the new apartment, and opened Zomato. The persistent blare of vehicle horns and people screaming at each other was enough to discourage me from stepping outside. I ordered some sandwiches from a fast food corner, and eventually slept.

“Somvaar se office ka joining hai, flat ekdum hi badhiya hai, aaj soch raha hu thoda ghumunga.” I had seen the majority of the places that you find when you first google ‘things to do in Bombay.’ I was consistently following a few instagram pages who posted ‘unique things to see in Bombay’ or ‘visit bombay like a local.’ One of the pages had posted about these abandoned mills a while ago. Along with grandfather’s work I would be able to visit the mills and maybe end it with good food and a drink in a place called ‘Kamala Mills’ - it has been all over my instagram feed.

“acha beta khayal rakhna, suna hai Bambai mein bahut scam hote hai. Train mein toh ekdum hi sambhal ke jaana, jyada bhid ho toh mat chadna, train ki bhid mein itne accident humne news pe dekhe hai hume toh darr hi lag raha hai.”

Ended a video call with my parents, and I left for the station. The trains were not as crowded as I had expected them to be but there were still more people than I would see for days back at home, yet nothing compared to the horror stories of crowds I had heard from my friends who had come here and returned.

There were a lot of books that had been written on the life of mill workers of that time, I discovered after a quick google search. Using GPT to summarise them all, I made sense of the condition of bombay during that time.

Finding a place to sit, I removed the letter from my bag.

Moving past the uncles, we would make our way to the chai-tapri, making sure the day started with some fresh gossip and tea, of course. “Teen cutting chai lagau?” Chhotu asked as soon as he saw us. “Haa, aur ekdum badhiya kadak chai dena ha.” “Teen piece biscuit bhi lete aa, aaj kal sabko bohot tension hai, maalik log chodte hi nahi hai.”

This was the beginning of the riots that took place in 1982. We did not know it back then, it had just seemed like normal disagreements that would go on, we never would have thought that everything would blow up at such a scale.

However, we continued our days as usual, all of us were migrants, and staying out of the politics and on-going tensions seemed the most suitable alternative.

AMBABAI CHAWL,3, 48 POONAWALA BLDG, S.K.MARG, Lower Parel, Mumbai, Maharashtra.

This is the address that my grandfather had texted. Reaching the station, I got down from the train and made my way to the overhead bridge. The sun reflecting on the tall glass buildings was still the first thing I saw, and I had to force myself to direct my view to the houses that almost seemed to merge with the station, an extension of the bridge I was on. Crossing several hawkers, sugarcane juice vendors, people selling flowers, I tried following the way shown by google maps, but it was just making me go in circles.

“Bhaiya, Ambabai chawl kitna kilometre door hai?”

“Idhar se 5 minute seedha chalo, sab restaurant dikhegi, udhar se right leke bass do minute mein aa jayega.”

I paused near Baithak - a cafe, contemplating if I should drink a cup of tea. I had seen a lot of posts about their ‘Kulhad Chai.’ Ordering a cup of tea, I made my way to the table and flipped open to the page of the letter that I had paused at.

Now, there was this one day I remember very clearly. We were sitting near the tapri, after a particularly exhausting set of days. Everyone’s frustration was at its peak and it had been so long since we had not had a break, but with the tensions of the riots building up the atmosphere was extremely tense. “Mere paas paisa hota na, toh woh Jhunjhunwala se mill hi kharid leta.” “Kya bol raha hai Shyaam, aise sapne dekh jo pure bhi toh ho sake!” replied Sadanand, “mere paas jaise hi paise aayenge mein pen kharidna chahunga. Achhi pen, jo aajkal saheb nai leke ghumte, jisko baar baar patak-ke na chalana padha, jisse khat likhne mein maza aaye, aur ese makhan jaisi paper pe chale.” Mein tabhi usko hass ke bola, “Woh toh me tujhe thode hi dino me paise jod kar ekdum badhiya wali pen tofe mein dunga.”

It was one passing conversation, but that day something took place in the mill where Sadanand worked. The manager, extremely angry at Sadanand, sacked him on the spot. Unlike many of us Sadanand did not want to move back home. All he wanted was to settle down in Mumbai.

After this incident he became extremely involved with the union leaders for the riots. He moved out of our chawl. I have heard that most of the slogans and articles written during the strikes were written by him. After he moved out, we saw him occasionally around khanaavals.

Since Sadanand and I were close, we never failed to have at least one cup of tea a day together. He kept me updated on what was happening. Inspired by papers like Deenbandhu journal he had started his small version of that in Hindi as the migrants could also keep up with it. Deenbandhu was a weekly local newspaper that was started in Pune and eventually moved to Mumbai. Sadanand along with a few others published the journal on a weekly basis.

The kulhad chai did live up to its hype I thought, as I made my way out. Immediately outside the cafe was a chai tapri, and I smiled thinking of grandfather, almost my age, in an unknown city with nothing to fall back on, but the comfort of that one cup of tea with his friend. It made it easier to

understand why he wanted to reconnect with the people and the place even after so long.

The gate was almost entirely hidden behind banners advertising big luxurious apartments - "Spa, gym, stargazing deck, garden - for you to live your best life." If you did not know what you were looking for it was difficult to find - makes sense why google maps could not show the way.

A cat greeted me at the entrance. The scene was exactly as grandfather had described, there were old people who were reading newspapers in the corridors, the kids were playing cricket, and a few ladies were huddled up in a corner discussing something.

Looking closely you would start noticing small changes - everyone had a mori outside their house, there were drainage pipes that came down from various walls, some people on the ground floor had extended their houses, adding a balcony or a verandah, the aangan was being used largely for parking and you could also spot a few CCTV cameras.

In the apartment I lived in, it was very easy to sneak in, even getting a few friends would not be an issue as long as you knew the timings of the watchman. Here even though there was no watchman there was always someone who would have eyes on the entrance.

"Namaste, mera naam Raj hai. Mere dadaji idhar raha karte the, mein abhi hi Mumbai aaya hu Patna se, toh socha dekhne idhar aa jau." "Mein toh abhi abhi idhar aaya hu, aakhri vaali kholi, jiske bahar tiles nai hai usme ek dadaji hai voh jaante honge," *the uncle whose newspaper reading I had interrupted replied.*

I made my way to the room, making sure not to trip over cycles, water containers, small cupboards, and the endless amount of things that were spilled in the corridor.

"Kabhi rehte the tere dadaji idhar?" he asked after I had explained why I was here.

"Jabhi mill band hone lagi 1980s mein uske thodasa pehle. Deepak, naam hai unka, actor banne aaye the, aap jante hai unko?"

"Arre haa deepak ko mein kaise bhul sakta hu, tum deepak ke pote ho, aao aao baitho. Mein Shyam, Deepak ke saath ek hi room mein rehta tha, yehi vaala."

There were two metal frames with mattresses and one iron cupboard. There were nails on the walls on which rags were hanging. The condition of the walls from inside somehow seemed worse than the outside, no wonder people chose to tile everything. The room was even smaller than the guest room we had back at home. How did six people or even three people live here at a time?

“Yeh toh pura badal gaya haina, Shyam, aur tu idhar kaise?!” My grandfather’s excitement was very evident even through the phone. *“Kitna acha lag raha hai tumhe dekhke, itne saal baad.”*

“Arre mere bete ka job idhar hi hai, toh mein ek din uske saath chala aaya, tabhi pata chala ki redevlop hone wala hai. Bass aise hi apne kholi ke paas aaya toh dekha ki abhi khali hui hai, koi rehta nahi hai. Toh kabhi kabhi bete ke saath aata hu bass baithne aur baaki ke logo ke saath baate karne, naye makan mein koi gharke bahar aata hi nai, pura din kya karu!”

The updates and the exchange went on for about thirty minutes after which grandfather realised that even I was standing there.

“Arre Shyam teko pata hai Sadanand kaha hai ab, mujhe usko 50 saal pehle vaada kiya hua pen dena tha,” grandfather asked.

“Voh din toh kaise bhul sakte hai, uske baad hi sab alag alag ho gaye. Par tabhi phone nai the na, toh idhar chale gaye sab pata hi nahi chala. Sadnand pakka Bambai mein hi hai, accha lekhak bhi ban gaya hai, thode bohot saal pehle idhar hi mila tha, iss chawl par hi article likh raha tha.”

“Unka pura naam ya unke bacho ka pura naam bata sakte hai?” I asked. I was pretty sure to find an author online would be easy,

“Kya naam tha Sadanand ka pura yaad hai kya Deepak?”

“Ummm Kumar, Kumar hi tha pakka.”

Sadanand Kumar - journalist and writer, writes a lot of articles on mill workers - riots and struggles, two kids, no formal education, and some random page on justdial. But to directly contact Sadanand was difficult as he wasn’t active on social media. I could see a lot of pages supporting his articles on these social media platforms. I also searched for the magazines, newspapers and reports mentioning Sadanand as their author to gather some more information. We came across the names of his children, in the acknowledgment of one of his

books, this was enough.

Looked up his kids on instagram, and luckily one of them had a small business, through which I found the contact number easily.

“Hello, what would you like to place an order for today? We have freshly baked brownies, cookies, biscuits, but cakes are available on pre-order only.” someone said as soon as I called.

“Hi, sorry, I was looking for Sadanand Kumar, your father, I think,” I said, stammering and wondering if I should have thought the conversation through.

“Aap kaun bol rahe hai?”

“Hum unke dost ke pote hai, unse milna chahte the.”

“Rukiye mein unko phone deti hu aap unse hi baat kijiye?”

“Hello, kaun bol raha hai? Arre Sadanand, Deepak bol raha hu, yaad aaya ki nai?”

“Deepak, sacchi tum ho kya?”

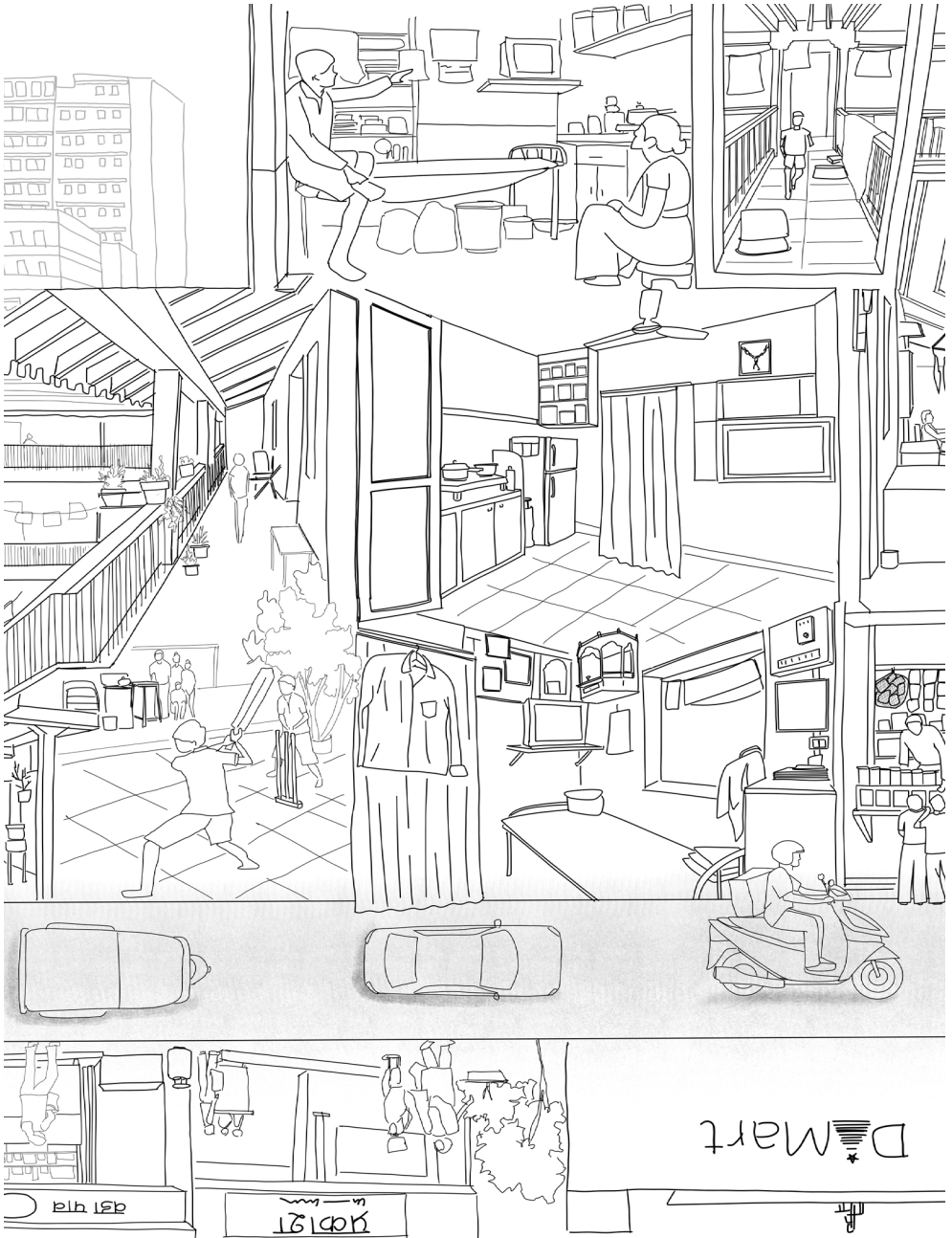
They talked till Shyam's son came to pick him up. Numbers were exchanged, Whatsapp groups were made.

I dropped the pen at Sadanand Ji's, made my way back home feeling a little nostalgic about these kinds of friendships.

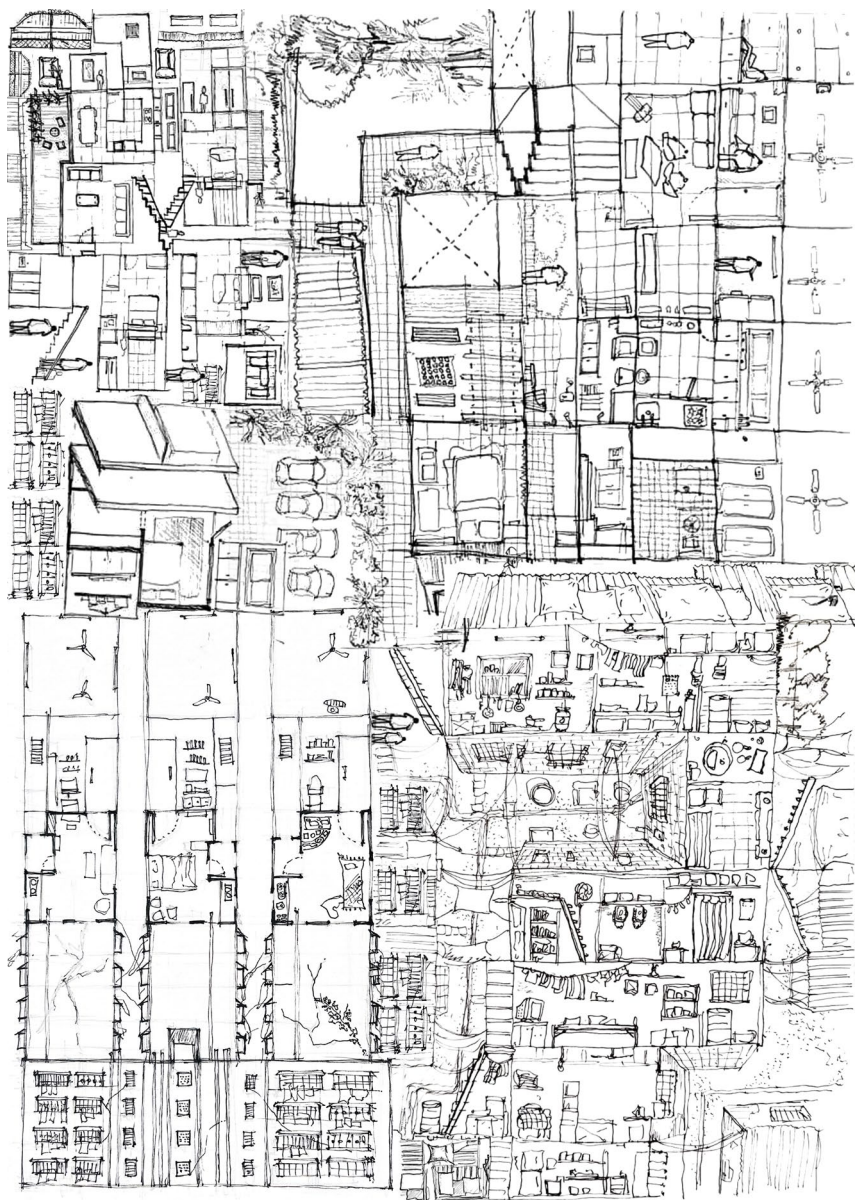
Climbing the stairs of the building, I saw my neighbour, coming back from work, hunched over with the weight of the bag.

I smiled, *“Would you like to come over for beer later?”*





Disruptions and Doubts



The clock in the lobby showed quarter to 11 while Manoj closed the door to his cubicle at the sprawling office of J.K. Consultants, one of Mumbai's largest multinational corporations. The flickering fluorescent lights cast long shadows in the empty corridors, creating an eerie silence contrasting sharply with the daytime hustle. Most of his colleagues have left by now, they rarely stay past 7:30 pm.

Manoj, a diligent and unassuming thirty-five-year-old, is generally known for his dedication and meticulous attention to detail. His colleagues often envied his ability to juggle multiple projects while maintaining an air of calm. Tonight, he was reviewing the last 2 weeks of paperwork before it was sent out to the client's office on the coming Monday.

Manoj's thoughts were constantly whirring around work. He stepped out onto the terrace briefly and was hit by the humid night air, the city's usual nocturnal rhythm. The sound of distant traffic, the occasional honking of horns, and the murmur of late-night street vendors created a symphony unique to this time and hour.

After spending a brief 10 minutes smoking a cigarette, he headed back in to finish up an hour's worth of work before logging out. On his way back to the desk, he glanced at the manager's cubicle. *"He's still here? Never seen him at the office this late before."* he thought. The new manager, Ishaan has been a buzz among most office employees since he joined the company. He is engaged to the daughter of Ravi Ahuja who is a very renowned businessperson. Rumours have it that Ishaan got the job because his to-be father-in-law pulled some strings to get him the job despite being so young for a senior manager. About 20 minutes later, the manager's cubicle had its lights and AC shut, with the doors closing behind him as he walked towards the escalator, followed by another fellow who seemed to have some equipment in the luggage he was carrying.

Scrolling through the endless Excel sheet, Ishaan checks it for the 100th time, probably more than necessary. He was supposed to log out at 6 pm, it is 10 in the night and he would love another opportunity to kill time. It was almost like he was staying back in his cabin a little longer to avoid making his ride back home. He logged out from his work account figuring that he couldn't avoid going back home altogether and gathered his things in his backpack, pushing the door to his office towards the exit.

Everybody had left a few hours ago but he could see one desk lamp on with an employee still working. Ishaan had started working here not long ago, he vaguely remembers seeing this guy in his welcome party but hadn't bothered to remember any names, with the hopes of quitting this job soon. He is well aware that the employees working under him don't like him. He was much younger than most employees working under him.

He looks down on the gold band on his ring finger, a constant reminder of the perks of being engaged to Diya. His move from Delhi was rather sudden and something he was not looking forward to but knew he couldn't avoid. His life in Delhi seemed effortless because of his family and friends around him. He lived in Lajpat Nagar in a small apartment building, a very stark contrast to the high-rise he lives in now. The colony friends and he would spend their evenings in the building talking about all sorts of things.

"Aaj bhi late ho gaya office se nikalne mein...aaj ka din bhi ismein he waste hua" With a groan, Mahek left the office building. She was thinking about the man she had seen in the elevator. A short man, dressed like he had just started his workday in a sharp suit. He entered the lift located one floor above her and noticed that the button for the 10th floor's light was on. Presumably, someone was waiting for the elevator. As the door opened, the short man hurried off towards the dead end of the floor.

As Ishaan waits for the elevator, he gets his phone out of his pocket when he hears the notification ring. He opens the lock screen seeing four messages from Diya informing him that she won't be home tonight as she is staying back at her parent's place for another night. She also mentioned something about a family gathering coming up the next week and that he had to 'prepare' himself for it.

Ishaan was so zoned out in thinking about next week that he didn't notice a man beside him waiting for the elevator. It is quite rare to see people in the building at such an hour. The man wore a tucked-in button-up shirt and black pants was constantly fidgeting with his cuffs and had a suitcase with him which he found rather strange. *"Who carries such luggage with them to the office?"* he thought. They entered as the elevator doors opened and Ishaan pressed the button for B2 while the man wanted to get down to the 16th floor, just one floor below. *"Who takes the lift just to get one floor down?"* he thought.

The elevator door opened on the 14th floor again, but as he was expecting someone to come in, he saw a retreating figure going back into the office, it seemed like the woman forgot something. She looked familiar to Ishaan as he recalls seeing her frequently around the building and having bumped into her in the lobby on several occasions.

Ishaan walked towards his car parked in a designated spot in the parking lot, one of the perks of being a senior manager he is grateful for. He sat in his car and took a deep breath. He switched on the AC and tried to connect the car's Bluetooth to his phone to play some songs. It became difficult to get a network in the parking lot so he had plenty of songs downloaded to avoid such issues again. On some days, it is the only event of the day that he looks forward to. He struggled to get the Bluetooth connected as it kept saying 'No device found', he kept trying, pushing random buttons on the screen to get that thing to work anyhow. After a brief 10 minutes of struggling which seemed like an hour, he got it connected to the console. He took out the leftover takeaway he had for dinner to savour it in the background music of his favourite songs. This is also something he and Diya used to do a lot in their days in college.

He puts the crumpled brown takeaway bag on the backseat and takes the car out of the parking lot. As he takes the car some distance out of the gate, the woman he saw earlier waiting for the elevator comes in front of the car almost unaware of a vehicle approaching. Ishaan slams the brake just in time to avoid causing an accident.

As Mahek arrived at the main gate after finally picking up all her things from the 2 messy trips to her office, she was in her train of thought about the man she saw in the elevator. She was on the Uber app, entering her drop location and looking for an auto. There was a queue of autos parked at the end of the wide lane. There was no one on the vacant road, only the sound of crickets from the garden across the street and occasional fast cars. She wanted to get home as soon as possible. After she filled the storage with photos of every location she visited in Mumbai, her phone started to slow down.

She was grabbed off her phone by a car horn. She fumbled for a second and dropped her three folders from her arms. She managed to keep her phone, her purse, and her tiffin bag safe. Over the past week, Mahek had seen him multiple times in the office's smoking area. They exchanged glances but were never able to get the words out. She learned his name via hearing a few of -

- his coworkers use it. His ID card strap indicated that he was employed in the same office building working for J.K. Consultants.

Ishaan was greeted by the watchman who recognized him and opened the gate. Mahek stood up, fastened her never-tied shoelace, placed her handbag on her shoulder, a tiffin bag on her elbow, and picked up the folders once again. Ishaan exited the gate and came to a stop along the pavement. He questioned which side she was going. “*Adarsh Nagar*,” Mahek retorted. With a smile, Ishaan offered to drive her home.

Mahek initially hesitated, turning her phone to indicate that she was attempting to make an Uber reservation. It was 11:30 at night. For the following five minutes, they waited in the same spot. On the app, there was no confirmation regarding the ride. She agreed to share her live location, she promptly let her sister and roommates know where she was and with whom. They replied right away with a ‘Reach Safely’ text.

About half an hour later, Manoj started to pack up his things to head back home for the night. He left his laptop behind to avoid carrying extra weight in his backpack and shut off the lights and fan in his cubicle while headed back to the lobby where the lifts were located. He pressed the lift indicating it was on the 19th floor as it would be quicker to wait than the other lift down at Basement 2.

He walked past the security desk and waved at some of the guards he had become acquainted with while leaving for home at this hour. He looked up and could hear a faint rumble of thunder in the distance, the approaching rain prompted him to pull out his small umbrella from the bag while he walked to the main road to catch the auto heading towards the station at this time.

They turned right to head in the direction of the Link Road after settling into the passenger seat. The traffic was still clogging the signals. Turning left, they proceeded along the Link Road. Mahek peered out the window, taking in the rushing traffic and the recently opened metro line. When she arrived in Bombay, she brought an entire checklist. One of them is using the metro system. Since last week, she has not had enough time. The car was stuck at the busy Mith Chowk intersection, whining about the never-ending traffic in Mumbai.

Mahek said, “*Travelling in Ranchi is so different*” she concurred. “*At this time,*

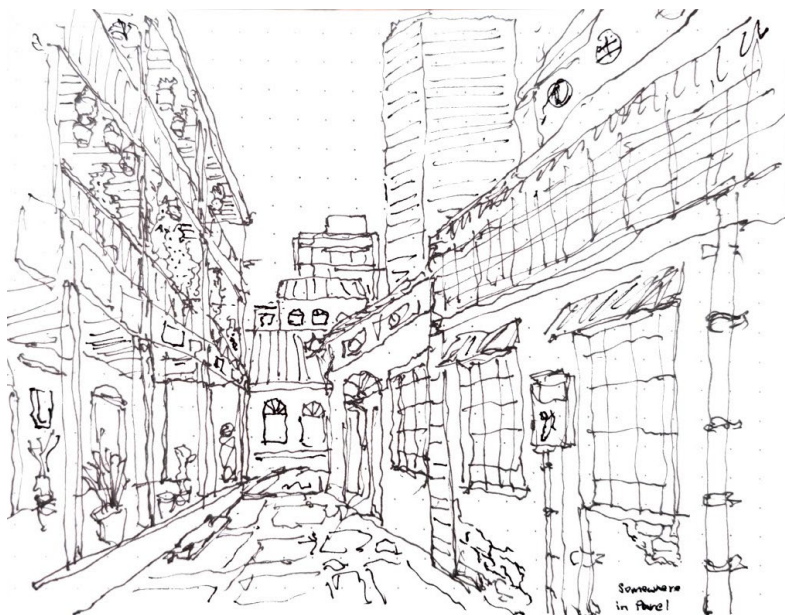
nobody is out on the streets. It is completely dark, with just a few street lights."

Raising an eyebrow, Ishaan enquired, "So, you are from Ranchi?"

Mahek exclaimed, "Yes, I am here for work," as she thought back to her hometown. "I work as an analyst at CapitalKart Fintech. I apologise for not asking, but I believe you work for J.K. Consultants." She asked, glancing at the I-Card strap.

"Indeed, I am a senior manager there", Ishaan replied with a smile. "I relocated from Delhi some months ago."

Mahek was relieved that someone could relate to her feelings of having to move to a new place for employment and taking care of everything herself. She has been extremely active and wishes to explore Mumbai as much as possible. As they arrived at the Agarwal Residency gate, Mahek thanked him for dropping her off and exited the vehicle. After reversing the vehicle and bidding Mahek farewell, Ishaan made his way home. Mahek went inside her building and pushed the button for the elevator to take her upstairs. She lived with three other women in a two-bedroom apartment on the eighth floor. Although they had moved a few days back, they had decorated the apartment in their own way.



As the train rattled and swayed, Manoj found a small corner to stand while he scrolled through the feed on his phone while he waited for the train to reach Andheri. He jumped off and rushed to the metro concourse to catch the last train heading towards Ghatkopar- and reached the platform just in time for the train to arrive a few minutes later than usual, he must've gotten lucky tonight otherwise it would've been another tiring auto ride, or switching trains at Dadar on the local again.

The journey home was long, but he was used to it by now- it was now just a short walk home from Ghatkopar station.

Finally, he arrived at the narrow gully, the familiar surroundings offering a sense of comfort. The streets here were narrower, the buildings older, but this was home. He walked briskly through the lanes, greeted by the occasional nod or wave from neighbours washing the front doors of their houses, who had known him since childhood. A stark contrast to the impersonal atmosphere of the corporate world he thought to himself, while opening the -- gate to his building. He flipped his backpack around and went through the zip to find his keys as he walked up the 2 floors to reach his flat. He opened the door cautiously to avoid waking his younger brother and parents who'd been sleeping in the hall for the cool air through the large window.

"Alarm set for 7 hours 16 minutes from now"

Mahek's room resembled their mood board from Pinterest. Mahek and her roommate Aisha took a week to set up their room before she joined her office. They roamed around as much as they could around every famous place in Mumbai. Given the little usage, they had made arrangements for furnishings and some used appliances. Before Mahek left the workplace, she had asked Aisha to order dinner. Mahek immediately went for a shower and asked Aisha to heat the package coated in Zomato tapes. They began eating dinner as they sat on their separate single beds along the room's two parallel walls.

Before they began eating, they both held their bowls of biryani in front of the camera to share an Instagram story and let their followers know just how 'great' their lives are in Mumbai. The French window in the background had light curtains that let in sunshine and were adorned with fairy lights the girls acquired from Crawford Market at night. Besides the nightstands, more wall hangings and posters were hung. There was a dreamcatcher in a tiny

space where the wall was misaligned, fastened to the shelves and curtain rod.

Mahek put an alarm for following morning. Her targets for the day were over.

Manoj woke up to the sound of tadka being fried along with onions for Pohe in the morning. His younger brother was running around in order to be ready for school in the morning, while his father patiently read the newspaper in the hall.

He stepped out at 8:30 in the morning, the hustle and bustle of the neighbourhood already in full swing around him. He straightened his shirt and walked towards the steps of the Ghatkopar metro once again.

As he descended the stairs into the cool, air-conditioned haven of the metro, Manoj felt a momentary relief from the sweltering heat outside. He jumped on.

The bag got stuck, the cleanly polished shoes were stamped on, the yelling and pushing and pulling but what if the bag tears apart? It should've been held above the head. A phone call arrives but there is no space to wriggle the wrist free from the clutches of shoulders, the phone continues to ring amongst the chaos. Frantic searching for a small gap to move and squeeze through within the carriage, Jogeshwari kaunse tarafaayega? We need to avoid that. The files in the bag must've been crushed by those pushing from behind. Standing on our toes now, how much longer till they start painning? Wallet hai na mera pocket me? Accha thank god, it's there. Train ka pass aaj khatam ho raha hai, TC na pakde toh accha hai.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the train pulled into Malad station. Manoj disembarked, merging into the wave of passengers moving towards the exit and 10 minutes later he was on his way to the office lobby but only this time he was greeted by the security to direct him to the conference room on the 15th floor.

Perplexed by the unusual atmosphere and running around of a few police officers on the multiple floors, he kept quiet hoping his questions regarding the hubbub would be answered soon.

“Are you Manoj Kothare? We need you to sit here until you're called upon. I'm afraid your work schedule for the day may be affected.”

As Mahek completed her morning routine, memories from the previous evening brought her back to Ishaan and the man she had seen in the elevator. She ignored them and went to the kitchen to heat the milk and toast bread for herself.

She departed for her office at nine-thirty in the morning, just like any other day. She boarded the bus from the main road. On her way, she abruptly received a call from an unidentified number. It was the cyber branch of the Mumbai police. Even though she was certain she had done nothing illegal, she was nevertheless afraid of being by herself in such a big city. He inquired as to her whereabouts and urged her to report straight to the building office. When she walked upstairs, she discovered that numerous laptops were set up and that CCTV was playing.

A female cop called her into a conference room. They asked about last night. When did she leave? Did she see anything out of the ordinary? Many of the other frequently asked questions. Mahek couldn't quite make sense of what had transpired in the office building. She requested others to explain to her what had occurred the previous evening while she walked around her office as if nobody noticed her existence. A minute later, she heard two police officers talking about a data breach in J.K. Consultants' office. The woman thanked Mahek for the information and said they might give her another call if she needed any help.

After hearing how much Ishaan disliked his job and the environment, the only thought she had was that he had made this error last night when no one was in the office. After all, how many senior employees may have access to such crucial information? She headed for the office balcony, overthinking as she often did since she entered the city, and from there she noticed Ishaan smoking on the fire exit of the lower floor.

She called up Aisha regarding the situation. Aisha spoke to her, explaining that she wasn't going to be in any kind of trouble. Mahek headed back to her office and continued working. Again, her day got delayed.

Manoj sat down while he cleared some of his spam emails on his phone for about 20 minutes when a cybersecurity representative approached him.

"It seems there's been a major data breach with regards to the office servers on some of the floors over here. This is a serious issue as the servers contain confidential

files that you may well be aware the office legally cannot disclose regarding clientele information. The intent is still unknown, but we suspect a hardware breach on some of the servers which can be traced back to last night. Our assumption for now is that the data is intended to be sold off to other, smaller companies by a few crooks."

Manoj did not show much expression while he was briefed regarding the situation, he hadn't paid much attention to the people at the office yesterday, and his cubicle was situated at the far end of the office floor which didn't give him much of an idea what was going on last night.

"We'll require you to come up for a few minutes so that we can ask you a few questions."

"Let's go over this again, you were the last one to leave the office last night. What exactly did you see?"

Manoj said *"I... I finished my work around 11:30 PM. The office was empty, just the usual hum of the servers. Everything seemed normal, and then I left."*

"And you didn't notice anything unusual? No signs of a breach?"

"No, nothing unusual" he repeated.

"Our forensic team found traces of sophisticated malware on the system, something that could only be planted by someone with inside access. You're the lead IT specialist. How do you explain that?"

Manoj replied *"I'm not sure. I mean, I have access, but so do others."*

"Anyone, yes. But only you had the opportunity last night. We're looking at a serious theft here, Manoj. Sensitive data, millions in potential losses."

Manoj had long been considering starting something small of his own where his services could come to use with smaller firms within Mumbai, and potentially grow it out into a small business. However, he had financial security at J.K. Consultants which only a corporation could provide- Health Insurance and ease of loans would be a task if he ever decided to venture out on his own, not to mention the assurance of receiving a reliable paycheck at the end of every month.

Manoj felt cornered by the officer's tone. He had looked forward to joining an MNC as its work culture was said to be far better than other localised firms offering even better pay, but of late he began to realise that his efforts went largely unnoticed.

Ishaan was out on the balcony thinking about the questioning that happened earlier, his father-in-law and Diya were present in the building before him. His father-in-law was talking to one of the senior inspectors about the details of the case. He has connections with the police at higher posts so everybody knows his name and work.

When Ishaan was called for questioning, he was seated in the conference room of this office. One of the senior officers with his father-in-law entered the room and a little while later followed by the peon of the office getting a glass of juice for each one of them. It was rather strange to provide this kind of treatment to people during questioning, more so having a third party present there.

They asked Ishaan the same set of questions they've been asking everyone who left late for the sake of the procedure. The tone of suspicion felt missing here and when asked about his whereabouts about when he left the office, he left out the details of running into Mahek, not because it is something that should be hidden but the fact that he knows how his future in-laws will view the situation.

She wanted to leave early to visit the Lil Flea festival in BKC. Her week was all planned out and the recent events jumbled up her entire schedule. She had only started working in the second half of the day when everyone had completed their targets for the day. Rushing and managing to reach BKC by 10:30 pm, she missed most of the fest. Travelling back home for the next one & half hours, she realised that it was no use rushing around.

Manoj had no further work for the day, and he headed home.

Does this seem like a good idea to bring up right now? There's the internet, gas and electricity bill piling up- we spent so much renovating the flat, it'll be hard to convince them. I hope they understand the potential of starting something of our own. Bah! Voh kabhi nahi samjhege, unhe yehi chahiye tha ki main koi acchi theek thaak naukri kar lu, yeh nahi hoga toh kya? Kabir bhai has that shop down the street, look what money he makes in the daily! More than that, travel saves so much

time, and the comfort of coming home whenever I want. When will I be able to start something of my own? Ghar par bas raat ko soone aata hu, ab toh ghar ki jagah bas kamra lagta hai. Pehle khud ka ghar ka, upar ke floor pe pura din hum dost baithe rehte the, baahar ghumte the, yeh flat mein sab khud ka darwaza bandh karke baith jaate hai. Year after year I've been postponing this with hopes my position back at the office would improve, where is it going now? Scooter bhi service karvana hai, mixi theek karne di hai, lekar aani hogi, pipeline fir bandh hai? Paani kab aayega? Shyam and Girish bhai have already asked me for some services in their shop. Freelancing ek accha option hai. Should I take it? PF ke paiso se jagah ka deposit bhi nikal jayega aur setup bhi ho jayega, kya yeh risk lena theek hoga?

It has been almost 6 years since Diya and I have been together and I have not once seen Diya behave this way. Is it because we're not in Delhi anymore? Is it how it's going to be like when we marry? Will our marriage always be under the scrutiny of her family? These thoughts occupy my mind every so often. I have started losing faith in my own relationship for which I moved cities. Mumbai was never my first choice to settle, I had no family here apart from Diya and no friends on whom I could rely on. The worst part of it is the emptiness. The flat, the car, the cabin, the parking lots. Mumbai is filled with people, yet the circle around me were just voids. A duplex flat, with fewer people than rooms, if any guests come, their judgments have changed half the interiors of the flat. It was almost like my feelings didn't matter anymore and I had no say in what goes on in my own life. I felt like I was overthinking the matter and it would just go away soon but being at the family event tonight proved me wrong. I knew that Diya only wants what is best for me but he felt more and more suffocated in the process and felt like I was losing sense of my own self. Diya has been so distant lately that it feels like I haven't had a real conversation with her in months.

Kya life hai yeh, idhar bhaago, udher bhaago! Life hai ya local train, never on time, just managing to cover all the stations. Work is surely fun, I will never complain about it, never get enough of the work. I enjoy working as an analyst in fact. But life outside, what is it? Where is the personal space, the time, the curiosity to explore? The tap is broken, the neighbours complain, the broker is not answering, I can't reach the landlord, the owner's worn out chairs in the duct are not cleared even after two weeks of getting the flat, the water has to be filled at 7 in the morning everyday and if you forget, you rely on the quarter tank left from the previous day. Life only revolves around these daily duties. I have been trying to tick all the tasks in the bucket list, not realising that I need time to be happy about all I have achieved.

Mom complained to me the other day, if I wanted to stay outside the whole time, why did I even rent such a place? I realised I miss the comfort that made the home. Break leke bas ghar par rehna hai ab. Exploring myself in the new city is so overwhelming that I forgot to handle myself. Suddenly my phone rang, “Kal Juhu beach jaana hai kya? The ice gola is very famous, we’ll try that.” asked Aisha. I smiled to myself, “Anytime later”

