A big procession came out on Friday after the Jumma namaaz. It was mainly the endeavour of Sirajul and Taj Mohammad. Processions had come out earlier, but nothing like this had happened before. Meandering through ten villages for the whole day, it went on and on. The weekly haat did not assemble at the marketplace that day – the big meeting was to be held with all these shoppers. Sirajul was frenzied. The usually tranquil Taj Mohammad was also furious. They had wandered through many villages in Bihar – the far-off helpless cries of people there seemed to reverberate through Sirajul’s voice.

Hundreds of protesting voices did not let his speech come to an end. Even the appearances of the men underwent a sudden change. People who would earlier never speak without a smile on their lips, changed too. Their behaviour and movements resembled those of flashing, sharpened swords.

Himangshu had just started his practice at the district court. He wasn’t making money yet, neither did he have the inclination to do so. He always came to spend some time in the village during the winter season. After feasting on palm juice, jaggery, and fresh cat fish from the lakes, he would make arrangements for the distribution of the paddy and the rice, and then once again go back to his rented house in the district headquarters. He was just coming back from the barn along with Nakul Das. His feet seemed to become static when he arrived near the market square. He had known vaguely that there had been some trouble, but could not imagine that it was such a dangerous affair. He went and stood behind the trunk of the banyan tree. He did not want to get noticed by the people going to attend the meeting, so he hid himself amid the aerial roots that had formed like a small room. Once he thought he would climb up the branches to the top. From there he would be able to both hear clearly and also see everyone. But all his enthusiasm subsided once he listened to Sirajul’s speech. He moved away from the vicinity of the marketplace even before the speech ended. Shivering all over with fright, he did not have the courage to walk through the empty roads. The village that he had known for all these years had suddenly changed its appearance. It seemed as if a jungle of wild grass had all of a sudden turned into a dangerous forest, with snakes and tigers lurking around everywhere. He could not decide which side was safe. He had to run away – but where and through which route?

It was a huge double-storied mansion. So many people frequented it – especially on such occasions when Himangshu came home. There was no end to the festivities till midnight. But today no one came. Without glancing anywhere, he hurriedly stepped up on the verandah in front of his bedroom. Upon hearing his footsteps, Hashi opened the door. Her face resembled that of a bloodless corpse. Quickly she locked the door, fixed the latch on. Then she went around the house inspecting whether all the windows were securely shut down.
That night, no one in the Hindu neighbourhood opened their doors. Hardly anyone slept. They lit lamps and kept on sitting throughout the night. They did not even have the courage to speak out. There was silence everywhere – a kind of gloom had settled in. The call of either a fox or a dog from a far off place sent shivers down their spines. What was that? Were they beating tin sheets? At the western end of the village, tin sheets were being beaten instead of drums. They strained to listen to whether they could also hear “Allah-ho-Akbar” along with the noise.

In the morning it came to be known that a group of *mojahirs* had thrown Haran Chatterjee out of his house. Mr. Chatterjee had gone to lodge his protest, so he was caught by the neck and driven out. Having fallen down on the staircase, his whole body was bruised. It was also heard that there wasn’t a single house left unharmed in Bandar. Having gathered in groups, they had torched the barns of grain in broad daylight. The police simply remained silent spectators.

It seemed to be Sirajul’s voice – he was standing on the road speaking to somebody. Himangshu had studied with this same Sirajul right from the nursery class to high school. Whatever he might have said in the public meeting, now that he was available close at hand, he should be questioned once. He would surely offer help.

Himangshu ran to the road and clasped Sirajul’s hands.
“What am I hearing brother?”
“You’ve heard too much – a lot of it has been exaggerated.”
“Stop them brother. Probably you can do it. They are killing innocent people –”
“Killing the Hindus,” Sirajul corrected him.
Himangshu spoke in a perplexed tone, “What are you saying? Aren’t Hindus human beings?”
“Hindus are human beings, Muslims are also human beings. All those people who were killed in Bihar, were they not innocent too?”
“But, why are you penalizing us for their sins? Go to Bihar – go and kill those people who are killing others.”
In a firm, emphatic tone Sirajul replied, “The killings are being done not according to human beings but according to caste. Wherever the Hindus are powerful, they are killing the Muslims. Therefore, whenever the Muslims get an opportunity, they will kill the Hindus.”

How could one rely upon anything else if such words came from a person like Sirajul? No one knew how such things happened. Right from the beginnings of civilization, men had been uttering such good words. But they were simply decorative costumes from outside – a small scratch revealed the shameful animal instincts from within.

While walking the through the village paths once again after a period of four years, Himangshu kept recapitulating these past incidents. It had been like a devastating storm – so many houses had been destroyed, so many men got scattered here and there. This evening it was very peaceful and quiet. There was no similarity at all with that day. At the end of the village there was a huge banyan tree that had spread out its branches on both sides. This place was known as Haritala – Lord Hari spreading out his symbolic arms to protect the lonely village. Nowadays, during festivities no one hears the drums being played, nor did
anyone place a sindoor-annointed pitcher at the foot of the tree for worshipping it. The whole place was now covered with hedges and creepers, making one unable to go near the God.

While walking past Taj Mohammad’s house Himangshu noticed that verandahs had been added to it already. Bundles of jute were spread out in the entire courtyard for drying. The women of the house were busy husking flattened rice. In the afternoon, date juice was being boiled – large bright flames of fire came out through the two openings of the clay oven. Himangshu had seen what hard days they had earlier. Now they had arranged for everything. The reason for their over-flowing prosperity was of course their illegal use of his own and ten other people’s farmlands. His eyes fill up with tears. City-bred people try to use their intelligence in understanding all these accounts. But how could they enter the minds of such people? Can people from outside understand the suffering and pain of one who has had similar experience in the past?

The market-place. It was not the day for the weekly assembly here – even then people kept gossiping in front of the shops. Covering his face with his hands, Himangshu sped past it.

“Babu, walk slowly. It’s a dark place – you might trip and fall over some roots,” Nakul advised him.

By the time he landed at the courtyard of his house, it was quite late in the evening. Just because he had known it for thirty years he could identify it – otherwise any newcomer could not tell whose courtyard it actually was. Standing beneath the verandah he found that wild plants had grown neck-high and covered the entire place. A mild scent of wild flowers filled his nostrils. A droning sound came from the wind passing through the rows of tamarisk trees on both sides of the gate. Himangshu felt a tingling sensation in his heart.

What happened to Nakul? How long did it take to light a lamp? Nakul had come here earlier in the afternoon, swept the floors and had kept the lantern and the matchbox ready. Then why was he taking so long? Impatient, Himangshu entered the room in the darkness itself. He was a bit wary, as if some hidden assailant was lurking there. He wanted to shut the door but the panels were all missing. They had taken away all the door and window panels from this deserted house.

Laying a mat on the floor, Nakul said, “You are tired – lie down Babu. I’m going to boil some rice for you.”

Nakul was incomparable. For the last four years he alone had been looking after this deserted gentlemanly neighbourhood. He would come here whenever he got an opportunity – stopping by for a while at someone’s courtyard, someone’s garden. The jackals and the pigs would scamper away at the presence of human beings. It seemed as if everyone had entrusted Nakul to look after their properties before they ran away. But actually none of them had told him anything before they left.

The rustling sound of a sari made him look up in surprise. Hashi entered the room. The lantern was kept at a distance so that its light did not disturb Himangshu. Suddenly its
light flared up for a while and then gradually grew dim. The room was dark. She was standing at the head of the bed. Himangshu turned his head to see her once again. Hashi moved towards the small shelf in the wall and stood there fidgeting with something. Was she looking at her face by holding a mirror in her hands? How could she see things in the dark? Did she bring the mirror along with her? The undulated rushes of black hair left open on her back made Himangshu certain that she was Hashi Rani. Hashi was not speaking, so why should Himangshu speak to her? Hashi did not care to find out how he had been running around here and there like a storm-tossed bird. She did not share his grief.

Hashi suddenly came and sat down next to him, very close to his body. This was her permanent place. She spoke too. Her voice trembled.

“Did you remember your home after such a long time?” Himangshu asked.

“Tell me, what can I do? If everyone runs away then there would be no one left to lighten the evening lamp in this family household – how could that be tolerated?”

“Don’t you feel frightened?”

“Can anyone feel afraid of one’s own things?” Hashi replied. “Now that you have come – am I afraid of it?”

After being silent for a short while she added, “You all are not alive. But can we think differently?”

Himangshu screamed out in fear. At least he felt that he was shouting at the top of his voice.

“Not alive?”

“Yes, you are, you are.”

Trying to manage the situation, Hashi said, “Don’t be annoyed – yes, there is no doubt that you are living. I was just joking”

Looking up at Hashi’s face, Himangshu emphatically added, “Yes, that is why I was saved. I had come here once again with the police after recovering at the hospital. You had died, Hashi. Right? I was forgetting everything. Now I remember.”

Hashi gave a low smile and added, “That is what I am also telling you. Both Nikhil and you are alive. All right, don’t get excited over petty things. There is a profusion of blooming bel flowers – can’t you smell them? Wait, I’ll fetch some and keep it in a platter near the head of our bed.”

“Tonight we will sleep once again on a bed of flowers as newly married brides and bridegrooms do,” she added. “This time it will be really quiet and peaceful without anybody disturbing us. Oh! I still remember how we could not speak anything on that auspicious night. As soon as you went to say something, someone started to laugh aloud from behind those windows.”

Laughing, Hashi tiptoed out of the room to pluck the flowers. So, the flower garden still existed! She was forever crazy about flowers – her attraction did not fade even at this age. But this bit of information had really not reached Himangshu that Hashi was still looking after this jungle house.

“The food is ready, Babu. Please get up,” Nakul called.

Himangshu got up and said, “Brighten the light. I can’t see anything.”

Nakul looked at him with surprise.

“How much more can I increase it? The glass will crack if I try further.”
He had spread some boiled rice on a banana leaf. A bit of tamarind had also been arranged along with it. That was more than enough. Putting a few morsels in his mouth, Himangshu sat thinking.

“What is that huge scar on your neck, Nakul?” he asked.

“They had hit me with a chopper. By God’s grace I was not cut into two pieces.”

“They had hit me too----“

“They hit you with a stick. Your skull had cracked and the soft matter inside had come out. No one could imagine that you would recover and come back from the hospital again. On the other hand see what happened to sister-in-law---“

Oh, what a terrible day that had been! Everything was being looted. All the rooms were being engulfed in flames. The oozing blood from Himangshu’s cracked skull kept flowing in streams in the courtyard. Hashi was begging like a lunatic at their feet – “Since you have taken all, when you have finished all, they why do you have pity on me? Please kill me too.”

“You pointed a gun at us. We have the maximum grudge against you. That is why we will not kill you,” they had replied.

Handing her an earthen bowl they said, “You will go begging from door to door – this is the state that we have turned you into.”

“That bowl was lying in the ferry-boat jetty next to a jungle of berries, Babu,” Nakul said.

“The dead body was found amid the tall grass hedges. Such an immaculate figure like a banana tree had decayed and bloated up.”

Himangshu grew wild with anger.

“Can’t you find any other place to narrate such cock-and-bull stories? Your neck was slit, the grey matter in my head came out, and we are still living. And that living person who did not have a single scar on her body – was she the one to die?”

After the meal was complete, Himangshu sat on the mat, leaned against the wall and closed his eyes once again. He would think over the whole matter again in a calm and composed mood. He had recovered and come back from the hospital – no maybe that was not true – he had probably thought that he had recovered. The denizens of the world after death probably lived with such pride. Probably they thought that they were the only ones alive – the rest were dead.

The sound of footsteps interrupted his thoughts. It was Nakul.

“Get up, Babu. Let me lay a sheet upon the mat. Otherwise you will suffer and get marks of the mat all over your body.”

Himangshu clasped Nakul’s hands firmly.

“Tell me truly, don’t hide. Are we dead?”

“By God, Why do you thing so? Many have gone, but we are still here. It is our good luck.”

The night advanced. The huge clumps of trees and shrubs which all this time stood motionless, now seemed to peep and eavesdrop from here and there. Nakul was exceptional. Without any signs of fear, he lay peacefully sleeping on the floor in the room with shutterless doors.

“Hey, Nakul!”
Without answering, Nakul just turned in his sleep. His snoring stopped, that’s all. Himagshu’s head was reeling. He started slapping the mosquitoes all over his body. What should he do now? Everyone thought that he was a brave man. Why then was he feeling such impatience even while sleeping in his own ancestral home? What was that? An animal suddenly disturbed the vegetation and rushed into the jungle. A chameleon was calling from the vicinity of the Durga temple. Sleep was eluding him. How could he sleep in such a situation?

The chameleon had stopped calling. Now it was the sound of crickets. The night seemed heavy. It seemed as if the women of the house were uttering the mild ‘ulu’ sound that they did on festive occasions while roaming around the entire village. Innumerable fireflies had filled up the trees. That courtyard there had a maze of innumerable rooms surrounding it. Jethamoshai used to say that even a thief would not dare to enter the house because he feared that he would not be able to come out.

Aren’t the palanquin bearers calling? Which great nawab bahadur was approaching in a palanquin in the middle of the night? Who else but Ramratan uncle from the Chatterjee household. Golam Ali of Bhalukbhar village had even composed lyrics on him which emphasized how even without sickness Joggeswar Babu was weakened, whereas without any land or belongings, Ramratan remained a Babu. It was said that Ramratan even went to the market in a palanquin. No one could stop his spendthrift habits even after he lost all his ancestral wealth and property.

Strangely enough, Ramratan uncle’s palanquin just stopped in front of Himangshu’s room. Uprooting a few thick branches of the heranchi trees, the bearers sat upon them, wiping their perspiration with their gamchas – occasionally fanning themselves with them too.

“I heard that you had come, so I came to meet you. How are you? You look quite thin. It’s a pity that you have to stay in the city. I hear that one has to even buy soil with money there – what can you get to eat in such a place? What exams did you pass this time before coming?” Himangshu had finished studying long ago, but the old man would forget that and ask the same questions over and over again.

Joggeswar arrived too. He was fair, very lean, his unshaven face filled with a beard.
“From the call of the bearers I knew that you had come,” he said. “But why is the drawing room dark? He called for the daughter-in-law, ‘Bouma, send a light.’ Then to Ramratan uncle he said, “Come, let’s not waste time. You had defeated me in two deals in the morning – let me repay one of them at least.” He pulled Ramratan’s hands with such strength that the old man cried out “ooh – ooh” in pain.

“Though you are old Joggeswar, you cannot do away with your childish habits. You nearly broke my wrist. Himu has come some, so wait for some time.”

Joggeswar looked up and gave a very casual glimpse towards Himangshu.
“Are you well? When did you come?”
By that time he had already dragged Ramratan into the courtyard.
“Himu is going to be here. I will come in the morning again and talk to him. Stop making
excuses and come along right now.” Then he raised his voice for the daughter in law and
added, “Send some paan to the drawing room, Bouma.”
The disgusted tone in Hashi’s voice could be heard from the darkness of the adjacent room.
“Now they turn crazy for having paan so late at night.”
Ma scolded Hashi in a subdued voice.
“What kind of behaviour is that? If people come to your house you will have to bear with
some hassles. Guests are akin to Lakshmi. A middle-class household gets blessed only when
people keep on coming there.”
Nothing more could be said. Hashi was ashamed. All her display of power was towards
Himangshu. Now in Ma’s presence she was as timid as possible.

The sound of the nutcracker chopping betel-nuts was heard. Khiro lulled back the
baby to sleep when he cried out. One could hear the sound of the hammock being swung too.
This Khiro was a strange girl. She would not accept any salary. “Where will I keep my
money?” she would ask. It was really strange that she did not find any place to keep her
money. She was like a sister to Himangshu – another daughter of his mother.

One could hear some shouts coming from the drawing room. Really, these two old
men had become unmanageable. Himangshu ran there. A great tussle between the two was
going on. Joggeswar had hugged Ramratan in a tight embrace. Though he was lean, he had
tremendous strength in his body. Without saying anything, he would strike his opponent
suddenly. Ramratan was sweating all over.
“What are you two up to? Everyone is laughing at you. Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves?”
A lot of children had gathered both inside and outside the house. The waistcoat of Ramratan
uncle was torn to strips and hanging from all over his body. Joggeswar held his neck tightly
and the manner in which he hovered upon the huge body of Taran uncle resembled that of a
tiny bird on the top of a mountain. But Taran uncle was uncomfortable even under the
pressure of this frail man. The audience kept on offering different comments, even cheering
them.
“Have you lost your mind?” Himangshu shouted at both of them. “Can’t you hear what they
are saying?”
An undaunted Joggeswar replied, “But how can one retrace a step on the verge of winning? I
have to win the game ---“
“But my rook did not reach the winning point,” a nearly suffocating Ramratan replied in a
squeaky voice. “I promise by Goddess Kali. How can I retrace a step? Just because he has
physical strength, can he win by force?”

Just at that moment Nakul appeared with a case full of paan. On seeing him
Joggeswar said, “What took you so long? My throat has dried up from not having paan for
such a long time ---“
It worked like magic. Leaving Ramratan alone, Joggeswar put four paans in his mouth all at
once and started chewing them fervently. Ramratan stood up and while he was brushing off
the dust from his feet, Joggeswar held the box of paan towards him.
Chewing the paan Ramratan said in a very liberal tone, “O.K. I’ll go for it. I don’t want a
rook. At least I have the knight – I’ll surely check-mate and end.”
“That’s good,” replied Joggeswar. “That’s speaking like a man. Let’s see ---\nOnce again, the two of them got engrossed in their game of chess.

A full-fledged household had existed within this house that was now covered with jungle. Everyone was there – mother, wife, Khiro, the baby. As usual the elderly men of the village came to indulge themselves in idle talks in the drawing room. Himangshu could not remember how long he had not seen them. Could he even dream now that he would meet them again? Even if he died now then death would seem very pleasant. He did not wish to leave this blissful state and return to the drudgery of life once again.

Towards the end of the night his sleep became deeper. Then he knew nothing else. He kept on sleeping blissfully even though it was dawn. Gradually he could sense people coming and going. Then with a sudden jolt he sat up. Since the wild shrubs had covered the entire courtyard, the people who could not stand there came up to the verandah. The house had become auspicious even without people moving about it.

Who had come? In the dim hours of the morning, the dreams of the night still dizzied his brains. All the people from the bygone days with whom he had spent the whole night did not leave him alone even in the morning. They just left the room and went to sit in the verandah, giving Himangshu some time to relax. Did the other people whom Joggeswar spoke about also come over here to gossip? The *adda* would be accompanied by tea and fried rice crispies. If the tea arrived a little late, Joggeswar would shout at the top of his voice, “What has happened to you all – oh Bouma?” That old man with white beard who could be seen there – wasn’t he Joggeswar? Surely if Joggeswar lived till the present, he would have turned like this.

He realized his mistake once he came outside. No, these were not the relatives who visited him at night – they were on the enemy’s side. There was Taj Mohammad – one who had danced wild with glee with a sharpened chopper in his hand – and many more like him. Why had they come here early in the morning? He was just lazing around in his playhouse and wanted to stay here for merely two days. Then he would go away for ever. No one related to him would come here again. No one would even mention that for seven generations – beginning from their rice-eating ceremony in childhood to their journey to the funeral pyre – they had lived here. Whatever faint connections still existed in relation to their agricultural land would also be severed from now on. That was the reason for his coming here. They could go and ask Sirajul if they wanted to – he knew everything. After so many years, Himangshu had not come here with the intention of settling down once again.

“You were coming from the marketplace,” Taj Mohammad said. “The shopkeepers had seen you. News had spread within the night. I am very busy with the farmwork now – cutting paddy, lentils, harvesting mustard seeds – that is why I have come so early in the morning.”

Why did they come here? What was their intention? Himangshu’s face turned pale. He remembered the incidents of that particular day – he had been an eyewitness to all those incidents.

The old man whom he had mistaken for Joggeswar, pushed Taj Mohammad aside with his left hand. He had a long flowing white beard, his skin sagging with age.
“Don’t you know me?” the old man asked. What a tone was he speaking in? Himangshu realized that he had really made a mistake coming here. He should have written to Sirajul to take the money and come over to Kolkata. The arrangement for the transfer of the land could have been done there. And with the kind of eagerness that he had shown, Sirajul would surely have come over. At least he would not have to hear this derogatory tone of address towards him. Himangshu was the eldest son of the household – most of these people were his subjects – and even a five year old child of this house had been addressed by old people with reverence. After so many years, being above thirty years now, it was humiliating to listen to such a tone. Had they all come over in a large group just to insult him?

The old man said, “I am nearly five score years old now. Can’t walk too much. I lie down most of the time. But I could not resist coming here when I heard that you had come. How the world has turned topsy-turvy, with all our old relationships washed away forever.” He breathed a deep sigh and lowered his head.

“I have come here in advance,” Taj Mohammad said. “Many others will come. How many days are you going to stay here? Since you’ve taken so much trouble to come, -- stay over for a few more days. And listen ---“ He waved his hands from a distance and whispered, “Now you will listen to many stories about me. Of course, how can I say that they are all false? I have actually taken possession of your paddy fields. Tell me, what would be the use of leaving it fallow? But I will not forfeit your share. Just think that you have given it to me for sharecropping. I agree to whatever amount people calculate and ask me to give you. But I cannot give it to you all at once. You’ll have to take it in installments. I have brought along a hundred rupees now. Since you have spent so much to come here, at least let some of it be realized.”

Taj Mohammad handed him the note and left. The surprised Himangshu just kept on staring at him while he left. Before coming here, his employer had told him, “If you want to go, please do so. But you will not be able to bring a single paisa from Pakistan. You’ll be only spending money.” With the money in his hands, Himangshu still could not believe himself. How could one believe that people still came over to your house voluntarily to hand over money to you? He had heard that Taj Mohammad still had a big court case pending against him and that he would be hanged to death. He didn’t know anything after that. Maybe he had already been hanged to death – this was probably his reincarnation. Otherwise, how could that same person speak so politely and display such religious faith?

The old man introduced himself. “My name is Golam Ali. How will you know me? After Ishwar’s death I had stopped coming to this house. All of you were very small then.” Himangshu became a little conscious on hearing his name. Faintly he remembered seeing him in childhood but he knew a lot about him. Golam Ali hailed from a pedigreed family. During those years he had built so many roads and schools, dug ponds along with Ishwar. Ishwar was Himangshu’s uncle – the elder brother of his father. No one in this region had such expertise in English as he had.
“I have become old and invalid,” Golam Ali continued, “And the distance from Bhalukghar is also not very little. While crossing the river, I fell down on the bricks and see what has happened to me.”

Himangshu was sad to see the big bruise on his knee. In a surprised tone he asked, “Uncle, what are you saying? You had to wade through the water even in these winter months?”

“Yes. Even in the month of Chaitra there is knee-deep water. There was a bridge earlier, but now it has broken into pieces. That is why it’s more difficult now – you have to stumble against the bricks in the water. But even then, I could not rest in peace, son. I heard that you had come here and will just fly away again. I woke up in the middle of the night and since then had been tossing and turning in my bed. I remember so many incidents from those days – where were you then?”

Suddenly Golam Ali stopped speaking. Sirajul came in.

“So you have arrived.”

In a respectful tone Himangshu replied, “Why did you take the trouble of coming? I was going there. These people have come here, so I got a bit delayed.”

“I came to tell you that you will have tea and snacks at my house,” Sirajul said. With a brief smile he then added, “Oh, how many days later I have come here again. What a mansion it was! During the master’s regime no one could cross over to the inner courtyard on this side. We even had bets on whether we could sit here in front with our legs spread apart.”

Sirajul was a busy village head now. He left in a hurry. He said that he would buy some solid slabs of date molasses on his way back home. Maybe they were meant for Himangshu.

“What is his motive in coming here?” asked Golam Ali.

Himangshu did not reply. A very excited Golam Ali then said, “Tell me everything clearly. He wants the land? Whatever ten or twenty bighas of land that you have left, can’t you sleep at night? Are you dying without selling your land? Is this why you remembered your ancestral home?”

Himangshu knew that in whatever manner he might have spoken, the words were absolutely true. He had lost all his money in a coal depot venture. Now he worked as an accountant in a small bookshop. That shop too was on the verge of closure. He would carry back some money after selling his land, otherwise there was total darkness everywhere.

Golam Ali closed his eyes and sat resting against the wall. Did he want to compensate for his sleepless night in this manner? Himangshu was in deep trouble. He had taken leave for only two days – a lot of bargaining, secret discussions and arrangements for distribution of the land had to be made yet. Would this old man sit here and spoil everything? But since he had already addressed him as uncle, he could not even tell him anything.

Suddenly he saw a stream of tears rolling down from Golam Ali’s closed eyes. In a worried tone he asked him, “What’s the matter?”

Wiping his eyes with the end of his dhoti, Golam Ali looked up peacefully and replied,
“Nothing, son. We have nothing to say. With what authority can we ask you to stay back? I was lying sick at that time. Your influential friend had spread the rumour that there has been violence and killing in some state, that they had destroyed a mosque—"
"Why are you calling it a rumour, uncle? It was not a false incident. And Sirajul had directly proven it.”
Golam Ali gave a loud laugh.
“You are talking like a child. I did not have the strength to get up, otherwise I would have given a big shout and told everyone ----”
“No one would listen to you, Uncle. No one was in the mood to listen----”
“What a disaster it had been!” Golam Ali kept on speaking to himself. “I can’t sit in this verandah and look around on all sides. Only if Khuda had made me blind!”

Three veiled women stood huddling together in the distance near the broken backdoor of the courtyard. Nakul came running forward and whispered to Himangshu, “They are women from Taj Mohammad’s house. His mother, his wife, and somebody else. I cannot recognize her. They hardly come out of their house, but today they have come all the way.”
Himangshu hurried towards them. “Why are you standing at the door? Come, come inside.”
The baskets that they were carrying contained rice, pulses and vegetables. A small cup of oil, a pitcher full of milk, tied with strings, hung from the edge of a basket. Moving forward, they put down the things on the floor of the verandah rather hesitantly.
“What’s all this?”
The aged woman, who must be Taj Mohammad’s mother, lifted her veil a little and looked up.
“You’ve come home but there are no provisions here. Cook all these things for today----”
Himangshu shook his head seriously.
“Won’t you take it?” the woman pleaded.
But even before Himangshu could answer, Nakul dashed in and took all the things away to the kitchen. “You partly fasted yesterday,” he said. “Now where do we find the bazaar? I am already going to boil a pot of water. You can stand here, decide and judge for yourself.”
Himangshu replied with a smile. “See, Nakul is worse than a beggar. I did not really want to accept these things. I was feeling very annoyed. Does a man like to cook? Instead of carrying raw rice and vegetables, couldn’t you send some cooked rice, mother?”

The same thing happened throughout the day. People just kept on coming – as if a fair was being held here. The jungle that had grown up on the unused pathway disappeared under the trampling of so many feet. The light from the soot-filled lantern that Nakul had lit the night before was insufficient for seeing everybody’s face. Someone ran to Sirajul’s house and brought a bigger light. Once upon a time, Himangshu had secretly covered his face and had run away late at night. Today he was comfortably meeting innumerable people in the bright light. It seemed like a home of festivities – the celebration of which was being undertaken by a new group of friends. The same people who had earlier stayed at a distance of a hundred yards had now come very close through darkness and devastation. It seemed like a pleasant sunshine after the storm. Man had once again regained his eternal habits. Who could imagine that such fountains of love rested in men’s hearts? It seemed to Himangshu that he had recovered from a very serious disease – everything around seemed wonderful. All the people were good too.
The next day was even more crowded. As the news spread, people from other villages came trooping in too. Himangshu felt amused – what made him turn so popular all of a sudden? But he could not take it anymore – he did not have even a minute to himself. The main reason for his arrival had still not been realized. In these two days, he did not find one free moment to speak to Sirajul. The village was about five miles from the railway station. He had come walking on the day of his arrival. On his return journey, no one listened to him. They brought a bullock-cart and made him sit upon it. The newly done up cart with a portable bamboo covering belonged to someone in the neighbourhood. It was dazzling in the early morning sunshine.

The bullock-cart screeched along slowly with a big group of people walking before and after it.

Golam Ali asked, “When will you come again?”
“I’ll come ---“ Himangshu could not say anything else. If he spoke any more then he would not be able to control the tears in his eyes.
Popping his head out of the cart he suddenly called, “Listen, uncle---“
The cart stopped. Golam Ali came next to him. Himangshu shoved the hundred rupee note that he had received from Taj Mohammad into the hands of the old man and said, “Uncle, see that the dargah at Bhalukghar is built. You must try like earlier times. This is my contribution.”

He knew that the job he held at the bookshop would not last long. He did not have even four annas to support himself and probably would have to land penniless in the streets soon. Such generosity on his part was not justified. He knew everything. Suddenly he remembered the prediction of his employer, “Go, if you want to. But you shall not be able to bring any money from Pakistan – they will snatch everything from you.” That was just what happened. There was no power in him to take money from here.

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