

Saksham

'The Capable'

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It was a cold and cloudy evening of December in the year 1982. Delhi, rather whole of northwest India, was shivering with windy chill. Hasmukh Lal was rushing towards his house on his motorcycle so as to enable himself reach home before onset of the rain. But he could not, in spite of his best efforts, as the rain was swifter. Nevertheless he had to face the rain for just a while, only near his home, and was saved from drenching, for which his decision to leave the office early proved quite right. On reaching home he parked the motorcycle and ran towards the interiors. Durga Devi was in the lobby, sitting on a couch, knitting something in pinkish wool. Hasmukh touched her feet, got her blessings, and rushed towards his room for changing.

Hasmukh, at that time was a young man, aged about 35. He was humble yet witty, intelligent yet polite, successful administrator having secured a good job in a reputed organization, but success had not reached his head. He had a great love for his family, which included his father, mother, brother and sister-in-law alongwith their three children, all girls; and, of course, a beautiful wife, who was also a working lady. His fondness to live in the joint family did deprive him of many an opportunities of more greener pastures away from home but declined by him. His father and brother looked after the shop owned by the family. They had a good house to live in a good locality, and all the members had very good understanding with one another and were bonded with true affection. These certainly are the characteristics of a happy and well to do family, especially in this part of the world. But, as they say, no one in this world is happy perfectly. So, does this family also have some shortcomings leading to some bad taste in their lives? They say that happiness is only a stage of mind. A person in a certain situation may be seen as happy while another in the same situation could be found complaining. To come to a conclusion let us snoop the conversation likely to start between mother and the son.

As soon as Hasmukh changed the wet clothes he saw Durga entering his room. He noticed a special feeling of love and care in her eyes, which he has always been showered upon, not by his mother alone but by all the members of the family; not only upon him but also upon all others, well reciprocated by the recipients.

‘It is too cold today, beta (Hindi for son). Are you okay?’ Honey oozed out from the mouth of Durga.

‘Yeah, mama, but I just came right in time, otherwise I would have caught cold’

‘What would you like to have, tea, coffee or something else, beta (son)?’

‘I think....nothing at the moment. Subhagini is expected any time now. Let us wait for her and shall take as per choice alongwith her.’

‘That is a great idea. Now when she is away would you give ears to me?’ Durga came straight to the point.

‘O sure mama, you can pull out both.’ It appears Hasmukh grasped the intentions and tried to avoid by feigning to become witty.

‘Ha ha ha, I don’t need them that way. You just listen carefully what I say, without jesting, and let them remain where they are, looking fine. Now be serious, okay?’

‘Okay mama, let me know how much serious you want me to be. Please don’t extend the limit lest I reach the hospital.’ Hasmukh did not budge. It clearly shows that he was aware what his mother wanted to discuss but he wanted to avoid.

‘No no my boy, don’t speak like that, it hurts me badly, my child.’ Durga could not tolerate damn thing like medically serious for his loving son, even while joking.

‘I know mama you will again start that topic’

‘Now what problem is in that topic? Is it not my right to demand a grandson from you?’

Oh mama, you already have three grand daughters. I think they are enough. Why are you demanding more?’

‘It is nice you love your nieces so much. What you don’t realize is the fact that howsoever affectionate nephews and nieces might be, they can’t be equated with own children. You don’t insist at this stage because you don’t have experienced how much they value. You will realize this only when you have one.’ Durga seemed to have decided to reach at a positive outcome right at that time. Hasmukh had been facing this situation earlier also. But today he was feeling that the matter can not be avoided for long, as Durga appeared adamant to reach at some conclusion.

‘You may be right mama.’ Hasmukh felt the need of decisive discussion. ‘But buying this logic means that my nieces will become less dear to me. And I don’t want a child who weakens this bond.’

‘Love does not diminish on getting additional child. Have you noticed any differentiation by the parents for their elder children? They continue receiving the same amount of love after they are blessed with additional siblings.’ It was not easy to defy Durga with such logics.

‘Mama desire for having more children is dependent on one’s satisfaction level. There certainly is a point when one thinks he does not need more children.’ Hasmukh had to forward something. ‘I have already reached that satisfaction level and don’t need more children. And you pleazzzzzzzzzz don’t insist.’

‘I wouldn’t have if you had even one. And even if you don’t need any, why do you deprive us of pleasure of having grandchildren?’

‘You already have three, mama. And be satisfied with them please, as they are amply capable of providing you that pleasure.’

‘But that does not entitle them to halt the process of legacy in your lineage.’ Durga was not ready to give up so easily.

‘My sweet mama, it is this love for legacy which has made us one of the most thickly populated countries of the globe. Now legacy of family is already continuing with bhai (brother) having his children.’

‘That is his lineage, and that too is also not continuing. Lineage is not continued with girls, a boy is needed for that, and Sansar is having daughters only. O God, please have mercy on us this time. Please bless Sansar with a son this time.’

‘Ok mama, God has not made any law that family lineage will continue with sons only. It is only we who think like that. Jawahar Lal Nehru had no son, but his family is still known as Nehru family. Mughals had so many children. Where is their legacy now? But if you still need a grandson I sincerely wish your God to respond to your wishes and bless you with a grandson. Happy now?’

‘That is a separate issue. If Sansar is blessed with a son how does it absolve you of your responsibility to get a son? Is it not in Shaastras (religious books) that every man has a responsibility to produce at least one son?’

‘Okay mama, if your Bhagwaan (God) has fixed responsibility on every man, including me, then why does not He bless me with a child. It is evident that He has spared me of this.’

‘Now don’t blame God, ok. When He puts you under test, and you are confronted with a problem then you have to use your mind, given by Him, and find a solution.’

‘There are many solutions, which have been tried by us, and you know that. The solution being given by you unethical, and you know it.’ Hasmukh’s voice contained a submissive appeal.

‘It sure is unethical if done for pleasure. But it is a compulsion or us? I love Subhagini so much that even my real daughter would not have fetched. We are not going to desert her. She will continue receiving the same affection. Moreover, being a working girl, she is financially independent. The destiny made her unfit to become a mother. But this fate can also be converted into good luck. You see if you become a father, she will also become a mother.’

‘She may or may not become mother but, I will surely make an ass of me. How ridiculous would it be to living with two wives! Mama this pleasant home will become a hell.’

‘The stigma you are attaching to is not social but just in your mind. The new bride I have chosen for you has accepted our decision gladly that Subhagini will keep staying in this home in the same capacity as of now. Subhagini, told me that she is ready to do anything for making this house a happy home and that she is willing to receive her happily. I know many a people with two wives living happily. Your fears of any disturbance in the atmosphere of the family are unfounded. All my three daughters-in-law will live in this house like real sisters. Now when all, including Subhagini, are ready, it is only on your part to agree and let me proceed further for the good of us all. Please beta, don’t disappoint me’

‘Happiness of the other people mentioned by you can be guessed only after meeting them. I know many who have made their own lives hell. In my opinion 95 percent people in such cases are not happy, and the remaining 5 percent are happy because they don’t have the sensibility to differentiate between happiness and gloom.’

Durga could not continue the argument as she heard the sound of footsteps outside the room. As expected, it was Subhagini. Her cloths were wet. She touched the feet of Durga, wished Hasmukh and entered the dressing room. She continued from the room:

‘Mama it is too cold and I am wet. Can I have a cup of tea made by the sweet hands of yours?’

‘Sure, and you need not to indulge in buttering for that, ok. You change and come outside, the tea will be ready by then.’

Durga moved went out. Hasmukh kept watching her going out with a peculiar feeling. It is not that he was dead against children. But her wife was not fit to conceive. They were also trying the new technology, namely IVF, but results were not favorable. That is the reason why Durga was insisting for second marriage of her son. After all she also belonged to the same Indian society, a major portion of which thinks on the lines she was thinking; for whom the world finishes if they don’t have any son; they think they can live after their death if continuity of their lineage does not break. And then who would look after them in their old ages? You know there is no provision for old age pension for all in India. But a small portion of the society was not buying these arguments, and Hasmukh was one of them. As he was lost in the ideas he could not notice when Subhagini changed the dress and came out. He came to his senses only when she quipped:

‘Seem a bit disturbed today.’

‘How that concerns you?’ Now she realized that he was also a bit angry.

‘What is the matter? She asked politely with a feeling of concern clearly visible in her eyes.

‘Has the bond of emotions and understanding between us exhausted?’ He put a counter question.

‘Not from my side. And I have also not felt it from your side. What is the matter?’ She looked a little worried now.

‘I can’t tolerate a third person in our relations. How could you agree for that?’ He was straight forward.

‘Oh. That is the matter. Unhhh...in fact I did not have courage to refuse mama straight away in view of her emotions and expectations she had from me. Of what use is my life when I am not in a position to make her happy?’ She seemed a bit frustrated and resigned.

‘It is true that emotions of elders should be valued and acceded to,’ he relented and soothed her, ‘but ethics cannot be sacrificed at the altar of emotions. I know our mama is sensitive, but she is intelligent enough to see the reason. I will make her understand what is the right path to tread in this situation. Will you cooperate with me?’

‘Has ever come a time when I refused cooperation?’ she smiled with tears in her eyes.

‘Mom is having ‘childomania,’ he wiped her tears with gentle touch of his fingers.

‘What does that ‘miss-mean’?’ she also tried to change the mood.

‘Mad for a child. But if confronted time and again with similar situation I shall sure catch ‘childophobia.’

‘But you don’t dislike the children.’

‘Yes, but does that mean that life would stand still in the absence of children, I mean one’s own children?’

The conversation was disturbed with arrival of Durga with tea tray in her hands. They took tea with pretension as if nothing of that sort had ever been discussed. But atmosphere had become quite heavy due to this all, for all the three, so much so that they did not ask about the absence of other family members. It was only when they finished that Hasmukh bothered to ask:

‘Mom, where is bhabhiji (Brother’s wife) and children?’

‘Pratha has gone with Sansar somewhere and children have gone for tuition.’

‘But bhai (brother) is supposed to be at the shop at this time. Where have they gone?’

‘I have no idea, they did not tell me.’ Durga tried to avoid.

‘Bad guys. They should have told.’

Durga was not that naive to be unable to understand the hidden sarcasm in Hasmukh's tone, but she kept mum, with smile hidden in her eyes.

Durga went out of the room after taking tea but not before showering blessings on both. Hasmukh and Subhagini remained in their room thinking over the situation and for appropriate solution to the problem so that their small happy home is not broken and relations with other members also continue to be cordial. When their brain felt exhausted they decided to postpone the thinking and to indulge in some lighter activity. Subhagini picked up a magazine and Hasmukh came out of the room and started watching an interesting but irritating program on TV in the lobby, where three girls were also playing. Yes, it was irritating because as soon as his attention reached at the peak there flashed the commercial break. During such break he toggled through other channels but was alert enough to switch back to his favorite program well in time, but only to miss the majority of the voice under the noise of children playing there. Just when he was changing the channels aimlessly he saw Sansar and Pratha coming in. Hasmukh got an opportunity to use his leisure time more effectively.

‘Aha, bhai...bhabhi good evening. After so long I have seen both coming together after an outing. Gone for shopping or for picnic?’

‘No yaar, nothing of that sort.’ Sadness was clearly written on the face of Sansar.

Pratha was also not happy; both just walked away into their room without much responsiveness, contrary to the general routine. Hasmukh could not find any clue for their gloomy faces, and also did not think it fit to ask for the reason right at that moment. As he was probing the possible reasons for their behavior he saw Azad Singh entering the lobby. Hasmukh touched his feet and asked:

‘Hello pitaji (papa), today you are too late.’

‘Yes beta, today there was great rush at the shop and Saansar was also not there, I alone had to handle all the work, have they come back?’

‘Yeah. Seems they are busy in some important work. But why were they sad?’

‘What? Were they sad?’ Face of Azad Singh clearly showed the change of mood from anxious to gloomy, indicating that he knew what the matter was. And suddenly the picture started to be clear to Hasmukh as well. He asked the children to stop playing, go inside and do their homework, for which they agreed to, obediently. Now father and son were free to discuss the issue.

‘That means, pitaji, you know what the matter is. That means.....pregnancy test.....or we can say sex determination test.....Oh my God, a girl child again.’

‘It seems so, beta. I can’t understand why God is so harsh on us?’

‘Pitaji, you too! It is not expected from you. Anyhow, the matter is serious and needs immediate attention. You order the family to assemble here, right now, lest it is too late.’

Azad came to his own general self; not bothering much for any thing, taking the things as they come and continue enjoying the life. It is true that sometimes he also exhibits the feelings generally shown by the majority of people, dying if not blessed with children, nay.....sons. But that can be attributed to the love he has got for his family. And that is the reason that such feelings don't last long. He readily went out and called Sansar, Pratha and Durga in the lobby. Hasmukh turned off the TV and started:

'You people won't stop, huh. Did the efforts of that holy saint not bear fruit? Now why don't you ask him or some other person or some exorcist to change the girl child in the womb to a boy?'

No one replied. Silence remained for a few moments.

'Now don't deride. You guide for future course of action' Durga, though lady-in-chief of the house, could say only this.

'Mama, seriously, will you please agree with me now? We already have three children, but still we are not satisfied because there is no son. Now please stop after birth of this girl and don't imperil bhabhiji's health. I think four girls can surely fill the void for the son in our thoughts?'

'Filling of that void will be taken care off later. At this juncture we are to think how to get rid of this nuisance.' Durga hinted her intentions.

'What? To get rid of the nuisance? You mean abortion? No, mama it is not expected from a person like you. Now, as per your version mama, she is the gift of God, why don't we accept it happily?'

'Be practical, Hasmukh.' never had Hasmukh seen Durga talking in such a harsh tone. 'You know loads of money is needed to raise a girl, a lot more is required in her marriage and all is given to some one else alongwith the daughter. And Sansar has already got three. How much further liabilities can we afford?'

'And another day you said mama that girl is the incarnation of Lakshami (goddess of wealth). And you keep on lecturing me on the necessity of children, for which it was my duty to go for second marriage. Is this the love for offsprings?'

'I told you to be practical, you know? Don't get emotional for the unborn ok.' Durga was determined.

'And what about the risk involved?' Hasmukh was not ready to quit.

'That has been discussed. The doctor has ensured that at the moment much risk is not involved.' Sansar seemed a bit relieved now.

‘Okay, let me suggest a way out. How if this girl is welcomed and is given to me for adoption.’ Hasmukh used the last weapon.

‘Are you not the member of this family? Then how the burden of the family would diminish? I told you not to be emotional for the unborn. By adopting a girl you can feel relieved now, but when the body will grow old you will feel the need of a son. Only then you will realize the value of my concerns, but that will be too late for you. Better you consider my other proposal and father a son?’ Durga was still not in her usual self.

‘Ok, suppose I agree to it but am also blessed with girls only, then what about the additional burden?’ Hasmukh was not ready to surrender tamely.

‘Are we so sinful that we will have to be content with girls only? God is not so cruel.’

‘If birth of girls is the result of some sins mama then expectation of fourth girl indicates we are sinful.. But now God has also provided us with an opportunity to convert the sin into goodness. No sin is bigger than female foeticide. Let this child see the world. I am feeling the desire to have a daughter now.’

Silence prevailed for some time, but change in mood was seen clearly on the faces of all .

‘But would Subhagini agree to it?’ Durga relented at last.

‘Yes mama, I am ready.’ Subhagini entered the room, smiling.

‘Okay beta, God bless you. May He bless you with your own children too. Do all agree to the proposal?’ Durga asked to others present. All nodded in affirmative. Happiness returned to their faces as before, rather more vigorously, as Hasmukh was likely to become a responsible father now. They knew that the blessing of a daughter, though adopted one, would be a source of great happiness in their life.

What they were not knowing was that Sneha, the elder daughter of Sansar was listening to this all secretly, like Subhagini did, but behind another door.

Time passed by and that moment approached when the girl, planned to be slaughtered before her birth, eventually survived to see this world, may be with grace of God or with the help of her uncle and aunt, nay parents to be. That happened to be normal delivery. The whole family was happy, except the other three girls. The elder girl was by now thirteen and she could make the younger siblings understand the situation. And all the three were nurturing a sense of hatred for the family attitude. Soon Hasmukh and Subhagini adopted the newborn girl, but the poor chaps could not realize that all this had enraged the elder children. They were all busy in celebrations. A small gathering was arranged in which some close relatives and friends, alongwith the colleagues of Hasmukh and of Subhagini, participated. Mr. Verma, the immediate senior of Hasmukh, who had joined the office just recently, also attended alongwith his wife. The wife, naturally, was to be attended with special hospitality. And Subhagini knew the job well. And her personality was such that the wife befriended her in a few moments, and it looked as if they were old acquaintances. Hasmukh was also busy in introducing his guests to his boss. And Subhagini and Mrs. Verma were surrounded by the ladies for light chat. Mrs. Verma started:

‘Mr. Verma was telling that your husband is of very jolly nature.’

‘You are absolutely right madam. And that is due to me’ chirped Subhagini. The baby girl started some movements in her lap; it appeared she had just woken up. Subhagini tried to make her sleep and the baby again fell asleep.

‘How is that due to you Subhagini?’ Questioned Mrs. Verma.

‘Simple, I keep him happy, you know I am a good wife.’

‘Ha Ha, that surely you are. Okay was yours a love marriage or.....’

‘No madam, it was ‘Lubh’ marriage.’ Hasmukh interfered as he and Mr. Verma were passing by. ‘You know in Punjabi ‘lubh’ means ‘to find’.

‘Oh I see.’ Laughed Mr. Verma. So did the ladies. ‘And for a happy married life permanent understanding between the husband and wife is more important than love, which may be temporary in nature in some cases.’

‘And understanding we have in between us quite abundantly.’

‘That is great, it should be.’

You see sir, when she is happy I am also happy and when she is sad I am also sad.’

‘That is the right approach, sir.’ Mrs Verma acknowledged.

‘Thanks madam, now let me elaborate, ok. When I am in the house she is sad, I am also sad; and when I am outside the house she is happy and I am also happy.’

All laughed. Both the men then moved ahead for some more snacks. Till now all initial formalities for receiving the guests etc. were over; also the guests had started helping themselves for snacks. Some had indulged in gossiping. Mr. Verma and Hasmukh were now busy in conversation.

‘If you don’t mind Mr. Hasmukh may I have some discussion over this adoption?’ Mr. Verma started the topic.

‘Sure, sir, please ask whatever you like.’

‘I have heard that your views regarding children are altogether different as compared to those of general people of this part of the world.’

‘No, not that different, sir. I also like children, but also understand the social responsibility that they should not be a burden on the society, the nation or the world. My liking for the kids does not transform into a craze to own them at any cost. It is good if one raises a family with planning. In case you are not blessed with children owing to some biological disorders I am also not against taking proper medical treatment. But in case you still don’t get blessed then, in my opinion, that is not an end of the world, as is the case for some, rather many, in India.’

‘That means you don’t bother about family lineage.’

‘Yes, that simply is a mirage, following which we have increased our population to an explosive level. People think that their name would remain in this world through their children, rather sons. But what they don’t consider is the fact that after some time your name would not be remembered by anybody, including your children. You see how many people know the names of their forefathers after third fourth generation? And if you are so concerned about your name then better do something worth it, like Bhagat Singh, Subhash, Gandhi, Tagore or other great personalities have done.’

‘But in India, you know, there is no system for sufficient support for elderly people, like old age pension and old age homes, in the absence of which the only hope for support is from a son.’

‘That is really a cause of concern in our country. But to consider that the son would definitely help you in your difficult time is also not a foolproof idea. I have seen many people whose sons quarreled with parents for claiming their share in their property, and after taking that did not bother to take care of them. And if you are wise, honest and lucky then son or daughter of someone else can also come forward for your assistance.’

‘Yeah, your views are quite good. I also have similar ideas. My arguments were just to look into your mind.’

The party continued till past midnight as the next day was Sunday. The only persons to leave the party early and go to bed were the three daughters of Sansar, but nobody noticed it.

Although Hasmukh and Subhagini were not giving as much importance to fostering a child, yet the entry of the small baby girl in their lives made a big emotional change. Rajni, the younger daughter of Sansar was born after their marriage and Subhagini was quite instrumental in her bringing up. But that was just letting a helping hand to Pratha, while this time she was playing a lead role. She was feeling more closeness with this child as compared to Rajni. Her life became more busy, but more charming as well. The child did prove that it was quite capable of developing an emotional bond with the parents, either natural or foster ones. She was named Saksham, which in Hindi means 'capable'. She was looked after by Pratha, Durga and bigger sisters, or, say, cousins, when Subhagini had gone to her bank for her routine job. But her joy would know no bounds when told that the girl missed her in her absence. Before adoption of this girl she had cursed the God many a times for leaving her medically unfit for conceiving. But now she had the satisfaction that she had become mother.

Time passed by quite smoothly for whole of the family and a year passed in no time. But, as we all know, the time does not remain similar for all the time. Change is its nature. In Subhagini's case it came as transfer of Hasmukh to Mumbai. The transfer was a shock, not only to Subhagini but to Hasmukh as well, rather to whole of the family. The family was having so close a bond that no one had ever thought of living separately. That is the reason that the whole family became sad for his transfer in stead of being happy for the big jump he was getting due to the promotion he got alongwith. The family members insisted him to decline the promotion, but that was not easy for Hasmukh as his full career was at stake. Moreover, he was entitled to the accommodation at company's expense, due to which he was spared of the botheration of finding a house in the city like Mumbai. The employer bank of Subhagini had many a branches in Mumbai. Hence there was a great possibility for her transfer also. And at such an executive post they had no problem in making frequent visits to the family. Persuasion on these lines helped the family members accept the decision. Otherwise also no one was having any desire or will to oppose the views expressed by Hamukh.

Initially Hamukh went alone. But soon Subhagini was able to get herself transferred. She found life in Mumbai very tough due to hectic traveling; her bank being far away from the accommodation provided by the company to Hasmukh. The congested roads and traffic jams make the journey much more longer than the actual kilometers involved. There was no one, who could be termed as their own, to look after Saksham when away from home for office duty. Yes, they did manage an ayah, but a servant is, after all, a servant and cannot be a substitute to a family member. But she was still happy, as she had now good family, a family of her own. Her happiness had, sometimes, bouts of sadness also. 'Would there have been more love and affection for a girl born to her as compared to Saksham?' she used to think. She would herself negate the feeling with a big no for such a stupid idea. 'How can a natural daughter be more lovable than a doll like Saksham?' she would say to herself. She was optimistic for life by nature. She had developed a habit for enjoying the half-full glass instead of cursing the half-empty, especially after marriage, in the company of Hasmukh.

Although life style in Mumbai was quite different as compared to that of the combined family home, yet both adapted to the new situation. Initially they made quick visits to home in Delhi but slowly the frequency diminished. After all it was not easy for them to spare time, money and energy for the visits. Problem back home was also similar. Sansar was unable to spare time, as it was he who had to look after the shop. Azad had to be there for his son's help and was not able to pay a visit to Mumbai even though he liked to. Same was the case with Durga, as she was alone for helping Pratha in maintaining the family and the house. But these problems did not lessen the strength of bond between the two families, if we can say so, as they did not consider themselves to be members of two families, but of one family only. The link between the two sides, however, continued through telephone calls, although STD was very expensive those days as compared to now. The geographical distance could not increase the emotional distance; rather it was the opposite in this case. The condition of the family could well be described as enviable by the neighbors as no other family could dream of such a good relations amongst themselves, and those who had, were not as well off and were confronted with many other problems. But was the family really happy; or we can put it, 'Were all the members of the family really happy?' The answer can be found in the situation described in forthcoming pages.

The family had everything which is needed for a happy home; good income, good relations amongst the members, good health of all of them, sweet children. What else is the definition of happiness? For an ordinary person that might be. But for Durga, Sansar and Pratha, this all was not sufficient. What value all the riches, property and valuables have got if no one is available to inherit and enjoy it after their lives? The girls, you know, are not the legitimate heirs of the family heritage. What if the law accepts them as legal heirs, they are not to remain family members forever. After their marriage they have to move to their in-laws, to 'others' house. And hard earned money would be grabbed by the 'other' people. To keep the property intact in the family a son is a must. As a matter of fact a son is needed not only in Sansar's home but also in Hasmukh's. Although they are considered as one joint family, but for this purpose they are separate entities. Now Hasmukh does not have the requisite sensibility to understand and evaluate this need. Perhaps excessive education and intelligence has taken its toll and he has lost the ability to understand this. Then, at least Sansar must have a son. Otherwise who would the girls call as their brother, and who would receive them and their husbands in their parents house after their marriage? But even Sansar, who is wise enough to understand this all, is not being blessed with one despite enormous efforts. In such situation how can they be happy? Last time they had applied all available methods known to them for conceiving a male child, including medication from the quacks, exorcism, blessings of holy souls and naming the third girl as 'Rajni' alias 'Rajjo' meaning that they were now content with girls and need a boy. But all of them failed and again a girl was born. Perhaps it was the result of attitude of Hasmukh, who did not believe that. Even if he did not have faith, he should not have ridiculed the exercise.

Time was running out fast for them but they were finding no solution. Durga tried to persuade him to go to some other holy soul for the blessing and try their luck again, but Sansar and Pratha could not gather confidence and were in dilemma to go ahead, lest the experiment fails again and they are burdened with one more girl. This time, owing to their age, even abortion would not be that safe. As such they were looking for a solid proposition, which should have no chances of any failure. Otherwise they were ready to reconcile with their destiny. But destiny was not so harsh to deny them any opportunity. It was another routine day for Sansar in his shop when Sukhikar, a so-called social worker, visited him. He was not to buy anything from the shop, rather was to sell an idea. God knows from where such people gather such information and utilize for their benefits in the garb of helping others through social work.

'A new technique has been developed,' explained Sukhikar to Sansar, 'which is not yet available in India. But Dr. Aroop has tied up with some foreign doctors. They come and make the people like you make breathe for life again.'

'But how much are the chances of success and how much is the expenditure involved,' Sansar expressed his doubts.

'Expenditure must, naturally, be high. That will have to be discussed with the doctor. But, you know, what meaning the wealth has got if there is no one to inherit it. As far as

success rate is concerned, let me advise you to have faith in the almighty. When you have not done anything to hurt any unprivileged then why should He be so cruel to deny you this happiness?’

‘But is it sure that the child would be male child only?’

‘That is the wonder of the technique. Dr. Aroop will explain it to you. But don’t discuss it with anybody. You know these bloody jealous people oppose such activities in the garb of ethics. They have managed to persuade Govt. for enacting a law to prevent such practices. Now all this is done under the curtain.’

‘When will the doctor be available?’

‘Let me fix an appointment’

Sukhikar then dialed some numbers, made some conversations and turned happily to Sansar.

‘Congratulations, we are lucky. A foreign doctor has just arrived and would not be available for long. We should not waste time and go immediately. It appears God is with us.’

Sansar wasted no time. Azad Singh was there to look after the shop. With great enthusiasm Sansar was now sitting in front of Dr. Aroop, who explained him about the technique

‘See, let me tell you about the procedure being used. You know that sex of the would be child depends upon the chromosomes of the fertilizing sperm.’ Dr. was explaining with the aid of a chart in raw way so as to enable a layman also understand it. ‘The semen consists of sperms with two types of chromosomes; X chromosomes and Y-chromosomes. The female egg is fertilized by one of these sperms. If it is fertilized with X chromosome sperms then a girl is born. In case Y chromosome fertilizes it then a boy takes birth. In our technique we get the Y-chromosomes separated and get the fertilization done with Y sperms only. But be careful, we do not take up this job as a profession. It is Sukhikarji, for whom we have a great regard. On the insistence of him I have agreed to go ahead, otherwise this technique is not proper ethically and we do not practice it.’

‘Yes doctor, I can understand.’ Sansar was extremely obliged. ‘A man like Sukhikar in anybody’s list of friends is a priceless asset. I am lucky to have him.’

‘And you know, the process is to be carried out by an expert who is a foreign doctor, the expenditure for the procedure would be a bit high. I think you would be in a position to afford it.’

‘Yeah, Sukhikarji explained it. Now for such things one cannot bother much about expenditure. All I wish is that may God bless you with the credit for the birth of my son.’

‘Okay, you come tomorrow alongwith your wife. We will have to perform some tests upon her, and upon you as well. And hope, with grace of God, we shall be successful.’

Sansar was not in position to understand why so much time was being taken to reach home today. And on reaching home he went straight to Pratha, with his eyes glowing with hope. Soon, the same glow could be seen in Pratha’s, and then in Durga’s eyes as well. Sneha, the elder daughter, had no confusion about the reason for this delight in the eyes of elders in her house. After all she is not a kid now; she is thirteen by now. And the younger children had a great love and regard for her.

The efforts bore fruit. With so much medical care and after overcoming many obstacles there seemed the twilight. Durga was waiting eagerly for the phone call. Only a few moments ago she had been told that the delivery was not normal and Caesarian operation was to be performed. From then on she continued praying, with an ear on the phone bell. She was so engaged in her prayers that she could not find time to feed the children on their return from school, and asked them to take care of themselves. Now, why can't they bear such a trifling bothering when they are going to get the greatest gift of their lives? You know, which other gift is more valuable for a girl, especially in India, than a gift in the shape of a brother? The girls also did not put any pressure to be fed by Durga, they were otherwise known for their insistence, especially after returning from school. They simply went to the kitchen, picked up whatsoever eatables they found and went to their room.

And when the news came she felt as if her heart was eager to come out through her mouth. She wished that her whole family been there to be with her at such a happy time. But she had only the children for her company. Hasmukh had intimated that he would be reaching by the evening. She was waiting eagerly for him. But it was still only early afternoon. Had Azad Singh agreed for keeping the shop closed today she could have shared the happiness with him. Now she was left with the girls to express how much happy she was. She rushed to their room and broke the news that they had been blessed with a brother. She kissed and hugged them one by one and asked them to thank God for the blessing they have been conferred upon. The happiness was so enormous that she felt no need to watch the reaction of the children. Out did she go, for breaking the news in the neighborhood, alongwith a packet of sweets. And her well-wishers in the neighborhood were already waiting for the occasion very eagerly. They were also happy when the news was broken to them.

For a long time Durga remained in the neighborhood. Whenever she was about to return back home some other lady would come out from her house and would convey her congratulations. She was so eager to see her grandson but she had to suppress her wish as the doctors had not yet allowed anybody near him. Her happiness was uncontrollable and the feeling did not let her sit in the house peacefully. She wanted to tell whole of the world how happy she was. And when the box containing the sweets exhausted she, alongwith a few elderly ladies, returned to the house to fetch more and distribute in the neighborhood and share her joy with them. To her pleasant surprise she saw a taxi halting in front of her house. She was so glad to see Hasmukh alighting from the taxi. She rushed to hug him and break the news on him, which he reciprocated by showing a great joy on his face. He also accepted the greetings from the other ladies, who also enquired about Subhagini and Saksham. He paid the taxi bill and all went in.

As they opened the door of the lobby they were aghast to see the scene, never really ready for that. The three girls were lying dead on the floor of the lobby. Their faces and body bore a bluish tinge and there were signs of vomiting in the room. Durga and other ladies could not stop their shrieks. Hasmukh, howsoever lion hearted he might have been, started trembling like a discarded leaf. He was not in a position to understand what

had happened. Stunned he sat on the ground with his back touched to a wall, without noticing that a big piece of paper was glued there, right over his head, which read:

“You got what you wanted. Now what is the need of unwanted?”

The incident was never bearable for a family like the one we are acquainted with. What to say about such a gentle family, even the hard criminals would not have been in a position to endure such a pain and stigma. Pratha was still in the hospital. They were not in a position to tell her anything, as she was not in position to bear the shock. In fact they were not in position to decide what to do. They were just wailing and watching the people come and go. They kept wailing even when the police came, and did not raise any question when the bodies were lifted for the post-mortem. It was only with the intervention of a family friend and old colleague of Hasmukh that he had to forget about the grief and see the reality that the family was in big soup due to this incident. The friend whispered in his ear that the police was going to investigate the matter and was planning to charge them with Abetment to Suicide.

Hasmukh did not have to face such a situation earlier in his life, but knew how to handle it. He had no time for mourning now. He went straight to the civil hospital alongwith a tout, readily available in such cases, where he recorded his statement with the investigating officer. A wade of currency notes was enough for the investigating officer to drop the charges and show sympathy with the family. Hasmukh had never come across the meanness of this degree where one can bake his toast even on burning pyre of someone. But the world goes on like this, where you have to interact with the good, the bad and the ugly, not as per your wishes, but as the situation prevails. And when three pyres were lit amidst an ocean of people, only a few out of them known to the family, majority thronged out of curiosity to have a glimpse of the dare-devil children, who did not provide anyone an iota of suspicion of their intentions, the atmosphere became so heavy that even strangers could not control their tears. Only Pratha, who was in recovery room after the Caesarian, was not aware of what was in store for her. Only the time would tell how would she reconcile with the fate.

And she could know only on the day of Kriya (last rites). She was inconsolable. Had she been told that her gift of son would be so costly she would certainly have declined that politely. She was upset that why she, even though mother of them, could not read the feelings of the children. And so was the whole family. They had lost their dear ones, all right, that does hurt. But the stigma attached to the act of the children was not letting them show their faces to the world. The people approaching them for condolence appeared to them as if taunting them. But if during such conversation someone asked about the newly born boy, the family got scared. They felt as if the person asking such questions was accusing the child of all the happenings. But what was the fault of the innocent if he was brought to the world with such a curiosity? There might have been some people who had not liked their attitude for male child. But their intentions while expressing sympathy were not doubtful. It was the situation through which the family was passing that even the sympathy expressed by the well wishers appeared to them as if they were being jeered at.

It is not difficult to imagine the degree to which the shock and stigma was unbearable for them all. But mental agony they were going through was forcing them to reconcile with the situation as soon as possible. Circumstances were compelling them to forget all that happened like a horrible dream. Initially they were not in position to face the society for

the act of the children. But soon they had to realize that it was not their absolute fault. Their intentions were not bad. Rather it was sheer bad luck that they had to confront with such a situation. They were not hypocrites or shameless, and hence were much concerned about their prestige. They were not in position to face the embarrassment of the society, and, in order to avoid that, were planning to leave Delhi and settle somewhere else so as to enable them hide somewhere, away from the acquainted ones. But settling in another city, and that too in such a hurry, was not possible; they had to drop the idea. And with passage of time, when interaction with people continued, the stigma appeared to be leaving their souls.

Hasmukh and Subhagini were not willing to leave the family yet. But how long could they stay back? After all they had to look after their offices as well. And, moreover, they were not in a position to undo what had happened. And when the period of mourning was customarily over Sansar and Durga also asked them to go and look after their jobs. Perhaps they were getting themselves ready to face at their own. But before going back Hasmukh had a piece of advice for the family.

‘Although the children have committed the act which one can associate with the newly born, yet the child has no fault of his.’ Advised he. ‘Please take care that bringing up of the child is not disturbed due to some misunderstanding or complex.’

‘No, no. What fault is this small kid at? He will certainly fetch the deserved attention and care.’ Durga replied.

With heavy heart they had to see them off.

Although bad time takes much longer to pass, yet its passing brings a great relief with it. Perhaps that is why it is called a great healer. And as the time passed by the life returned to normalcy for all the members of the family. It is true that the incident did not stop haunting them till today in one corner of their hearts or the other, though a year has passed by. But nobody let the feelings overtake their senses. They all preferred not to discuss or remember the incident. And despite the burden of the incident they have now started laughing, joking and enjoying the life. Let us have a look at Hasmukh's family after one year of that incident.

Saksham is three years old now. She speaks more clearly as compared to the other children of her age. She is a lovely child. Today Hasmukh and Subhagini have come to a good school for her admission in Nursery. They filled up some forms and went in an office. Saksham was not aware what was happening. All she new was that she was joining the school and that she would no longer need to remain with the ayah for a full long day, but would be at liberty to play with other children in the school. And that is the reason why she was so eager to join the school. And when the lady in the office saw her face glowing with enthusiasm, unlike other kids, who normally resisted coming to school or kept weeping in such situations, she was quite impressed with her attitude.

'Would you like to join our school?' she asked.

'Yes madam.' Subhagini had taught her to address the ladies in the school as madam.

'Ok, fine. May I know your name please?'

'Sachham.' No child of her age could pronounce more clearly

'And what is your mother's name?'

'Subhagini' she pronounced quite rightly though with a bit difficulty.

'And your papa's?'

'Listen please'

The teacher could not understand what Saksham had said. Subhagini started laughing, which increased the curiosity of the teacher.

'You know, madam, it is a custom in most of the households in India that the ladies do not call their husbands by name, except, off course in ultra modern families. We are still not that modern. That is why I do not call my husband by name. And when I have to call him I generally call like that, 'listen please.'

The teacher also could not control laughter. She gave Saksham a chocolate and started filling some other forms for admission and deposit of fee etc. Saksham readily put the chocolate in her mouth and started munching and jumping. Suddenly she started crying,

with her mouth open, half munched chocolate lying on her tongue and tears rolling down her cheeks.

‘What happened to my child?’ enquired Subhagini.

Saksham continued with her wails.

‘Did you cut you tongue?’

Saksham nodded in affirmative.

‘Okay, that is really sad. You have full right to weep. Okay, now listen for a while. I don’t say you stop crying. But it would be better if you first munch and swallow the chocolate and then weep. You know weeping with mouth full does not look nice.’

Saksham stopped crying, munched the chocolate and then swallowed. And when finished, she again started crying. But she could not understand why the Teacher, Subhagini and Hasmukh were laughing.

Saksham proved quite good in studies. Her IQ was good. She also had a good taste for learning. Further, her parents were extremely supportive. They did not rebuke her if she asked questions, sometimes childlike, sometimes childish. They used to guide her for better utilization of time and resources. They also did not mind in telling her, at an appropriate time, that she was their adopted daughter and that her natural parents were Sansar and Pratha, whom she used to call badey papa (elder papa) and badey mummy. But the time was not yet considered ripe for telling her about the three elder sisters.

With Saksham joining the school the routine life of her parents also changed. Earlier they used to visit Delhi as and when they had an opportunity. But now they could not do so lest the study routine of the child is affected. Now they could plan their visit only during her vacations, although Saksham, of late did not show much enthusiasm in these visits. How could she, as Kuldipak, her cousin did not show any respect or love for her? She was elder and stronger than him. But how could she say something when the house belonged to him? And it pained when her aunt, uncle or grandma ignored the high handedness of the boy.

The advice of Hasmukh to the family not to consider the boy guilty for what had happened was taken a bit too seriously. And as the time passed by, the pain of the incident continued to diminish and being replaced by the joy of having a son, their own son, who could carry their legacy. In their inability to mark the limit where love coincides with the line of confrontation or where the childhood crosses the tenderness and enters the childish stubbornness, they were not even aware what damage they were doing to the attitude of the boy. His refusal to obey was considered as cuteness and a source of joy. His slapping and kicking was laughed upon. Damage done by him to his costly toys or to the domestic articles was ignored. Thrashing of the children of his age at his hands, or even bigger ones, was a thing of pride. Hasmukh and Subhagini, when in Delhi, tried to persuade them desist from such behavior, but they were not living with them and could not have any control over the affairs when living so far away. The boy was admitted to a school, had a good IQ, no doubt. But he did not have much enthusiasm to learn and study. Even his class teachers were not having courage to persuade him, as he would be enraged over trifles and disturb the whole class.

Suksham was seven now and was in Delhi alongwith her parents due to summer vacations in her school. Hasmukh and Subhagini had planned their leave accordingly. She was sitting in lobby alongwith Subhagini, who was reading a book, when Kuldipak came in alongwith a pup. The pup was very small and cute. But Kuldipak was finding amusement in irritating the poor thing. For a while Saksham watched his activities. But she could not resist herself and asked him not to tease the pup. But Kuldipak was not in any mood to oblige her. He continued with his mischief, rather he found annoyance on the face of Saksham a source of joy for him. Subhagini was watching this all. She hit upon a plan to save the situation.

‘Okay, Dipu,’ she proposed, ‘will you like to play a game?’

‘Oh yes, oh yes, sure.’ Kuldipak was so excited. ‘But which game, aunt?’

‘You and Saksham will play with the pup alternatively. Behavior of both of you with the pup will be watched and you will be treated exactly as you behave.’

‘Okay. Let first Saksham take her turn’ as if he wanted to watch and learn the rules.

Saksham obliged. She came forward, picked up the pup, took her in her lap, touched it with her soothing hands and showered affection. She then looked towards Subhagini for the outcome of her behavior. She got the same treatment from Subhagini.

‘Now it is your turn, Dipu.’ Subhagini was hopeful that Kuldipak would follow suit.

And that appeared to be true. Kuldipak went to the pup, picked it up with care and started soothing it. But suddenly his eyes started glowing with mischief. He slapped the pup with the force he could exert. The pup started shrieking. Kuldipak started laughing as he had befooled his aunt.

‘Now you will also have to take a slap on your face, Dipu.’ Subhagini controlled herself and kept smiling.

‘No, I won’t’ Kuldipak started going out of the room.

‘Then you would not be considered as a good sportsman, you know? And we shall call you a cheat.’

‘No, I am not a cheat. Well, slap me, but don’t slap with that force, okay.’

Subhagini gave him a polite slap, as if with love, on his cheeks. He was happy that he was not a loser. He had acted in a manner of his liking and also did not have to be got defeated by the girl, in front of her mother.

Durga came in on hearing the shrieks of the pup. And when she entered the lobby she was happy to see Kuldipak playing with Subhagini and Saksham.

‘Okay, aunt, if I slap the pup, you would slap me. If I pull the ears of the pup?’

‘Then I will pull your ears. And if you pull its leg, I will pull yours, and if you pull its hair, I will pull yours.’ Subhagini elaborated.

‘Okay then.’ With a fresh mischief in his eyes he went to the pup. He got hold off its tail and pulled it up vigorously. The pup started shrieking again. Kuldipak started laughing loudly. But Subhagini was concerned that Durga was also supporting him. At this juncture Sansar and Hasmukh came there.

‘You see the intelligence of this boy, Sansar. When Subhagini threatened him that he would be meted out exactly the same treatment that he would mete out to the pup, he

thought for a while and pulled the tail of the pup. Now how can you pull his tail, dear daughter-in-law? You see how intelligent the boy is? After all whose grandson is he?’

‘Mine’ Azad was standing in the door, looking proudly towards Kuldipak.

‘Grandpa, where have you been today? Why did you go out alone? I was to accompany you.’ He started kicking and slapping Azad.

‘No, no. Good children don’t slap and kick the elders, okay.’

‘Then you should have taken me along. I know you went in a marriage party.’

‘But you were to attend summer camp in your school.’

‘No, I won’t go to school anymore. I will go to the marriage party.’

‘Okay, but now there is no marriage party.’

‘Then arrange one’

‘At such a short notice? But whose marriage can be arranged in no time?’

‘Mine’

‘Yours? So early? But with whom?’

‘With grandma.’

‘Has anybody ever wedded grandma?’ Azad could not help control laughter.

‘Yes, you have, grandpa’

‘But, boy, she is not my grandma, ok.’

‘Grandma is papa’s mom, right? My papa married my mom, right? Now I will marry papa’s mom.’

All appreciated the aptitude and reasoning of Kuldipak. But Subhagini and Hasmukh had strange feelings on their faces.

Pratha was not in a good mood today. She had been feeling for quite some time that Kuldeepak was being spoilt due to ignoring of his adamant nature by them. He needed good counseling for making amends in his attitude. Not only a piece of advice but even some rebuke, if needed. But she used to ignore only with the hope that with passage of time the boy would become mature enough to understand the difference in good and bad. Time was passing, ok, but the required maturity was not forthcoming. It is not that he was not in a position to understand. But the problem was that he did not have intentions to understand. He had developed a nature that he would feel happy by inflicting trouble upon others. She had been receiving constant complaints from his school authorities regarding his bad habits. Every other day he would beat a child or inflict insult on his teachers. Sometimes he would disobey them and at other time he would taunt them. His school authorities were also of the opinion that he possesses a good brain in his head but was using it in damaging exercise instead of in some constructive way.

Reason for today's worry for Pratha was the report card received from his school. He had, anyhow, got the pass marks in his terminal examinations. But his position in the class was at the bottom. The column 'Class teacher's remarks' was filled as 'He is not attentive to his studies. He rather indulges in tomfoolery, and trouble, not only for others but for himself also. He needs to be controlled by the parents also.' The cause of worry was not only the adverse remarks of his class teacher. She was more worried about the continuity of such remarks. He was in standard V now and should have gained maturity. But nothing of that sort was happening. She had got reprimand many a times in the past also. But every time she had ensured the authorities that he would be persuaded to mend his ways. But no improvement could be made in his mind-set. Now the danger of expulsion from the school was looming on his head. And then where he would study? How many good schools were in their locality? And also the change of school was not the solution.

She made a telephone call to Sansar and asked him to come home early in the evening. He agreed with much reluctance. Luckily Durga was away for evening prayers in the nearby temple due to a festival. Otherwise she would not let speak harshly to him. And when Sansar enquired him about the poor report card, he laughed carelessly.

'I don't know, I attempted well but the teacher did not grant full credit to my answers.'

'But the teacher has also remarked that you beat other children in the class.'

'Because they tease me by not obeying me. The teacher does not take action even on my complaint. So I myself have to take action.'

'Why should they obey you? You are not their class teacher, or even the monitor of your class. Why don't you take action for your improvement instead?'

'I am already all right. They need to improve. I can't allow anybody go against my wishes. And you need not tell me what to do and what not to. I am not a small kid now, and I know how to set things right, okay.'

And that was the cause of real worry. He was not a small kid now; rather his way of talking was above his actual age. Had he been a small kid they could have now moulded him into a nice boy easily. And they had missed that opportunity. Now they had to take some harsh steps to bring the boy on track. Sansar gathered courage for the action.

‘Okay, from now on you beat somebody and see the consequences for yourself, you spoilt boy!’

‘Okay, I will like to see immediately.’ He picked up a small household article and threw it towards the face of Sansar. Sansar could have moved away from the line but the attack was so sudden and unexpected that the article hit bang on his face.

Enough was enough. Enraged he caught hold of him and gave a hard spank. Then one more, and more. But he was astonished to see that the boy did not cry. He did not react either. And when Sansar loosened the grip on his wrist, straight he went to the wall, bang he smashed his face with the wall. He started picking up various articles in the room and throwing some away and smashing some on his head or body. Blood started flowing out of his nose and head quite profusely. But he had no worry about that. Only concern for him was to teach his parents a lesson for insulting him.

Sansar and Pratha kept watching him, emotionless, senseless. They could not even gain the sense to forbid him and kept watching horridly, like two statues. Had Durga not come back at that juncture the drama would have continued, which might have ended in another shape of tragedy. She rushed to take Kuldipak in her lap, with a shower of kisses on his face and a burst of curses for Sansar and Pratha.

‘Why are you not calling the doctor now?’ she thundered. And Sansar reacted like an obedient child. Pratha remained still, like a statue. She was neither frightened due to the episode nor feeling any need to gather courage to ask Durga to refrain from interfering in the best interests of the boy. Her mind was busy in unfolding the past when she had to pay a heavy price in the shape of foregoing of Saksham’s custody and then sacrifice of three daughters for owning this boy. She paid gratitude to the almighty for saving her from the disgrace of her proposed abortion and subsequent adoption by her brother-in-law. Otherwise, who knows, Saksham would have been alive or not.

After that episode nobody in the family ever dared to confront Kuldipak. He was getting pass marks, all right, but could not remain in one school. He got expelled from one school and got admitted in another, to be expelled from there as well after some time. The only consolation for the family was that he was still studying. Even if he completes his school education and starts helping his father in the shop, that would be a good proposition for them. Azad Singh was no more getting younger now. For how long one can expect him sit in the shop with Sansar? And, with the grace of God, he cleared his Matriculation examination. He was adamant to take up +1 class in a college. But Durga, somehow, managed to let him agree to continue in the school. You know, the atmosphere in the college is not conducive for the persons like him.

Saksham, on the other hand, was quite at home in her studies. Not only in studies but even in extra curricular activities. She completed her +2 in style, with distinction. She would not have faced any problem pursuing any stream of studies, including medical, science or commerce. But she had developed a special taste for journalism and communications. That is the reason she joined a good college and opted for these subjects in her Graduation. Today was her first day in the college. Neelu, her friend in the school, had also taken up the same subjects and accompanied her. Both were sitting in the classroom, but there was still some time left for the class to start. Some boys were making noise and some girls were chirping. Suddenly the professor came in. He had some silky lines in his otherwise black hair. But he looked younger, rather boyish, if the whiteness in the hair was ignored. The class got up in order to pay him respect.

‘Please sit down, ladies and gentlemen. I am Prof. Shastri. People call me Philosopher Shastri. I am not a professor of Philosophy. But, as I study and analyse every thing in depth, so I got this title. So don’t worry, I won’t teach you Philosophy.’

Class was to evaluate the capability of their teacher, as their success was dependent on him. So they kept listening with interest.

‘Well, ladies and gentlemen, if you seek success in life, be sure to study and analyse in depth. Let me explain. Today when I was coming to college, I saw something lying on the road, like this.’ he placed his book in the center of the altar, went to a corner, and started moving towards the book.

‘Oh, what is this, lying in the middle of the road?’ he murmured after stopping near the book. ‘It looks like a cake. But what the cake is doing in the middle of the road?’ Students were curious and they kept watching with interest.

‘It might be cow-dung,’ he continued. ‘But it does not look like that. It appears to be a cake.’

‘Whatsoever. What business do I have?’ He walked forward, and then again stopped, ‘But how a person like me, studying things so minutely, can ignore and go without exploring?’

He bent and pretended as picking up with his fingers a small portion of what was imagined to be lying on the road. He then pretended as tasting the material. And then suddenly pretended as if something loathsome had gone into his mouth, 'Ah! Thu, thu. It certainly is cow-dung.' But soon he pretended relieved, 'Thank God, my foot was not placed on it.'

The students chuckled. Not because they did not know about the nature of the professor, but because they had seen the real professor sneaking in, calmly, without letting the pretender even feel that he had been caught. He could realize only when he felt somebody had caught hold of his ear.

'So you would not mend your ways, Rohit.'

'Sorry, sir. I was trying to teach them.'

'Okay, go and sit on your seat. Also clean up whatsoever you have put in your hair.'

Rohit walked towards his seat, smiling. The students got up in respect. The professor asked them to be seated.

'He is Rohit,' continued professor, last year's drop out. He is very intelligent boy, but could not take the exams. as he fell seriously ill during that period and had to drop. And I am Prof. Shastri, the real professor Shastri, not philosopher Shastri.'

Students now laughed. Professor Shastri then took introduction of the students and started the lecture.

It is said that you need at least one of these three constituents to make a chap study. The best one is to have fondness for gaining knowledge. In case that is missing then the second option is to offer some incentives. But in case that too does not motivate, then the last resort is fright. All the three options did not work for Kuldipak. But somehow he cleared +2 in his first attempt. Some say that he used unfair means in the exams. But success is success. The family was proud to put him in a college, though he could get admission neither in a reputed college nor in a good stream.

But Saksham possessed the first trait described above as the best one. She did have a desire to learn and intensity to grasp. That is the reason why she got very good rank in these two years of her college. She was to start the session for the final year of her degree course, but college had not yet begun. They had leisure time at their disposal, and the students were not ready to let it go unutilized. They planned a picnic party. Professor Shastri was their favorite teacher, who agreed to accompany them alongwith one more professor. The students made the arrangements quite eagerly. They were to start from the college campus by a chartered bus arranged by them for the purpose.

Saksham and Neelu reached college well before the given time, so that they could acquire a good seat. But they were surprised to see that most of the students had reached there even before them. And when they got in the bus they found Rohit and an other boy sitting in the bus. They were passing some funny remarks on the fellow students present in the bus. Saksham wanted to enjoy these moments. She went to Rohit and without any preface asked him to let them two sit there.

‘Hey, Rohit. Please let me and Neelu sit on this seat.’ She was straightforward.

‘But why? Is there any flower bed here?’ Rohit was well known for his wits.

‘Not flowers but phool. You know in Hindi phool means flower. Okay phools?’

‘When will you learn some polite way of talking, my dear?’

‘When you would learn the etiquettes of respecting the ladies.’

‘You mean respecting them by offering your seat in the bus? No way. I have already been thrashed for such offer, though in my childhood.’

‘How can that be? Elaborate please.’ Saksham, Neelu and other students in the bus started enjoying the conversation.

‘My papa and me were traveling in a bus, when I saw a lady standing. My dearest uncle had many pieces of advice for me. And one of them was that the males should offer their seats to ladies in such situation.’

‘Your uncle must have been a nice guy.’

‘Sure he was. And that is why I offered her my seat gladly, by getting up from my seat and asking her, ‘come on aunty, you may take my seat.’

‘You were also nice in your childhood. The lady would sure have appreciated your gesture.’

‘Yes, she appreciated with a slap on my left cheek’

‘But why? And did your papa say nothing?’

‘The same question was put up to my papa by my uncle when I told him about the incident, with tears rolling down my cheeks.’

‘What reply did your papa offer then?’

‘He said that I deserved that?’

‘But how is it possible?’

‘My uncle also objected in the same manner. But papa suggested him to ask me where I was sitting.’

‘Where were you sitting then boy?’

‘Exactly the same question was put up by my uncle. And pat he received the reply.... ‘In papa’s lap’

All laughed.

‘You dirty fellow?’ Saksham hit him politely.

‘No problem. You can remove the dirty portion and keep the remaining, ok.’ saying this he got up, hinted the other boy to follow suit, and moved to another seat. Saksham and Neelu occupied those seats.

‘What is so special in these seats?’ Neelu asked.

‘We have come for enjoyment then why not enjoy?’ replied Saksham.

Soon the bus moved, with the students making merry.

Subodh generally does not drive rough. But today he certainly was driving very fast, though it cannot be treated as rash. In the process he was overtaking other vehicles quite regularly. But overtaking of a bus seemed quite dangerous. The other occupants in the van objected.

‘Drive slowly yaar (friend), lest we meet the same fate which my grandpa met with.’ said one of them.

‘Again grandpa, Rahul? Why can’t you leave your grandpa back home?’ laughed one of the other occupants. ‘Now what happened to him?’

‘No no, not now. It happened to him long ago, when he was driving a similar vehicle, in similar fashion, quite fast, similarly, for a picnic, but without my grandma, someone else in her place.’

‘Did your grandpa possess a car?’

‘Why, he was not bekar like you. (kar in Hindi means work, be-kar means without any work, i.e. worthless. Rahul used the word for ‘without car’ as well)

‘But you are as bekar as I am. Only your tongue is working, all other body parts are on strike. Anyhow let your grandpa continue the driving.’

‘He could not for long. As he drove quite fast, he surely went in the car.....but came in Akhbaar (Newspaper in Hindi)’

‘But my son, I am not going with your grandma or some one else in her place,’ laughed Subodh, ‘I am driving fast because, today being a holiday, our targeted picnic spot is likely to be occupied by some other party. So I want to reach there before others do, okay? Now you continue with your grandpa.’

‘Yeah, he was a great man with pleasing personality, good mannerism and sweet tongue.’

‘Was he diabetic?’

‘Keep your mouth shut yaar. He was smart and brave. Any man howsoever strong was not able to hold his ear beyond a few moments. He would put some money, Rs.5/- or 10/-, on stake, and ask the man to hold his ear, with full force. And then, with a light jerk of his head, he would get the ear released and demand his bet amount, ‘My ten Rupees please.’

‘He might have made a fortune then.’

‘Yes, but not much. Because another day he asked a wrestler to hold his ear with a stake of 50/- Rupees. He gave a jerk to his head, jumped swiftly and away did he go

demanding, 'my 50/- Rupees please'. The wrestler said, 'That later on. First you take this, your ear.'

'Why did he indulge with a wrestler then?'

'He did not do it intentionally. He was not aware that the man was a wrestler. He never tried to bother a man, especially a strong man, intentionally. But what was his fault if some one was teased unintentionally. The other day he was walking on the way, eating a banana. When finished he threw the peel casually. Little did he know that it went straight on the face of a strong man. And that fool slapped grandpa without any real provocation.'

'Sad. Your grandpa might not have objected to that.'

'Why not? He called the strong man with disdain, 'Come here, you wrestler.' He obliged, came to grandpa, 'yes what is the matter?' Grandpa demanded, 'you have slapped me. I demand from you to tell if it was done as a joke or you were serious?' The strong man remained unperturbed, 'I was serious, then what?' 'Then it is all right. I do not like jokes.'

'He was a smart and intelligent guy then.'

'Very smart, really. An outstanding footballer.'

'O really? At which position did he play?'

'How could he play? He was an out standing player.'

Perhaps another occupant in the vehicle was having an upset stomach. He passed gas quite loudly.

'Use your mouth for talking please' said Rahul.

By now they had reached the spot of their liking.

And when college bus reached the destination all were uneasy to see that the spot of their liking was occupied by a small group of boys. The professor suggested moving to the next spot. But the students insisted to grab the spot from these boys.

‘No sir, we will make them leave this place.’ Said Neelu. ‘Saksham, as her name suggests, is quite capable of such tricks. Why not let her have a shot?’

And both the girls moved while the other students alongwith the professors kept waiting for the outcome. Subodh and party noticed them coming, were aware of their intentions, but remained ignorant deliberately.

‘Hey, gentlemen, are you here on a picnic?’ said Saksham on reaching there.

‘Yes ladies,’ said Subodh, ‘we are on picnic, if not converted to packnick.’

‘No, no. We don’t have such intentions. In fact there is a very good spot not far away from here. Do you know that?’

‘Oh yes. You want to go there and are asking for guiding you there? Come on Rahul, please go with these girls to guide them to that ‘very good’ spot. You know, we should help them on humanitarian grounds.’

‘That is not the case sir. In fact, you know, that spot is a narrow place and cannot accommodate our party. I was thinking that you being a few people.....that certainly would be enjoyable for you.....after all we are related due to humanitarian bond, you know.’

‘You are right. But we also have another relation in between us. You are students and we are also students, though of different stream. Let us strengthen this relation by enjoying a joint picnic.’

‘Who would like to strengthen the relation with me?’ It was Rahul.

‘Me,’ said Neelu, ‘I would like to develop relation of a daughter with you. Which relationship is stronger than that?’

‘So you want to be my daughter. Well, have your mom consented for that?’

‘She is in Heaven. You can take her consent on reaching there.’

‘No more jokes please,’ interfered Subodh ‘and no relationships, except for the relationship of friendship. Now let us celebrate jointly.’

‘We will have to take other members in confidence as well. By the way where do you people study?’

‘We are students of MBBS undergoing internship training.’

‘That is great,’ said Neelu. ‘Even to get admission in medical stream is a tough proposition. And you have completed it. And that boy, my papa, also completed it, wow.’

‘You mean Rahul? In fact only he has completed. We are yet undergoing internship training. He is pursuing his MD.’

‘What will he do after becoming M A D?’

‘After MD I will operate upon your ears, my dear,’ said Rahul. ‘They need to be set right as they hear so many unwanted words.’

‘That means you are an ENT specialist and would ask me to pay through my nose. Why didn’t you choose heart in stead? In that case, instead of getting my ears engineered, I would have enjoyed angiography at your hands.’

‘From where have you got this talent of talk manufacturing please?’

‘I can’t beat you in that; you are more deft in this art. But you misuse your talent?’

‘Well, I don’t have Mrs. to use. Hence I miss use.’

They had taken a long time in such loose talk. People were waiting anxiously for them to succeed. And when they intimated about the proposal for joint picnic, they agreed after some initial reluctance.

Any activity done with interest is always done better than that done under some burden. Saksham had a passion for the subject she studied. And she also possessed the intensity to hone her skill. And that was the reason for appearance of her articles in various newspapers and periodicals so regularly, at such a tender age. But today she was having a special day. Her article on the problem of population explosion had fetched her 'the best amateur writer' award by a reputed national magazine. She was invited to receive the award from the chief editor of the magazine, which was to be telecast on the TV channel of the same group. She was invited by the Principal of the college and showered with congratulations by him and other faculty members. A special note of congratulations was pasted on the notice board for the intimation of students, with an advice to read the article in that magazine. The students were waiting eagerly to watch her receiving the honor on the TV.

And when the day arrived the students cancelled all other activities and remained glued to the TV. And when she was receiving the award in the auditorium full of intelligentsia, the whole community in the college was feeling honored. Loud clapping by the eminent personalities in the hall was a source of pride for every college mate. After receiving the award she was asked by the anchor to say a few words for the viewers about her views on this burning problem. She got up, went to the dais without any hesitation and wished good evening to the audience and the viewers.

'First of all I thank the management and the intellectuals connected with this magazine who showered the honor so immensely which the article otherwise did not deserve. I am still an amateur writer and I tried to make a small effort to study, analyze and then tackle the mammoth problem. It is only up to so many intelligent and capable personalities, some of them present here and many more busy in some more constructive work, to pass judgment that how much successful my effort was. As far as I am concerned I am under no misunderstanding and am of the view that the solutions given by me are only indicative and not exhaustive. The country is filled with a hoard of wise men, who are capable of finding a score of other solutions, which may prove to be more suitable than mine. But the need is to study the problem seriously, to analyze the problem properly, to work out the causes attached for its persistence and then finding the effective solutions.'

Saksham stopped and watched to notice that the audience in the hall was listening with utmost care. May be because the audience belonged to the best class of the society. She continued:

'It is general perception of a common man that our planet is overpopulated, which is, no doubt, true. But the matter for more concern is the pattern in which the population is scattered. The countries with lower density and good resources are not much bothered, because they are not feeling the pressure, although they are bound to be affected in the long run. And the countries with high density are not having enough means for controlling. The resources available to a country due to its geographical positioning may appear to be the sole ownership of that country. But that is only an illusion. In reality the resources are used by the other countries as well. The best example is the oil resources of the Middle East. Are they not consumed by all the nations? And as long as the

consumption of the resources remains in excess than their natural formation, they are bound to deplete and exhaust. And the affect of such depletions is bound to be felt by all, not only by some countries owning them. And with present level of the global population, coupled with the modern day consumption patterns, the available resources are bound to exhaust, and exhaust soon. The need for population control is, therefore, universal and should not be restricted to some over populated countries.'

'The factors responsible for continued increase in population can broadly be divided in three categories, i.e. Natural, Psychological and Social. Desire for owning a child may be out of natural love for children. Or, sometimes, the birth of a child may be just casual. Such natural childbirth suited the primitive man and is best suited to the animals now, though is still prevalent in some people, especially the ones below poverty line, in third world countries like India. But when we have attained a mental level to understand that such unplanned childbirth does not augment social standing of the family, society or of the nation, we need to feel the responsibility for planned family, so that the child born could be raised to become a national asset, rather than a social liability. Psychologically, the desire for the child arises out of fright of death. Every one is to die some day, and all know the fact. Our religious and social structures tend to exploit this fright for their benefits, deliberately or otherwise, by inflicting the feeling to live after death through their children, especially the sons. Though no one is clear what happens to a person after death, yet the so called religious scholars paint such a picture of the other world that most of people, including the educated ones, continue believing them, which may be due to the religious belief cemented in their psyche at an early age. The basis for this belief may be due to our desire to live for ever. But this belief is not absolutely free from all doubts. We keep fearing what if the other world theory is not true. This doubt is responsible for our desire that, at least, our name be remembered after our death. And birth of a child is considered as the best and the easiest way for this. Social factors play a bigger role for continuation of this problem in developing countries, where there is no support for the people in their old ages. The child, nay the son, is considered as the only hope in the old age. But how far this hope is to be sincere is as uncertain as the future itself is. But even if the hope is materialized in to reality in some cases, has the parenthood gone so selfish to seek favors for bringing up our children? All other creatures lend support to their little ones without expecting any return of favors. And still we are proud to be humans!'

The gathering was spellbound, not because of the ideas Saksham was having, but because of the maturity she possessed at such a tender age. What they were not able to realize was that she herself had borne the brunt of such superfluous desires of her parents. The heavy price she had to pay for this also did develop to be an asset for honing her potential to mature in such matters. She continued:

'It is general feeling that these psychological and social barriers can be crossed through education, I mean, modern scientific education. The conception, no doubt, is not untrue, but its implementation certainly is not free from problems. And till we achieve the target of perfect education, universally, which, I am afraid, will remain ever doubtful, the damage we would have done to this globe by then would lead us to the point of no return. Some immediate measures are, therefore, necessary. The countries where there is no

provision for social security need to develop a system to provide such security, at least to the people having no offsprings. The countries having such schemes in operation need to offer special additional benefits for such people. The desire for a son, needed either for family lineage or for support in old age, sometimes leads to excessive birth of girl children. Our religion and customs give such an importance to sons that daughters are not considered as part of lineage. The problems of dowry and other unwanted expenses required for bringing up the daughter make her a liability. And to get rid of this liability we indulge in unethical pre-natal tests and killing of the girl child in the womb. The need is not just to control and plan the childbirth, but also to change the mindset of differentiating between the sons and daughters. This problem can be tackled only if the daughter is given the same status as enjoyed by the sons, including their right to be the part of lineage of the family. And that is possible only with extra care for quality education based on morality and science with courage to break the religious enigmas attached to our psyche.'

'For better pursuit of the goal of single child norm, which is necessary for the overpopulated countries like India, the child may be allowed liberty to use the name of father or mother or both. Similarly it should be free will of the child to support the parents, parents-in-laws or both. The governments should come up with legal regulations for such framework, but well augmented with good education policy. The persons having regard to the set norms of family planning need to be rewarded with proper incentives; and those violating them need be denied these provisions. Benefits like cheap supply of ration to the people below poverty line, reservations to the poor for jobs in public offices, lower fees and taxes, lower rate of interest on loans or additional interest on savings and many other similar benefits should have direct bearing on the family planning behavior of the person. And, since the problem is universal, its effects also being universal, the endeavors for its check also need to be universal. Overpopulated and developing countries need more funds than their capacity. The developed countries need to create such funds and UNO need expand its Funds for Population Activities. UNFPA should come up with positive active support for population control programs of the populated countries.'

'As I have already submitted, these suggestions are not exhaustive. Many more solutions can be worked out. The suggested solutions may also be modified for better implementation. But there certainly is the need for action, an early action. And with so many wise men at the helm of the affairs, I am sure, the action would not be far away. Only then this prize would have some meaning.'

The hall sounded with a loud applause. Hasmukh and Subhagini were watching the program on TV and were feeling great pride in owning such gem of a daughter. They could not hold their emotions; a tear or two rolled over their cheeks, may be in happiness or for the love they had developed for her. And the other person, who could not hold her tears, was Pratha. The idea to abort her had scared her then, but that fright haunted her once again.

Subodh had developed a strange feeling for Saksham from the day he met her. He found the girl to be intelligent and mature beyond her years. He wished her to be from his own profession so that he could propose her for companionship for life. But her maturity was still spurring him to go ahead and propose. His shy nature coupled with this dilemma had prohibited him from going ahead, otherwise he had called her up many a times and talked with her on routine subjects. But today he was pleasantly surprised to see her aptitude. He kept watching her on the TV and heaping praise on her sincerity towards the nation, rather towards the mankind. He had kept fitting permutations and combinations if she was suitable to become his life partner. And today he had no doubt that with her entry in his life his happiness would certainly increase manifold. His parents also watched the program and appreciated the girl. He could not sleep well that night and kept thinking about her. Next day he gave her a ring on her mobile phone and congratulated her. But he could not work out whether that call was taken by her in a casual manner or she was feeling elated specially, the way he wanted her to. But he could not express further on phone. After all such feelings can't be expressed so lightly. For so long he had been nurturing the desire to meet her again. But today the desire transformed into longing. He wanted to say in clear-cut terms that he wanted to meet her, rather propose her, but the decency was not permitting him. He longed to have her in his company at the earliest possible but was not in a position to create an opportunity. All he could do was to pray for an early opportunity.

And when his wish was filled so early no religious man would consider it by chance. He was sitting in a restaurant alongwith Rahul, his mind still occupied by Saksham, though his condition not unnoticed by Rahul but factual position not yet clear to him. His joy knew no bounds when Rahul uttered:

'Oh not again. She would not do without becoming daughter, I mean, of my mother-in-law.'

Subodh turned for a pleasant surprise to note that Rahul was talking about Neelu who had entered the restaurant alongwith Saksham.

'Had I wished something else also, that surely would have been fulfilled' he said to himself. 'But what else more valuable had I wished then?' he questioned. The girls had not yet noticed them; or, may be, they were just pretending so. He asked Rahul to invite the girls to accompany them.

'You surely would spoil the evening.' Rahul remarked apparently while moving towards them. In fact he was also happy to find the girls there and was having a strong desire for their company.

'Good evening sweet ladies' he sought their attention. 'I am so glad to see you here and beseech your company for this evening, off course, with your sweet will and with the hope that you would not feel our presence here as a source of awkwardness for you.'

‘How can such a philosophical invitation be declined, you know? No, at least we can’t. Which table we would have to move to, please? Err... yeah.. good evening Mr....Mr....Rahul.’ Neelu seemed in ever-jolly mood.

‘This way please’ Rahul pointed towards the table, ‘You will also have to tolerate another itching substance sitting over there.’

‘No, now you don’t thrust your own qualities to be his also, that is not fair. He is such a nice guy that one can stay with him for full life without feeling any hitch.’ Neelu continued while moving towards the table. Subodh welcomed the girls and offered them the seats.

‘First of all my heartiest congratulations, Sakshamji for attaining such a thunderous attention for your article and subsequent TV coverage.’ Subodh started the conversation.

‘Thanks. Did you watch that program, sir?’

The waiter came with the menu card and kept waiting. They kept talking formally for the liking of one another and soon the order was placed.

‘Of course I did watch that program Sakshamji.’ Subodh had not yet forgotten the link of their previous conversation. ‘When you told me about that that day how could I miss that?’

‘Wait a minute.’ intercepted Rahul. ‘You told him, Sakshamji? And not me, why?’

‘Because he enquired from me on phone and you didn’t’ smiled Saksham.

‘Now, Subodh, you are crossing the lines. You know, this girl is telling that she is ready to spend her full life in your company. And you are making enquiries from the other girl too. And now what future do I have in store?’

‘Subodhji, have your friend become M A D yet or is still in the process of?’ Said Neelu and then turned towards Rahul, ‘I had said ‘one’ and not ‘me’ okay. But I would be happy to replace that ‘one’ with ‘me’ in order to avoid other inroads by some miscreants.’

‘World is not worth living now for honorable people like me, and, of course, like you, Sakshamji. But one can’t help. Crops yielding life supporting fruits have to face the presence of a score of atrocious weeds.’

‘Now stop it Rahul. She is such a lovely girl.’ Interfered Subodh. ‘And this evening she is your guest also.’

The waiter had served the eatables and they started enjoying their snacks without breaking the conventional conversation.

‘I think you are in the final year of Graduation now, Sakshamji. What is your future program?’ Subodh pretended asking just casually.

‘I would pursue post graduation in journalism. And I think you would also like to do MS or MD.’

‘Yes, but not M A D like Rahul.’

‘Initially I was also interested in medical profession. But later I settled for journalism.’

‘It is good you settled for your own interest, Sakshamji.’ Rahul interfered. ‘Our doctor sahib was also interested in journalism, but he gave way under pressure from his papa. Now this vacuum can be filled only if some journalist comes in his life.’

‘I will prove to be the perfect filling material. Any takers?’ Neelu was still in jolly mood.

‘Now you also are cutting through the lines. If you are so keen, why don’t you fill the vacuum in someone else’s life?’ Rahul found an opportunity to propose.

‘But the problem is that the vacuum does not lie in someone else’s life but it lies in his brain.’ Neelu pronounced ‘someone else’s life’ with special emphasis.

‘How can that be when you have already occupied his brain as well?’

‘No loose talk with the guests please. Hadn’t Subodhji advised you earlier?’ Neelu felt the need of being defensive.

‘O dear guest I can’t dare to talk loose, especially with loose screwed persons. I would have offered you my heart where you could stay any longer you liked to. But you have already stolen it the other day.’

‘How can that be? The other day you were ready to become my father.’

‘It is not possible now, since you have already taken shape. Why not let this privilege be conferred upon our children, I mean...with your kind consent, of course?’

‘Oh, you shameless creature!’ Clear lines of shyness appeared on Neelu’s face. She had finished, so she got up and walked away. Rahul also got up and went after her after taking leave from the other two.

‘Neelu is talkative, no doubt. But she is a good girl.’ Said Saksham.

‘Rahul is also of the same nature. They can prove to be a good match for each other.’

‘I can’t pass the judgment so early.’

‘I am quite conversant with your views on relations with the children.’ Subodh started after a pause. ‘But what are your views on selection of a life partner?’

‘In my view the partners should have good understanding of each other.’

‘Even though they don’t have love for each other?’

‘Love is easily reciprocated if you have respect for the views of you partner and the ability to reconcile the differences.’

‘Have you ever looked for such person?’

‘Not yet. The time is not ripe for it yet.’

‘So one should be hopeful for consideration when the time ripens.’

‘No harm in sending advance application. But consideration will be at the appropriate time.’

‘Ok, they also serve who only stand and wait’

‘The wait certainly will fetch some weightage during consideration.’

‘One is lucky to be in queue than to be ousted straight away.’

They saw Neelu and Rahul coming back, hand in hand. It appeared they also had settled for each other.

Kuldipak, although joined a college, but not much was being expected from him by his family. And he was also in no mood to falsify that feeling. His viewpoint for life in the college was only to enjoy it. He seldom attended the classes. And the teachers were happy if he bunked, because, otherwise, he would not let others study. He formed a group of similar boys and all would indulge in loafing and intimidating other students. The students, especially the girls, did never like to face them, though he never indulged in eve teasing. But despite this all he was getting through the exams. He had only limited ambitions in studies and did not have to toil much hard for their achievement. Otherwise his nature was such that he could go to any extent for achieving his desired objectives. And for achieving the target of just going through the exams. he did not hesitate from using unfair means. After all the results justify the means. And morality, virtue, decency and ethics were the words in his knowledge for befooling others; nobody in this shrewd world applies these on self.

Today also he had bunked the class and was sitting in the college canteen with some other similar boys. They were insisting him for snacks. With some hesitation he agreed and ordered for Samosas.

‘No, not Samosas, we want to eat Piza’ they insisted.

‘But I like Samosas.’ He was unmoved.

‘Ok, you can take samosas, but order piza for us.’ said one.

‘Why, when I have to pay you have to take what I offer’

‘Okay, today we have to follow you,’ they had no choice, ‘but on our day you will have to do what we shall be doing.’

‘What shall you be doing then?’

‘Getting a thrashing in the bazaar...ha.ha.ha.’

‘I did not relish this insipid joke yaar.’

‘Better you put some sauce on it...ha.ha.ha’

‘That day you were discussing about selling your motorcycle.’ Another boy changed the topic.

‘Yes, but then. Now I have changed my mind. I will keep it for some more time.’

‘You can think over. I am ready to buy it.’

‘Yes I know. But I am not ready to sell it.’

‘I know you just don’t want to sell it to me, otherwise you are to sell it.’

‘Well, okay. It is my motorcycle and it depends on my sweet will if to sell it or not. Why are you so crazy to own it? Why don’t you go for a new one?’

‘You know very well that I can’t afford new one. If you don’t sell yours I will buy another one from the market, but that will be second hand.’

‘You miser, don’t befool us. You do have the funds to purchase a new one. Only want mine for nearly nothing. Better you purchase a new one, we shall not allow you any second hand, ok.’

‘No, no. I will buy second hand. After all the new one will also get old after some time.’

‘Good argument. Okay, when marrying you also choose an old lady. After all the girl you choose would also get old some day.’

In the meantime they also finished the snacks. Smoking was not allowed in the college canteen. But no body ever dared to disallow this facility to Kuldipak and company. He lit one and started making rings. And when the friends were impressed with his talent, he intended to enhance the influence. He puffed with his mouth and released from the nose. Then puffed with his nose and released through mouth. Then again puffed with mouth and released from ears. Then again puffed but no smoke appeared from anywhere. A friend watched his nose, then his ears and at last watched his back. There attention diverted when they heard a giggle from the nearby table, where some girls were sitting. Kuldipak turned to look who she was. And on seeing her he was enthralled. He could not make it whether she was a real girl or a statue had come to life. He kept watching her without flashing his eyelids. The girl also kept watching him but was clueless what had happened to him. Her attention was diverted when the fellow girl asked her to move:

‘Get up Kamini, let us go. Hurry up, don’t sit here any more.’

Puzzled Kamini followed the girls. But what was to be happened had started to happen. The boys were watching the face of Kuldipak and noticing what effect the girl had left on him.

‘Don’t worry, we shall let you know her complete bio-data’ a friend contended.

In good old days it was the assumption that you spare the rod and spoil the child. With passage of time and development of modern day theories the notion has changed nearly in the opposite of it. But what was the real cause for Kuldipak's nature is not much clear. He did get plenty of love in his childhood; and was being showered today also. His views having slightest of reason were respected by his family. No body ever dared to annoy him, though by suppressing his own feelings in the bargain. But why he could not understand the value of respecting the feelings of others is beyond comprehension. When every member of the family endeavored for his well being why did he not reciprocate it, but remained self oriented person instead. Perhaps the reason lied in inability of the family members to make him feel how much it hurts if your views are not respected. It is good to agree to the reason, but when his unreasonable demands were also not opposed to, how could he feel the pain of being denied something. He developed a nature that he could refuse anything, even reasonable, to anybody, but could not tolerate denial for even an unreasonable demand.

Previously such wish list was confined to his family and, at the most, to his friend circle, which was very limited, if a group of scared flatterers can be described as so. But now his wish list was waiting in the wings for crossing these barriers. Today's incident had a great impact on his mind. Never in his life, of course till date, had he stooped low to indulge in eve teasing. In fact he did not like the persons indulging in such activities; he even had given a sound thrashing to such boys in the past. Then why did that girl was fritted away by her friends? What image did those girls had of him, were they scared of him? He had never hurt them; he did not remember having even talked to them as they belonged to a junior class and no occasion of talking had ever appeared. And if they were themselves scared, or nurturing some ill will, what right had they got to ask that girl to follow suit? And that girl needs to form a positive image of him, or else it is a great insult for him. Such ideas kept his mind occupied for whole of the night and he could not sleep well.

Next day his sphere of activity remained limited to collecting data about that girl. He was informed that her name was Kamini, who had joined the college only recently in the first year of graduation. She was the only child of her parents. Her father had died in her infancy. Her mother was a working lady, having their own house in a reasonable locality. The family, he was informed, did not have much interaction with other relatives as Kamini's mother had married her father against the wishes of her and his families. They had only a limited friend circle with very limited meetings with them and the two remained content in the company of each other, confined to themselves most of the time, and maintained the relations between them as good friends as well in stead of mere mother and daughter's. But what was Kuldipak to do with so much information related to her? Another person in his place would, at the most, have talked to her and cleared her mind that he was not a bad boy as portrayed to her by her friends and left the scene with full liberty at her hands to form any kind of opinion about him. But he was not a person giving up so easily. He did not want less than a confession, a sincere confession, not only pretension, that she had got no misunderstanding for him. And nothing less than her eagerness for his friendship would suffice making him believe she was sincere in her thinking.

He did not go to college, but remained busy in collecting the vital information, which was more important to him than attending the college, which, otherwise also, was only a pass time for him. And now he knew quite a lot about Kamini and could try to befriend her. He got up early in the morning and, to the astonishment of the family, went to college quite early. He reached the locality where Kamini lived. He parked his motorcycle on a deserted road and kept waiting. And when Kamini arrived he did not come forward straight away. He kick started the bike and started driving past her. On reaching her he slowed down, wished her good morning with a pleasant smile. As he was already expecting, the girl, instead of being pleased, was clearly perturbed to see him there.

‘Going to college, Kaminiji? You can accompany me, I am also going there.’

‘No, thanks. I will come by bus.’

‘But what is the need when I am going there? And let me assure you, Kaminiji, that I am not such a bad boy as your friends might have painted me?’

‘I don’t make opinions on the information provided by the friends, especially without verifying it. I have not formed any opinion about you, neither good nor bad. I shall be thankful if you leave me alone.’

‘It is good to know that you don’t have any bad feeling, but equally bad that you don’t have good either. But even then there is no harm in accompanying me.’

‘That I am to look into. And I again request you to leave me alone, okay.’ This time Kamini was a bit firm in her voice. The attitude was not at all liked but Kuldipak thought it wise to leave the scene instead of making one, which had started to be with curious looks of the passersby.

‘Okay, as you wish.’ He moved ahead bearing the burden of humiliation of refusal by a person he never liked from. He could not make it why she was so adamant for not going with him, although he is aware that friendships with opposite sex are still not seen very positively in this part of the world and the same is a source of special embarrassment for the girls, who generally don’t like to indulge in such affairs, except, however, if they are bold enough to face the society. He was sure that the reason for her refusal was not this, but, possibly, pollution of her mind by her friends. He would surely teach a lesson to those girls at an appropriate time. But presently his full attention was to find a way out to avoid this humiliation. At any cost she had to accept him as her friend. He was thinking of using her friends, after taking them into confidence of course, that he just wanted her friendship and no other relationship and, in the event of her accepting him as her friend, would not hesitate even to help her if she ever develops affairs with some other boy.

He kept driving for some distance, sunken in these kinds of thoughts. But soon the emotions started imposing pressure on his mind and he felt his brain was feeling tired. He stopped near a roadside kiosk to fetch a cigarette, which he considered quite handy in

relieving tension in such situations. He lit the cigarette while standing near the kiosk and started talking to the kiosk owner aimlessly. He was just trying to divert his attention and get relieved of the extreme tension he was feeling on his mind. But he could not divert the attention despite his best efforts. He left the kiosk and kick started the motorcycle. He put the bike in gear, without much clarity where he was aiming to go. He released the clutch and turned the bike in the direction he had come from, without slightest of intention of having another try on the girl, but just aimlessly. As he reached the middle of the road a car applied quick breaks. He was just saved from being run over for his negligent driving.

‘Brother, if you don’t have any love for your life, kindly have pity on my driving license, which I don’t want to lose so early.’ The driver of the car was addressing him. He felt very bad for his foolishness and waived his hand in an apologetic gesture and said ‘sorry’, but was stunned to see the scene in the car. Kamini was sitting in the car, alongside the boy driving it.

Any normal man can ignore what had happened. But Kuldipak can't be categorized as a normal man. As per his views the scene in the car was able to flare up any self-respecting person. Had the girl accepted his offer of lift up to the college and informed on the way that she was in love with some other boy, he would have never interfered in their affairs. But now the girl surely tried to insult him, and that too intentionally. Had her intentions been clear, she could have asked the boy to take another route, as she was aware he had gone the way they were following. He was sure that it was all intentional, just to add insult to his injury. He was angry with his friends as to how they missed any information about this boy. Who was he and what relations did he have with the girl? He surely was her lover, the way she indicated him to move forward after avoiding that accident clearly indicated this. He was nothing to do with her personal life. But she was using it for inflicting personal insult on him. Now he would not spare her. Now on, all her love, all her emotions, all her joys, all her sorrows, shall be at his mercy. And he would not let her go to any other person, come what may. For days together his mind remained occupied by such a hot lava, finding the way to explode out. But he was not able to find the solution. The pressure kept mounting with passage of time. It was now in his information that the boy belonged to a well off family, pursuing post graduation in the nearby college and the affairs with the girl were in the knowledge of families of both, having plans for their wedding in the near future. The idea of them settling so peacefully after inflicting such a great insult on him was giving him further sleepless nights. He kept thinking how to get rid of this catastrophe, but thinking kept piling up the burden further.

Suddenly he thought of a plan, the thought of which inducted a chill in his spine. He was not much confident if he would be having the capability or mettle for implementing it. But he had no other option if he was to win her; and defeat he could never accept, not at least in the present case, come what may. No, he had to act with courage and win; the losers don't live but just pass the life. And he has always lived the life. The idea of winning soothed his soul. His face started to glow again. The family and his friends, who were much worried these days for sudden change in his mood, were once again happy to see him return to his normal self. And, as a first step for the success of his plan, he encashed this happiness by demanding a car for going to the college. The family agreed after some initial reservations. After all for whom were they earning this all if their darling lad was not enjoying the life? Although Pratha was a bit disturbed with setting of this kind of precedent, which could spoil the boy further, but she also did not find it advisable to display her feelings, which, she was sure, would be a futile exercise. Only thing she could do was to pray that the gift of a car to the boy makes the boy realize their love for him and, with the degree of maturity he has attained by now, he recognizes their contribution and learns to reciprocate it.

Now he used to come to the college in his new car. His friends appreciated and demanded feast for owning it, for which he had no hesitation to throw a party. A friend also suggested to invite Kamini for that, but he was content to invite her friends only, the two girls who were sitting along that day. It is another matter that they also declined the invitation, on the expected line of thinking of Kuldipak anyhow. He also used to take the route coinciding with that of Kamini, would manage to pass the road near her bus stop

when she would be walking to, slow down his car near her, give her a look, and then move ahead, trying to pass the message that he was no longer interested in her. But what was being conveyed was not the one he intended to. The girl was frightened with his behavior. She knew that his way to college was not that one and that he was just following her. She also knew that his gesture of ignoring her was a sham. But what she did not know was his actual intentions. She was satisfied that with passage of time and on knowing that she had been engaged to a wealthy boy, he would come to reality and leave her. Otherwise also much time was not left in completion of post graduation of Ranjan and their subsequent marriage. And till then he was there to look after her in case of some eventuality at the hands of this silly boy, which she was otherwise sure of not happening.

Little did she know what fate had in store for her.

Wait of Subodh certainly fetched weightage. He considered himself the luckiest man in this world to find favors from Saksham. Saksham also found the man as the most suitable to her. Soon their understanding turned into love. But both were controlled by their brains, not by their hearts. And they had planned well when and how to settle. Their families also knew what they wanted and, instead of imposing their own will upon them, they gave them free hand to decide their future. After all they were mature enough and could take decisions with maturity even beyond their years. And there was a minor difference of opinion between the two, and both were sitting in a park today and discussing the point for the best reconciliation of the differences. Both were expected to complete their studies almost identically. Subodh wanted to pursue a career in his own practice, but for that he wanted to serve in a good hospital for a year or so, so as to enable him fetch some experience before settling for his own clinic. He was dreaming of joining AIIMS in Delhi, which he considered most suitable for his best experience. He insisted for early marriage after completion of the studies, so that he does not have to live alone during this time. The idea was not bad, as Saksham had a good part of her family in Delhi and would feel at home there also. She could also find a job there for pursuing her career in the field she liked. But the problem was that Saksham got campus selection from the TV channel she had attended to then, who offered her an executive post in Mumbai. She did not want to lose that opportunity. He was not much enthusiastic about that offer. By now she had become a know writer and had started earning a lot by writing. He insisted for adopting free lance journalism and creative writing. But she was proposing to grab the opportunity, as she would become more popular as writer if she gets support of a channel like that. That was the point being discussed by them. But when found her not ready to bend he had to surrender.

‘Now one more year? it is too much year’ Subodh was pleading.

‘Not that long as you think. You know we have already spent about four years from the day we first met. Now only one more year is to wait.’

‘And then first five year plan would be complete.’

‘And people would say what a planned love we have indulged in!’

‘What would be the program in next five year plan then?’

‘That would be eat, meet sleep and make marry, I mean, merry.’

‘They say that when you marry there remains no room to merry.’

‘One should have spirit to merry, only then marry.’

‘If we keep on planning and postponing the way we have been doing, the day is not far when we shall ourselves be transformed into a spirit. Then spirits will marry.’

‘For converting to spirit we have to die, for which, to grow old. But love never grows old. It remains fresh for ever. Hence we shall marry and make merry.’

‘That might be the case for love, but lovers do get older. I think I have already grown quite old.’

‘Oh yes, how many old people are there in your family?’ Saksham changed the flow.

‘Many. And all are quite obsessed to the old rituals.’

‘Including your papa?’

‘Yeah. He also finds pleasure in respecting old values.’

‘So we will have to marry in a traditional way. You mean I would have to put ghoonghat (veil) on my face, which you will lift in the night and I will get a gift from you in the bargain.’

‘Only man has to lose something due to this tradition.’

‘I have never done it earlier. Let us have a rehearsal, lest I make at actual occasion a laughing stock of myself.’

Saksham covered her head with her dupatta (head cover), lowered the front portion on her face and sat with her eyes down in a shy mood. Subodh also wanted to enjoy the moment. He pretended as if he had just married her and was just ready for honeymoon. He plucked a flower from the nearby plant, handed it over as a gift, and started lifting the veil, slowly, slowly and slowly. Saksham kept sitting with her eyes downwards, in very shy mood. And when half of her veil was removed, she suddenly brought out her tongue while keeping her eyes ever downwards and started sliding it left and right; in a way children taunt the others.

‘Oh, the bride is very shy’ some children watching nearby started laughing.

Summer season of Delhi is hot and dry. Although it becomes hot and humid on commencement of monsoons, yet people get some respite for the time it rains. But such let-up is very rare before the monsoons; and that is the reason why rainy season is waited for eagerly. Before the advent of monsoons, though pre-monsoon showers are not fallacious, but are generally accompanied by sand storms and high velocity winds, which are the cause of more worries as compared to the comfort of dropping temperature. And this year even that respite was not available to Delhites. And when the rain started yesterday all were happy to welcome the monsoons with even greater vigor. People started roaming in the rain without any care for their clothes. And the Mother Nature also obliged them with a prolonged spell.

But now this spell was getting prolonged to an extent where pleasure starts configuring into irritation. The rain, which had started in showers yesterday, converted into continuous drizzle during the night, remained so in the morning, and began cats and dogs at noon. All the enthusiasm provided by cooling of the climate was now transforming into frustration, which was further aggravated with the accompanying high velocity wind. The roads had started looking as if these were watery streets of Venus, with only difference that the boats had not yet replaced the buses and cars, although many of them had stranded in deep waters. And in the late afternoon the roads started bearing a deserted look. Otherwise also the traffic on the roads remains thin at this time of the day, as working people start returning only in the evening and school children are already home. But it was the heavy rain that was responsible for eliminating even that sparse crowds. Traffic had closed on low-lying areas due to water logging and only high altitude areas were approachable through vehicular mode.

Thankfully Kamini's area was approachable, but still it was not easy for her to return home after her college in such a heavy rain. She missed Ranjan badly today; he had gone in a marriage ceremony of a near relative in a nearby city; otherwise he certainly would have dropped her home. And when the bus dropped her at the stop near her house, she was received by the torrent showers, which drenched her in no time. The umbrella in her hand was of no use in such a windy rain. The bus stop and the road bore a deserted look. The road was like a pond of shallow water. She took off her shoes and started walking towards her house. A car passed by, which was being driven by a middle-aged man, who asked her for help, but she declined politely and kept walking. Heavy rain accompanied with fast wind had reduced the visibility to a level where even walking was not easy. But the roads were quite familiar to her and she kept walking without bothering for the visibility, enduring the torrential rain. The water on the roads was making it difficult to know from where the road to her house separated, but she had no problem in turning carelessly, as she had spent her life on these roads. She felt no curiosity to know why a car was standing on one side of the road in such a heavy rain, and that whether someone was sitting in it or not. The noise of rain and wind did not let her hear the sound of opening of door of the car, which otherwise would not have been gone unnoticed. The only sound, which she could notice, was the sound of splashes in the water as some one ran past her in the water. Before she could turn and see what was happening, a hand containing a handkerchief with pungent smell choked her mouth. She tried to scream, but intensity of her voice was very less due to gagging. She tried to turn her head to see the

face of the assailant, but she was feeling turning of her head very difficult, as it was held forcefully by assailant. Supply of fresh air to her nose was cut off by the substance contained in the handkerchief and she was gasping to breathe. A little air she could inhale with so much attempt contained something being released by the handkerchief and not the oxygen she was in dire need of. And it did not take much time for falling her unconscious.

And when she regained her senses, she found her on the front seat of a car, which was not moving. It did not take long for her to realize the danger. She turned her head to see who was behind it all and was horrified to see Kuldipak sitting on the driving seat. Sensing the looming danger she screamed at her full and tried to open the door and window pane, but to no avail. Perhaps the control was cut off. She searched for her mobile phone but her bag containing it was also missing.

‘No use, we are in the middle of the jungle. Nobody is near in such a weather.’ Kuldipak told her like a winner. She was enraged to see his face. His smile contained some loathsome hypocrisy in it. But it was not the time for her to show any resentment. Her sharp mind realized the situation, which demanded request, and not any argument.

‘It is my humble request, sir. Please leave me. Don’t spoil my life.’

‘Your pleading is fine, but is belated.’

‘I am sorry if I hurt your sentiments. But, believe me, it was not intentional. You are very nice person, worthy of friendship. I beseech you to hold my hand in friendship. I promise to be sincere in friendship.’

‘Now you have picked up the right chord. Only thing I wanted from you was the friendship. But you denied me even that, rather insulted me with your indifference, knowing little that I never accept disgrace. Now you will reap what you have sown, the humiliation.’

‘I still plead, sir, that a man with such a pious ideals cannot indulge in meanness. I am extremely sorry if I was instrumental in some disgrace. But I can assure you that it was not intentional. I will take care in future and shall remain your friend forever. And as a good friend I insist you not to indulge in any act for which your conscience does not grant permission.’

‘Now being over smart and webbing me in sticky words would not be a source of escape. Why are you offering friendship now, why not love as a token of sincerity?’

‘Because friendship is the first step towards love. Now let me confess, though it does not look nice for an Indian girl to confess, that I was in love with you from the very first day. I was ignoring you to fetch your response with more vigour. You know, it is in the blood of the female race.’

‘And taking lift from that boy was also a part of that game, huh.’ Kuldipak was sarcastic.

‘He is our family friend. I am not in love with him, or with any body else.’

‘But you are in love with me. Okay, then, let us celebrate this love.’

‘No, no, you know, it is not the proper time for such celebrations in the Indian context. You know our society does not acknowledge such relations before marriage. Please keep control on yourself.’

‘I have full control on myself. I want all this from you only as a token of sincerity. Now you prove your words with your deeds.’

‘Please don’t put me in such a test. I can prove in any other manner. Please don’t insist for this.’

‘You will have to prove only in this way. And I can assure you that I shall marry you. You rest assured that it is not for returning of disgrace, but for my desire to own you permanently. So I request you not to force me to use force.’

Kamini was now sure that she cannot befool him further and that he was determined in his intentions. Nothing was visible outside the car due to rain. But now there was no time to think. She put her feet on the seat, pretending that she was tired by sitting with her feet on the floor for so long. She suddenly banged her head in the windscreen, shattering it in small drop like pieces. With another jerk her body was out side the windscreen, on the bonnet of the car. Kuldipak caught hold of her feet from inside the car. But a forceful knee on his nose was enough to get herself released from his clutches. She found the words of Kuldipak to be true; there was no trace of any building there and they were in the jungle. She ran as fast as she could in the direction she thought the car had come from. She noticed that the path she was running on was only a muddy way. But she kept running, in the hope that she would reach some safe place before he could reach her. She continued screaming for help in between. But the rain, the wind and the water logged on the path was making running a hellish experience for her. Her breath seemed to desert her, but she kept running, lest he comes back and catches her again. She knew that he was hit on his nose, and might have fallen unconscious. But she could not take chance for watching to confirm and, hence, kept running. She kept shouting for help anxiously and was irritated that no one was coming forward.

And her fears proved to be true when, instead of some angel to come forward for her help, she was caught by Kuldipak. He was bleeding profusely from his nose, and his eyes were emitting fiery anger. She screamed with a force that her throat started painning. But that pain was nothing in comparison to the thud of his hand she received on her face. The assault was so powerful that she fell down on muddy earth, only to be dragged in the nearby bushes. Her hands were tied to some branches of the bush and her mouth was gagged by tying her dupatta (head cover) on it. Blood oozing out of the nose of Kuldipak was staining her clothes also. People of the area might have been praying for respite

from the fury of the rain but Kamini was yearning for someone to come and save her from the savage. The people in this part of the world have faith in God and have firm belief that everybody surely gets justice from Him at some stage; the only question is, when. And this question was of immense importance for Kamini, as justice delayed in her case was surely the denial. Prayers of other people were likely to be answered in due course, as the rain was to stop sooner or later, but wish of Kamini was needed to be attended to immediately, as any respite at a later stage was useless. Respite did she get, and so did the other people, but both got it only after suffering heavy losses and severe damages. Damage in the case of Kamini was, however, irreparable.

There is a thin line separating human nature from that of the beasts, which is marked with the feeling of compassion for others. When this line is erased by selfishness or revenge, the man is transformed into a brute, so much so that even predators find no comparison with him in cruelty. Is this transformation permanent or only a temporary stage? It is soothing to know that this is only a temporary phase and man is to return to his original self sooner or later. But how long would it take, depends on the individual and his circumstances. Act of Kuldipak was governed by neither selfishness nor revenge. Maybe, his false self-esteem was responsible for his behavior. He was not used to tolerate refusal for his justified demands. And he did not have even an iota of doubt in his mind that his demand for Kamini's friendship was justified. The indifference shown by her was considered as an assault on his self-respect, for which he could sacrifice anything. His old pals knew his nature. They were clever enough to accept his demands for the time being and proving him wrong later on, which, when accepted by him, would be accompanied by apology and compensation for the damages. But how could Kamini be aware of his habits when she had no acquaintance or interest in him? She can be termed as unlucky for that. Unlucky that she pleaded so well in the car, but did not have confidence in her tricks. Perhaps the reason for detection of tricks is that an element of doubt remains in the mind of the person using them. The same degree of sincere pleading can have a more lasting impact. She was unlucky that she did not know that her requests and pleas had started kicking out the animal inside him and that he was considering for her safe return, but not before making her realize that he knew that she was befooling him with her love proposal. Had she confessed that and assured her sincerity in friendship, he would have let her go. But she was unlucky to lose self-confidence, which she otherwise possessed in plenty, and she had to pay a heavy price for a slight haste shown by her in her try to escape. The act, in fact, had recalled the outgoing animal with additional dose of anger.

But now, when the hunting was over and the beast had gone after satisfying its ego, the human being in him was wounded with same intensity, if not with more, as was her outraged modesty. The anger had now been replaced by remorse. But what could now be done? Kamini kept lying there as emotionless as a stone. And he kept weeping with his head on her abdomen.

'How could I do this? How could I stoop so low? How? How?' He kept crying, but without any effect on Kamini, who laid there as if lifeless.

'You get up, Kamini. You thrash me. You kill me. My act is beyond any pardon. Let us go, I will drive you straight to the police and accept my guilt. I have no right to live happily after ruining your life.'

But Kamini did not budge. He kept crying, set right her clothes and picked her in his arms and walked towards the car with shower of kisses on her face. Kamini did not oppose even this and remained lifeless as before. He put her on the front seat and sat outside the door with his head in her lap.

‘Why don’t you thrash me, Kamini?’ he cried. But she remained calm with her blank eyes fixed at some distant point. He banged his head in the door and cried,

‘O God, why did you not kill me before allowing me to become a beast?’

But Kamini again remained unmoved.

‘Oh, Kamini, sweet angel, why did you behave like that? How a person who could not tolerate an evil eye towards even a stranger lady could become assassin of modesty of the person he loves most? I am in love with you, no doubt, but never did I wanted its reciprocation. A hand of friendship was enough for me. Had that been extended I would have myself made efforts for arranging your relations with a person of your choice. I cant understand why a beast enters in me when someone tries to ignore me.’

But Kamini still did not speak anything. She continued looking in space with blank eyes.

He got up with some determination in his eyes and walked towards the driver side with heavy steps. He ignited the engine, put it in gear and turned the car towards the city. It appeared he had decided his next step. Soon they entered the city limits. The daylight had given way to darkness. It was still raining at a brisk pace. The noise of water drops accompanied with fast wind coming through the gap formed due to broken windscreen and dropping of rain on the roof was the only sound supporting the engine sound. The occupants were sitting speechless and, virtually, motionless, although rain drops, accelerated by fast wind, were bashing their faces quite hard. The roads were more occupied now in comparison to the afternoon, as people had come out to buy some essential commodities before onset of night. But Kamini was not screaming for help now, despite the opening in place of the windscreen. And when the car turned towards a road familiar to her she broke the ice:

‘Stop the car.’

And Kuldipak reacted like a small obedient kid.

‘No need to go to police station. Drive me straight to my house.’

‘But that would be gross injustice with you.’ Kuldipak gathered courage.

‘That has already been meted out. Now don’t add ridicule to my insult and injury.’

And Kuldipak behaved as if he was a toy with remote control in Kamini’s hand. Soon they reached the road near her house. Kamini ordered him to halt the car there. He handed over her bag to her and pleaded:

‘I can do anything you like and order me to do. I cannot restore your lost honor, but will not hesitate to sacrifice anything for your happiness.’

Kamini stepped out and started heavy steps towards her house. Kuldipak kept watching her go and kept sitting there for a long time, till a passerby tapped the windowpane and asked through the opening whether some help was needed. He thanked him, ignited the engine and drove towards his house.

When Kamini reached her house she noticed that her mother was already home. She came straight up to the gate on noticing that Kamini was opening the gate, without caring that the raindrops were wetting her clothes.

‘Where had you been up to now? Are you okay?’ said Shanti.

Kamini did not utter anything and kept walking towards the interiors. Shanti followed her.

‘What is the matter. Your phone was also switched off. Ranjan also tried to contact you, but could not due to switching off.’

By now they were inside the house. Kamini embraced, rather engulfed her in her arms and started weeping inconsolably. Her mother was not such a naive not to understand what the matter was.

‘Who is the culprit, Kamini, tell me. I will not spare him’ she thundered.

But Kamini kept weeping as if she had no time or interest in anything else.

‘You be brave, my child. You name him. We shall go to the police and get him punished for his deeds.’

‘No mom, we shall not go to the police’ she said while trying to control her sobbing.

‘I can understand your fears. But I still insist you not to bother about the society. You know I have never bothered about the derision by the society inflicted on us for the misdoings of others. How can such a bastard go scot-free after such a heinous crime?’

‘I am also not willing to let him escape so easily. But going to police is not the appropriate solution. Presently I just want soothing touch of your caring hands. I will let you know of my plan of action, which will materialize only with your approval.’

Shanti felt a chill in her spine when she looked into her eyes, which were conveying in clear-cut terms that her intentions were crossing the starting point of dangerous proportions. The condition of her child was such that she did not utter a word so that time, the greatest healer, could reduce some agony from the mind of Kamini. She controlled her desire to debate the issue and reach at some solid conclusion then and there. She consoled her with soft touch of her hands, asked her to change the clothes and accompany her in the kitchen, as she usually does, especially in the evening. Kamini did not refuse and went inside alongwith Shanti, though she did not indulge in helping her as she usually does and kept standing still, watching the activities of her mother with dry eyes. The eyes seemed to be dry at the surface, but something was cooking beneath them when her mother was cooking food of her liking. The only other activity she did was to attend to phone call, which was from Ranjan. The only words she uttered on the phone were ‘Ranjan, all is not well here. You come soon and we shall discuss on you arrival’

and switched off, without giving ear to his information that he was on the way and would reach Delhi at around midnight. And when her mother finished cooking she served the food on a small table kept in the kitchen itself and tried to feed her with her own hands, as she used to do in her childhood. She obliged by taking some bites. It is another matter that she was not excited today as she used to be in her childhood, when the world was so beautiful, without any pollution of minds, and with animals also possessing the traits of humanity.

When the routine of dinner was over, they went straight to bed and switched off the lights immediately. Being only the two members in the house Shanti still allows Kamini to share her bed, although girls of her age are generally asked to sleep on a separate bed. Tonight she did lay with the same peculiar hug with her mother, but not with that intensity. Shanti tried to see if the time had ripened to discuss the matter further or still it was premature.

‘Are you feeling some better now?’ She asked.

‘Mom, let me discuss with Ranjan before revealing to you’ as if Kamini closed the issue for the time being.

Both kept lying, without any sign of sleep in their eyes and without any discussion on the issue. Fingers of Shanti moving in her hair were not effective tonight. Serenity of night was suddenly disturbed with the chime of doorbell.

‘Who could be at this time?’ Shanti murmured.

But Kamini got up and went to open the gate, as if she knew who was there. She showed no emotions to Ranjan; neither at the gate nor inside the house.

‘Your Kamini has been butchered,’ she said without any trace of tremble in her voice, ‘and you have to help her soul rest in peace by observing some rituals.’

‘I don’t love you flesh and bones, but heart and soul. You tell me his name, and I will ruin him. I can not desert you for the guilt of a mean person.’

‘Luck has already deserted us. I am aware of your love and of your determination. I am sure you will support me in my journey through this hot and thorny desert and would bear the brunt of burning heat alongwith me.’

‘What do you intend to do?’ Ranjan had some clear signs of fear on his face.

‘I intend to marry him.’

‘What?’ Shanti, who was listening quietly until now could not control her. Ranjan was also perturbed, but controlled his emotions in view of the determination in her eyes.

‘But how would that bring peace to your soul?’ He questioned with a thin layer of hope.

‘That is the point where your support is needed.’

‘Okay, even if I agree to support you, why he would oblige you with acceptance of your proposal.’

‘That is the area which I will manage, I am sure, successfully.’

‘No, my child, it is not the right decision. How long would you endure further slaughtering by the butcher you hate the most, and keep pretending to be alive. It is very dangerous proposition. I can’t allow you to plunge in this ditch willfully.’ Shanti pleaded, rather begged.

‘You are asking this, mom, despite being a woman? Women need not learn how to get rid off such situation. And if satisfaction is achievable with this sacrifice I have no hesitation in offering me on that altar too.’

The debate continued till the advent of morning. But no conclusion could be reached at. Shanti and Ranjan had, however, given some room to the rigidity of Kamini.

Durga came virtually running out of the house on seeing the broken windscreen of her grandson's car.

'What happened? Are you okay? What happened to your nose? My God, its swelling indicates that it has been damaged seriously. Pratha, come and see how our Dipu has been injured. You call the doctor immediately.' She kept speaking nonstop.

'Nothing serious has happened to me, grandma. It was a minor accident and there is a minor bruise on my nose. The doctor has already checked me and there is nothing to worry about.' Kuldipak was, evidently, making false statement. Pratha had come out in the meantime and was visibly perturbed to see the condition of her son.

'How can it be? Your nose is swelled to a degree that even realizing you is difficult. And you say it is a minor bruise.' She suggested with anxiety.

'Yes it has swelled, but I am not feeling much pain. Doctor has told me not to worry about it.' Truly the pain in his nose was nothing in comparison to the pain to his soul due to his wrongdoing, which was not responding even to repentance. He went straight to his room with strict instructions that nobody should disturb him, or come to his room for enquiring his health etc. etc. He knew that nobody in the family could dare go against his will. He bolted the door from inside, changed his wet clothes in a hurry, went straight to a cupboard, opened it and drew a bottle of whiskey. He broke open its seal and put its mouth in his mouth. He kept drinking till the neat booze choked his throat with pungent taste and forced it to refuse to let further dose enter inside. He kept the bottle in the cupboard and fell on the bed.

It is common belief that alcohol enhances the sleep. It may be true to some extent. But does this enhancement contain the same degree of peace and contentment which natural sleep can bring with it? In Kuldipak's case it did not. He kept sleeping, no doubt, but only he could describe the kind of relief that sleep provided him. The whole night passed in nightmare. Kamini's face with shock symptoms on it, accompanied with tears in her eyes and appeals on her lips kept haunting him all the time he slept. She does possess a cute face, but looked even cuter in her requests for letting her go. He would get up, enraged with himself that why he did not relent and let her go, only to fall asleep again under the influence of liquor, and face the same face again.

He remained on the bed till noon of the next day, still drowned in thoughts. His whole body was aching, perhaps under the influence of alcohol taken without diluting it and without supplementing it with food, or due to the pressure of his sin on his soul, or due to the fever he had caught due to the injury of his nose. His thoughts were disturbed by the ring of his mobile phone, which he picked up with anger. But on seeing the screen his anger turned into surprise. It was Kamini on the other end. He immediately pressed the attend button and answered with anxiety mixed with excitement

'Hello. What is the order for this shameless creature please?' His head was still heavy due to hangover. But the phone had a remarkable effect on his condition.

‘I want to meet you. You come alone in the restaurant near the college. I will be waiting for you there exactly one hour from now.’ The firmness in her voice was indicating that she was sure that he wouldn’t be in a position to decline her offer.

‘Yes, I will definitely come, and come in time, won’t trouble you with my wait.’ The reply endorsed her confidence.

He got up as if some dose of renewed vigor had been injected in him. He took half an hour in getting ready, and went out straight to garage, declining the requests of his family members for taking breakfast. He picked up his motorcycle and drove out in a hurry. Durga and Pratha kept watching him with anxiety. He reached the place before time and rang Kamini for informing her. She reached soon, for his astonishment, without any signs of sadness on her face. He got up to receive him, but she gestured to come inside a cabin instead of on the table he was waiting for her. They moved in the cabin and covered the service gate with the curtain.

‘I have not eaten anything since then. I think you also did not take anything either. I want to eat something.’ It appeared she had no trace of yesterday’s incident.

‘No, I won’t lie. I did take something in the night, I mean a half bottle of liquor.’ Kuldipak was depicting the repentance.

‘Now you do away with these signs of remorse. We cannot bring back the time for re-enacting the scene according to our changed will. But we can avoid its dull shadow with the cover of our good deeds in future. Earlier we forget that ugly episode, better it would be for us both. We shall eat something here and will go to a doctor for setting your nose right. I am sorry I hit you so hard.’

Kuldipak kept watching her with disbelief, trying to understand what kind of girl she was; soft like a delicate blossom though treated by him in a manner that even harshness would feel ashamed. And she was now a figure of humility; forgiving a person she should want to be hanged at some busy road crossing. Her broad mindedness lowered his self respect in his own eyes. How mean he was in comparison to her greatness, he thought.

‘Are you sure I deserve the behavior you are favoring me with? In fact I cannot withstand the load of courtesy from a person expected to be spouting hatred.’

‘I know you are not bad at your heart, but were ruined by momentary psychosis. There are two lines of action for me. One leads to the blind alleys of hatred, the largest enemy of mankind, which can turn a man into a beast, what to say of a person already turned. The other way out is to provide you with an opportunity to lay your hand on humanity again. It is not easy for a person to forgive his enemies, but the best way to win an enemy is by making him your friend; enemy will vanish automatically. I thought over it whole of the night, without any trace of sleep, and throughout the day. And called you

only on reaching at a decidable conclusion, that I should win you with love, which is more easy way-out as compared to the way of combat.'

Kuldipak was unable to control himself. His eyes were full of tears. He started weeping with hushed sobs. Kamini did not stop him immediately, but waited for some time. And when she considered the time right for consoling, she came forward, with smile in her eyes.

'Now these tears have washed away all your sins. You have come out as clear hearted as ever, rather more pious than ever before. Now would you keep crying or offer me something to eat?'

Kuldipak wiped his tears and tried to smile. But his smile depicted gratefulness for her instead of any happiness. He called the waiter and ordered as per liking of Kamini. They ate together, but the feelings on their faces were not reciprocating each other. And how can these match when one was obliging and the other one receiving the obligation. And when finished, Kamini insisted him to go to a doctor acquainted to her. But he was not in a position to withstand additional load of further favor, knowing little that the load he was likely to undertake in a few moments from now would cross all limits of his endurance and his senses would not be able to feel what they need to.

'I think you are not yet ready to accept me with full friendship honors.' Kamini proceeded further, when satisfied that her behavior was producing the desired results.

'No, no, I am. But I am still being haunted by my misdeeds, which have dwarfed me before your tall personality.' Kuldipak wanted to clean his guilty conscious and there could be no other way by presenting him like that.

'Oh, come on. If you are my real friend, you have to forget that incident without further delay. I think you also yearn for my friendship, but are suppressing your feelings. For my sake, and for your good health, please come out of your shell and open your heart before me. I shall be happy even to go beyond friendship, but only if you are also willing to hold my hand. I will not put any pressure for it and will value your friendship for whole of my life even if you don't accept me as your wife.'

The gratitude became unbearable for Kuldipak now. He got up and folded Kamini in his arms, with a flood of tears coming out of his eyes.

'You are not an ordinary girl, Kamini. You sure are an incarnation of some goddess, alighted on this earth for providing acquittal to the sinners like me. How can I decline your hand, which I was so eager to hold? I assure you that I will sacrifice anything for watching even a trace of happiness in your eyes. By coming into my life you have made me the luckiest person on this earth. O God, I don't wish anything more. Only keep my Kamini happy, happy for ever.'

And Kamini can be described to be happy at that moment. Why can't a satisfied person be termed as a happy person? She was satisfied that her efforts were going in the right direction. Not just in the right direction, but her arrow had hit in the bull's eye with the precision even professional archers would long for.

Efforts of Subodh bore fruit and he got what he had been longing for. He got an offer to join AIIMS, Delhi. He made a call to Saksham and shared the happy news with her. He suggested her to come home in time in the evening so that the occasion could be celebrated. He knew that Saksham used to leave her office late in order to deal with the unfinished jobs. Her job is such that any delay in broadcasting an important news would mean her channel to lag behind in the competitive race. She promised to try her best to reach in time. She also asked Subodh not to break the news to her parents at that juncture. She made a call to Hasmukh virtually ordering him to reach home in time, but without telling him the reason despite his asking for. She felt no need for such 'order' to Subhagini, as she seldom comes late. She had joined the channel only a few weeks ago, but was respected in her colleagues as if having worked there for years together. Today she wanted to leave the office well in time for which she was to talk to her senior officer, who was away for some official work. And she did not want to leave the office in the absence of a responsible officer. She was so relieved when the officer came back that he was able to notice the special cheerfulness in her eyes, different from the one she usually has, and asked for the reason. She was so eager to tell. Everybody in their office knew of her relations with Subodh. The officer smiled and quipped:

'That means either you will leave us and go to Delhi or you will delay the marriage till he settles in Mumbai. Both the situations are not pleasing for us. But if I am asked to choose one I will go for delay in marriage. What have you opted for?'

'How can I go against you, sir?'

'Oh, thanks. Today you shall not sit late, okay, rather shall go early and celebrate the occasion.'

'Thank you sir. You are so kind.' Saksham got without asking for what she wanted.

'No buttering please. But be careful not to come tomorrow without sweets, okay.'

Saksham nodded in gratitude. She finished the assignment in hand and left the office with eagerness. Subhagini had just reached home when she saw Saksham entering the house.

'What a surprise! You are so early today.' She remarked.

'Yeah, and papa is also coming soon.'

And soon Hasmukh also came in. He was eager to know what the matter was, but Saksham did not oblige. Rather she continued talking on phone and enquiring about the time when someone would reach. Before they could understand anything, Subodh entered with a pack of sweets in his hand. Now she broke the news with happiness writ large on her face.

'You see, uncle, how much happy is she on my ousting from my sweet home?'

‘I am happy for the success you have achieved, that too well in time. Now all will be well after a year or so.’

‘Would you accompany me to see me off in Delhi then?’

‘I will see you off to Delhi from Mumbai.’

‘Then who would introduce me to your grandpa and other family members?’

‘You are not a shy newly wed bride unable to speak to her in-laws in the first instance.’

‘Yeah, I forgot. I am a shameless bridegroom, unable to keep my mouth shut.’

‘No, no, my child,’ intercepted Hasmukh, ‘don’t tease him. He is going away from home for the first time in his life.’

‘Okay, let us go outside for dinner and celebrate the occasion. Rest we shall talk alongwith.’ Subodh suggested.

Hasmukh and Subhagini were not much interested to accompany them. What were they, the old folks, to do in the company of young people, except snatching away their privacy? But Subodh was insisting for their blessings and company, at least for that day. Just when the discussion was on for their need in the evening party that the bell of Hasmukh’s mobile rang. He pressed the attend key and started the conversation. He told the person on other end to hold for a while and informed the others present there who he was talking to and what the matter was. It was Sansar on the phone who had informed them that marriage of Kuldipak was fixed in two weeks time from that day and that their presence was a must, at least a week before the date of marriage.

‘Happy news is pouring today unstopped. Okay Subhagini, if he insists with such a vigor we have no right to refuse him. Let us also accompany them.’ Hasmukh relented at last.

‘You see, how fast the boy is. He is younger to you, is a boy, and is marrying before you.’ Subodh tried to tease Saksham.

‘Moving fast is not safe. There remains a risk of accident.’ Saksham paid back in the same coin.

Marriage ceremony of Kuldipak was not with expected pomp and show. Kamini had insisted for simple marriage, for which Kuldipak was also ready. But the family members were eager to solemnize the occasion lavishly. After all Kuldipak was their only son and they were to maintain their prestige in the society. In the end it was decided that marriage would be simple, but a party would be arranged for reception of the bride. Some people in the gathering were whispering about the relations of the bride with Ranjan, but family members did not get any air of the rumors. Moreover, it was not an arranged marriage, but the girl was of the choice of the groom. And it was for his happiness that they agreed for simple marriage. Otherwise the status of the family of the bride did warrant some good expectations. They had a good house in a posh locality. Her mother was in good job, having good income without many liabilities. But they were happy to see happiness on their son's face. Moreover, the gathering was mesmerized with her beauty.

The bride became a pride of the family soon, when she won all the hearts with her charming personality, polite way of talking and humble mannerism. There was not much work in the house for the ladies, as odd jobs were taken care of by professional outsiders. The kitchen work was handled by the old ladies in the house. Kamini's activities were limited only to assist them in their routine, or taking care of some needs of Kuldipak, which had now reduced to bare minimum, as he had got a treasure in the shape of Kamini and needed nothing more. He insisted on going away for honeymoon, but Kamini did not agree with the pretext of avoiding extravagant expenditure, especially when Kuldipak was not earning. The family appreciated her views, which, they thought, would instigate Kuldipak to understand his responsibilities properly. Otherwise how many girls these days decline such offers?

But Kuldipak was not yet ready to take his life seriously. He had never lent his assistance in the shop or other affairs of the family. And at the moment he had much more interesting activities to keep him busy instead of indulging in such affairs so early. After all whatsoever was being earned in the shop belonged to him also. But Kamini was not in any mood to relent. There was no use sitting idle at home and drifting away the hard earned money of parents. He had also dropped the idea of going to college for completing his Graduation, for which Kamini also had no interest. What she wanted was to put Kuldipak in some business activities, but was not in a hurry and was waiting for appropriate time to hit the nail on its head. Presently, she being only the recent member of the family, it was the time to study the family atmosphere and seek the ground for proper action.

And it did not take long to acquaint herself with the nature of all the family members and start making ground for accomplishment of her plans. She started talking to her mother-in-law about the need for Kuldipak to take interest in family business and earn something. Pratha was not in a position to force him, but she really wanted that her son should do something profitable. Earlier he was studying and they did not force him to help his father in his shop, even when he was free in vacations, although all other boys in similar situation used to extend their helping hands to their parents. They were aware that that would be the best utilization of the leisure time for him, which would provide

him an opportunity to gain experience for handling the business independently, but could not persuade him despite many pieces of advice in this regard. She asked her to convince him, as she possessed the capability to mould him the way she liked.

She knew that she could mould him according to her will. But she wanted this persuasion to be initiated by other members. Her own persuasion, she knew, would be successful in taking up the assignment happily, which she did not want. So she pleaded her helplessness in this matter under the pretext of her recent entry in his life. She promised to co-operate them in case they initiate the spurring. How could they ignore such views of a girl understanding such responsibility at such an age? Soon he was getting advice from all other members, some times from the individuals and some times from the group. He got irritated soon and demanded why they were all after him to make him sit in the shop immediately after marriage. They argued that a person without work is not seen with regard in the society. Earlier he did have an excuse as he was studying. But now the people would start whispering for terming him worthless, and that he would not fetch regard from his wife and her family if he remains unoccupied. It is said that an unoccupied mind is devil's workshop. There was a point in their argument. He was not willing to look lowly in the eyes of her wife. He was eager to discuss the issue with her at the earliest.

In the evening, when he noticed Kamini was free after her routine in the kitchen, he called her in their room.

'All the family members are pressurizing me to start sitting in the shop and look after the family business.' As if he was complaining. 'What should I do? I don't like to sit in the shop for whole the day.'

'You like it or not,' Kamini threw a pleasing smile, 'but their demand is justified.'

'You mean you are also with them?'

'I am with you also, rather more with you than with anybody else.' Her voice seemed to be laced with honey. 'But what is true should not be denied. Nobody likes an idle man.'

'That means my Kamini also doesn't like me.'

'She can't, but she must desire that her hubby is respected by all, in the family, in the society.'

'If you insist I will start sitting in the shop for whole day long. But, I tell you, I am not interested in shopkeepers job.'

'This problem can be sorted out. The problem is not that you must sit in the shop, but that you must do something. If you don't want to indulge in the running business then some other occupation can be thought over.'

‘But which one? I am not qualified for a good offers for a job and don’t have experience to take up a new entrepreneurship.’

‘That hesitation is natural. But if one has the will, supported by a good brain, which you have got with the grace of God, it does not make much difference even if you start something from the scratch. There are examples of people who started with virtually nothing and ended up enjoying the ownership of big business empires.’

‘Apart from the gradients described by you another commodity is also a must. And that commodity is that the man should have a wife full of enthusiasm and confidence.’

‘Thanks. I will not let down your faith. I will definitely do something for your upliftment in status and success, but only if the elders allow you to take up a business other than the one being conducted by the family.’

‘That should not be a problem. The income from the shop won’t increase much even if I start sitting there. Papa and grandpa are already looking after it. But if we start another business, that would fetch additional income. I think all will agree to it. They don’t go against my will otherwise also. But what if we don’t succeed in the new business?’

‘These are the initial hick ups. It is true that there remains a risk in any business, the shop run by papa and grandpa included. But with a little care and proper attention one can earn much in business as compared to other occupations. You can take example of Ranjan’s papa. He was a subordinate of my papa in his office. He left the job only a few years ago and established their own hosiery unit, without having any previous experience of that business. Now they are in millions.’

‘But he had sufficient experience of office management. And I don’t possess even that.’

‘Then, if you don’t mind, we can seek guidance from them. I think Ranjan will be ready to help us by letting you see their factory and explain you about the trade operation.’

‘But guidance can’t be a substitute for the experience.’

‘And if you agree, we can ask him to let you work in his factory for some time. You can learn the tricks of the trade by managing the affairs under their guidance.’

The proposal was not readily acceptable to Kuldipak; but not due to some misunderstanding. Surely he did have some doubts about the relations between Kamini and Ranjan before that incident. But his mind was clear now when she explained their old family relations during casual discussions. His hesitation was due to the obligation attached to their help, which he was not willing to accept. Kamini was also not interested in putting extra ordinary pressure for acceptance of her proposal.

‘No, problem. You take your time and decide. It shall be only your decision which will prevail. You remember they have invited us on lunch this Sunday. They are very nice

people. You can have an idea of their business and their nature during casual conversation. If you feel like not taking any help, we are free to go our own nice way without even disclosing our intentions to them.' Kamini was hitting the nail right on its head.

'And if a man has a companion like you, full of confidence, full of capabilities, there remains no scope for pessimism. I will surely discuss the matter,' said he.

The lunch on Sunday with Ranjan and family removed all the hesitation from Kuldipak's mind. Hospitality and humility shown by them was enough to attract him closer for establishing friendly relations with them. They disclosed the tricks of their trade, including some trade secrets, to him, without any hesitation, with the emphasis on their indications that they consider Kamini as their family member, and, hence, her husband is like their own son-in-law. Ranjan also invited him to pay a visit to their factory and see their manufacturing activities. He promised to visit on Monday itself and that he was very eager to see it.

Next day he and Kamini went to the factory. Kuldipak was impressed to see the grandeur of their factory. He was told that they are very good paymasters, because, as per their belief, best results can be obtained from the workmen and employees by treating them with respect and paying them properly. He was further surprised to see their annual report. If they can earn so much profit by paying their huge staff so lavishly, why can't he get good returns? Even half the rate of return would be much more than what they earn from the shop with equal investment. At this point Kamini sought opinion from Ranjan whether Kuldipak should also start some similar business. He was to play the role of a pusher, which he did with perfection.

'Nothing is left these days in trading through small shops in view of mushrooming big malls. And there is no use in wasting time in seeking employment in the units owned by others, paying in alms and demanding in truck loads of work.' He stopped to see the reaction, and when satisfied that he was treading the right path, started spreading the net.

'If you are really interested, I have a good proposal. We are not able to meet our demand with in-house production and have to engage some ancillary units. These are owned by our business associates. We pick up their production by paying agreed upon rates, which is decided from time to time with the consideration of costs of manufacturing. We add handsome profit to the costs, as even then that remains below our in-house cost owing to our high wages and overheads. If you like, we shall be pleased to accept you as our associate, for which we can provide you proper guidance. And, before that, if you want, you can gain some experience by working with us as Assistant Production Manager and learn the process under our able Production Manager. You can start your production unit when you think you have got the ability to do that.'

'How much investment shall be needed for such unit?'

'That depends on the capacity you intend to install, as number of machines you need and stock of raw materials and other working capital required will depend on that factor. Investment on land and building can be avoided as that can be taken on lease agreement. Funds won't be a big issue, as loan from the banks is not difficult to get these days. And we are here to take care of that all. But don't take any step in a hurry. You think over it, make up your mind and decide. In the mean time, if you want to, can come any day to gain the experience.'

Signs of approval were seen now on Kuldipak's face. Any hesitation, though not visible, was further removed with cleverness of a fox:

'And what fun is for you, Kamini, by sitting idle in house whole day long? You can also come and learn office procedures besides remaining in Kuldipak's company.'

Now what escape was left for Kuldipak?

It did not take long for Kuldipak to understand the production process. But family members were not in favor of starting a new venture when their own occupation was accomplishing their needs well. Pratha was of the opinion that he should take up the responsibility of their family occupation. Sansar was crossing sixty two and needed some reduction in his responsibilities, if not complete retirement, but was forced to obtain help from his eighty three years old father. How long Azad Singh can extend the helping hand further and how would Sansar control the hoard of workers and customers in the shop at his own? His health was also not good; he feels tired with a little physical exertion. But Kuldipak was not ready to yield an inch. He argued that if the returns from the factory touch his expectations then there would be no need for continuing with the burdensome and lowly shop business. Perhaps it is the human nature that people are not satisfied with their own profession and take the profession of others as more lucrative and easy. It may be due to the fact that hardships involving those professions are experienced only by the people attached; outsiders see only the income and prosperity. That may also be a reason that Kuldipak never had shown interest in the shop. His elders may have continued it as they had no capability and will to switch over to some other profession. But Kuldipak possessed an enterprising nature, well augmented by stubbornness. And, moreover, he was the only child, that too a boy, a favor bestowed on them against loads of worship and prayers. And who else was to own and utilize the property they would leave after them? And of what use it would be if that couldn't purchase the happiness for their loved one now? And, moreover, it could prove to be instrumental in realizing the significance of earning in his mind, a quality they were so anxious to see in him.

Paper formalities for loan, like project report and feasibility report were taken care of by Ranjan and his office staff. And by the time Kuldipak started considering himself competent for the project implementation, they had already installed the machinery and arranged for the materials needed for commissioning. He was impressed to see the influence of Ranjan in the offices of authorities dealing with tax and other Govt. matters, which helped in issuing the required certificates and permissions so early to him. Three months of his marriage with Kamini was not a long time, but he was converted from a loafer to an entrepreneur in that short period. What if it was at a cost of parting with the spare funds available with the family and hypothecation of the house, machinery and stock with the bank? You know, you have to sacrifice something in order to gain something.

The cost calculated by Ranjan for arriving at the purchase price, after including his profit of course, was quite fair. On completion of six months, a period for which the company of Ranjan generally signs a contract, Kuldipak was pleased to see a huge profit in the report from his accountant. He was impressed with their working and business policies. Whatever they do they do with honesty. They take business as a business and don't let personal relations interfere in it. That is why they don't keep their business associates on verbal promises, but favor them with written agreements, which are, generally, for a period of three months. They were also quite conscious in releasing the payments at the agreed dates. Other associates, who came in contact during this period, were also a satisfied lot. He was impressed, gratefully, with the sincerity of Ranjan, who spared time for him from his busy business schedule, burdened immensely further with the load of

study he was pursuing alongwith, especially at this time when final examinations were nearing. It was he who had arranged training for him and made him skillful in such a short span. It was he who was instrumental in persuading Kamini for taking up the office matters for his help. He extended his support by providing guidance in her office problems. Kamini also proved to be a fast learner and dedicated to the job. It was not possible for him to handle such a challenging project without her support. He was thankful to his mom who granted approval to Kamini to help him in office routine instead of harnessing her in household chores.

But there was a little problem in extending the agreement further, as explained to him by Ranjan. The Hosiery Industry they were attached to was a seasonal Industry, where work was in full swing for six seven months, average load during two three months, but very little in the remaining time. They were ready to pick up his production at the rates previously agreed upon, but volume was to be lowered owing to starting of the off-season. He got assurance from them that they would still manage to break even. But Kamini was not satisfied with break even only. She insisted that they hadn't taken such a big step just for achieving break-even point, but were eager to work harder than even before and earn something. Otherwise how would they justify such a huge investment to their parents? Would it not lower their value in the family? She pressurized him to help them, even if at the cost of other associates, quota of whom could be reduced further for accommodating their extra production. But Ranjan suggested another way-out, which was, as he informed, being followed by majority of other associates. It was in the knowledge of Kuldeepak that Ranjan's company exports quite a big chunk of their production. He explained that the export operations were started by them to convert this seasonal business to an all weather affair. But, as they didn't have huge funds needed for the activity, they had to tie up their associates alongwith. Although they attained sufficient funds later on, but they did not let down their associates by ignoring their interests. For this purpose a tri-party agreement was being made. The produce was lifted from the associates at the agreed rates by Ranjan's company, who held the export license. The foreign firm importing the material formed the third party in that agreement. Payment was made by the foreign party to Ranjan's company, on receiving which they pay to their associates.

'But what precautions are taken to avoid withholding or denial of payment by the foreign company? I mean, what if they indulge in fraudulent practices?' Asked Kamini.

'Your doubts are not unfounded. But it is not easy in international trade. We export only against L/C, I mean letter of credit, which is issued by the bankers of the foreign importers. Such clause is incorporated in the agreement itself. The payment is released by the bank as soon as a certificate from the mutually agreed upon quality insurers is issued declaring that the consignment has reached them and that the quality is upto the mark. We take insurance cover for any transit damage or losses, and thus take no chances for any risk. Only problem in this matter is that payment is delayed by almost a month further as compared to the payment we make to our associates against the formal agreement. But that is compensated by the extra rate we allow to our associates in such cases.' Ranjan explained.

‘Then the proposal is worth considering.’ Kamini responded.

‘No, Kamini. You should adhere to the principals of business. You should go in complete details of any transaction before executing it. Why did you not ask which rate would be received by you?’

‘Now you will not pay us less, you are our family friend. Anyhow, what would be the rate?’

‘Family relations should not be allowed to override the business relations. Don’t go ahead unless clear about every details, okay. Well, we pay ten percent extra in such agreements than the ordinary agreement.’

‘Ten percent? Isn’t it too much? By increasing the rate by ten percent there is likelihood of increase in profits by hundred percent.’

‘Off course that would be. We follow the policy of proper sharing of profits with our associates, and not gulping the whole lot selfishly. It is not easy to digest.’

‘Then why should we enter the other agreement, when this one is available.’

‘We don’t allow such free will to our associates. But in your case we will have to reconsider our policy. You have become expert in encashing the relations and asked me for something first time in the presence of Kuldipakji. I can’t refuse. You can go ahead.’

Joy of Kuldipak knew no bounds.

Workload in factory was immense, not only for Kuldipak, but also for Kamini. This excessive work was bound to be reflected in avoidance of household chores. Although Pratha allowed her, willingly, to look after the office job, yet that cannot be a ground for complete renunciation from the household responsibilities. Pratha did not have a complaining nature; that is why she avoided even casual talk on the subject, not only with Kamini but with her mother-in-law, or with other ladies from the neighborhood as well. On the contrary she used to appreciate her daughter-in-law for the commitment she was showing in her son's support and toiling hard for his success. But Durga was not content with the behavior of Kamini. It is true that she used to share business responsibilities with Kuldipak. But how does it absolve her off the responsibilities attached to her house and family? How is it possible for a sixty year old Pratha to shoulder the full load of the household? The odd jobs handled by contractual working ladies, no doubt, reduce some burden, but that is not sufficient for relieving her in the absence of some help from a responsible family member. And what help can Durga provide her at this age of eighty? And Pratha was also not getting any younger. Difficulties were definitely to increase for her in the coming days. Many a times she had discussed with her to tackle the issue in the beginning, but Pratha did not want to blow the issue out of proportions. She was of the opinion that once the work in the factory is streamlined and Kuldipak is in a position to handle the affairs independently, she would automatically pay attention to the household.

Similar was the condition in the shop. Age of Azad Singh was not allowing him to contribute much in the shop activities despite his willingness. And, although many people work quite efficiently at the age of Sansar, but he was not having that kind of physique. Off late he had started feeling fatigue with a slight exertion. His blood pressure started remaining high. The doctors had advised him thorough checkup. But he did not take it seriously. He was casual in taking the medicines and was not much worried about the skips. The problems at the shop had increased manifold with leaving by the old accountant. With switching off the sales tax to VAT by the govt. there remained a big confusion. The tax authorities were also not co-operating in the manner they used to, i.e., by accepting the gratitude for ignoring the minor flaws. They were summoning them time and again for some clarification. But the person kept for the purpose was new, and not conversant with the procedure. Sansar had to run to those offices by leaving the shop under the supervision of his old father. Then there were the problematic visits of shop inspectors and a hoard of other such authorities sapping the blood like ardent parasites. Had Kuldipak started sitting at the shop instead of indulging in factory, he would certainly have been offered full support by Sansar, and by Azad Singh as well. But it was beyond the capacity of the old folks to continue running the show at their own. At times Sansar considered it better to close the shop and start helping him in his office activities. But that remained only a thought.

At times he wished to have been blessed with at least another son, who could help him in his business. That day, when he was returning home, exhausted with demanding workload that day, he remembered the day when Saksham was advocating one child norm on TV and winning the thunderous applause from some fools in the garb of intellectuals. They should come to him and see his plight. It is very difficult for the only

son, he thought, to carry the burden of his parents alongwith the responsibilities of his own family. It is easy if it is shared by two or more sons. But he also had a great love for Saksham and regard for her views. If she had said something, that cannot be considered as baseless. She was blessed with intelligence at par with any genius, which was further sharpened in the company of Hasmukh. And how much she still cared for them, despite knowing the fact that she was adopted at her birth. The act of three elder girls was also not coming in their relations, for which she could have held them guilty and started hating them. She is always eager to visit them whenever she gets time. She had visited them at least four times in the last nine or ten months despite her busy schedule. He knew that she was a responsible officer in the channel where her schedule was quite hectic. But even then she was getting time for writing. She had become a prominent name in the literary circles and, as informed by Hasmukh, was also earning handsome remuneration for her writings. He was, suddenly, filled with mixed emotions of great love for her child and remorse for not keeping her with them, although she was not considered separated by living with Hasmukh. Had he not adopted her, he would still have the same entitlement over her. The ideas empowered him to think in line with her opinion. What if the other son also is not interested in family business and takes up another profession, he thought. He remembered the plight of many such persons who had many sons but no body was in their control. In some cases the brothers used to quarrel over their share in property and all considering their parents as culprits for not giving them their fair share, with misconception to everyone that the others have got something extra than him. Reprieve from worldly troubles, he thought, was available only to the lucky ones. It was still a matter of satisfaction that his son was not demanding now for his lavish expenses, but earning better than him, as he had told that day. Otherwise, these days, there are the persons whose sons do nothing, except than pressurizing their parents for yielding to their demands. He was now satisfied man due to this thinking. How rough and adamant he used to be before his marriage, he thought. But the girl had converted him to a hardworking and intelligent entrepreneur. He had attained maturity and sense of responsibility within one year of his marriage, or due to the ten months he spent in the business, thanks, in both cases, to the relationship he had with Kamini.

Any father of his condition was likely to think the way he was thinking. How could he detect, what to say of detecting, even have an iota of doubt, that his satisfaction was not to last long? He was not an angel, though possessed with the nature similar to the one, to foresee the ensnarement his son was likely to be caught into.

Kuldipak and Kamini continued production at even more vigorous pace than earlier, despite lean season, thanks to the extended help from Ranjan. They, no doubt, had to face a financial crunch, not only due to extra production or delay in receiving the sale proceeds, but also due to reluctance of raw material suppliers for relaxation of payment terms. They had been purchasing the materials against fifty percent payment as advance and balance within thirty days of receipt, and were quite regular in making payments to them well within the time. As per norms of the industry they were also expecting the supplies on hundred percent credit for two months. But they, being new in this business, were not being extended this privilege yet. This additional burden affected payments of their other liabilities, statutory payments like taxes and duties and provident fund payments included. It was difficult even to make the payment of wages to the workers in time. But they were just managing and were happy to see the tremendous figures of profit accrued on the sales volume. They were hopeful that the present crisis was only a temporary phase. Once the payments start coming in, the funds would multiply owing to the margins and due to likelihood of relaxation of terms by the suppliers. They had already planned to plough back the profits for better liquidity of their organization. At the moment they were doing what they thought was the best for phasing out of this hard time. And the best thing they considered for them was to maximize the production, as that would lead to more profits. And for that they could get little time to spare even for business related discussions between them, what to say of casual leisure talk. Many a times they were not able to even take their lunch together. Due to the burden of responsibilities on them they were not in a position to attend the marriage of Saksham, his dear sister. How he wished that the occasion been solemnized in Delhi instead of Mumbai. But that was not to be. He was content that all other family members participated in the ceremony, and he remained virtually with them through phone lines.

But that day they could adjust their routine and were taking lunch together, and were seemingly relaxed at the moment. And there was a great reason for that. Two months had passed since they dispatched their first overseas consignment, the quality of which had been accepted by the quality control inspectors of the party. The payment of this consignment was likely to be released by the bank on receiving that inspection report, which was likely to be supplied to them within a day or two. This would start the process of realizing the sales proceeds regularly and would be instrumental in releasing the pressure on their funds. They had just taken the lunch and were just relaxing for a while when the bell of the telephone rang. Kamini picked up the phone. It was Ranjan at the other side.

‘Hello, yeah, hi Ranjan, how are you?’ She remained mum for a few moments to listen to him. But her face expressions kept changing swiftly, from gladness to anxiousness. ‘What are you talking about? How did it happen?..... What is the way out now?..... We are coming to you and would discuss personally.’

Kuldipak was anxious to know what the matter was. Kamini told him that there was a problem with their second and third dispatch. The consignments were damaged in transit and were not being accepted by the party’s quality department. Now the consignment was to be returned back and the material to be replaced with a good quality material. The

payment was to be released only after getting the consignment replaced. To and fro freight and other expenses would have to be borne by the consignors, which was to be debited to them as per tri-party agreement. The losses suffered due to the damage were to be assessed only after return of the consignment. Ranjan would inform the insurance company with a request to depute the surveyor for assessing the loss and file the claim with the company accordingly. The fears were that the payment against these consignments would be released only after realization of the loss, that too only to the tune of recovery. They had dispatched only four consignments during this period, out of which two were in the doldrums, and fourth was sent only recently, payment of which was expected only after two months. The proceeds against the first consignment would be consumed for making the payment of wages to the workers, leaving virtually no funds for payment to the suppliers, who are supposed to be paid within fifteen days from now.

The situation, which was being relished in the hope of being in the last lap of difficulty, suddenly turned out to be very insipid for Kuldipak. The factory they were thinking of minting gold for them was suddenly turning to be a funds guzzler. They were already facing shortage of funds due to enhanced production volume. The delay in payment would land them in deep financial crisis. They are to purchase raw materials to continue the production process, supply of which would depend on their ability to make payments in time. Stopping of production would mean idling of labour, retention of which without any work would be a big burden, but retrenching would also lead to a big compensation package for them. Moreover, it would not be easy to engage them again on improvement of situation at a later stage. And cost of interest on loans and govt. taxes would continue swelling during the period of lay-off. They had entered into the present agreement mainly for the recovery of this component of cost, although allurements due to high margin of profit imagined by them can also not be ruled out as another reason.

Only way out left for them was to go to Ranjan and beseech help from him. He was a nice person and had the capability to bail them out. Their problems can be sorted out to a great extent if he releases even half of the payment in advance. Kamini was quite confident that he would help them. She encouraged Kuldipak not to lose hope and took him to Ranjan. He was just waiting for them, with a slightly less pleasing smile on his lips, which contained a sense of despair also, seen only first time by Kuldipak.

‘You see, ups and downs are part and parcel of any business. What we earn through a business transaction is the reward for taking risk of golden uncertainties attached to it. You are unlucky to face the unforeseen so early. But that would not be a deterrent for the entrepreneurs like you. Be brave and try to make up for this loss with additional zeal.’

‘It is your support on the basis of which we have taken up such a heavy project,’ Kamini looked as an icon of humility. ‘Now we have come to you with a great hope of help from you at this moment of crisis.’

‘Look, Kamini, you are not alone to bear this loss; we also have to share equally with you. Rather we will have to suffer more than you. But, even then, I will be pleased to extend helping hand, what can I do for you?’

‘We earnestly request to oblige us with some funds in the shape of advance payment against our consignments.’

‘Well, let me tell you Kamini, that I am not the sole proprietor of this firm. You know, ours is a Limited company. I am to work under a policy framed by the board of directors, for which I am answerable to them. Moreover, you know, we are also running short of funds due to heavy investment we have made in the new factory being established at tax free zone in Himachal Pradesh.’

‘No, no, Ranjan, you can’t do that. Please, you are the only hope for us. You are our best friend. If you don’t help us who else would?’ Kamini was almost weeping.

‘OK, let me search for a solution. Well, I shall try to help you by releasing the payment of your first consignment on receiving the same by us.’

‘What kind of help is involved in that? You are to release that payment. I don’t see any obligation attached to that.’ There was a little anguish in her voice now.

‘Then you are not fully conversant with the clauses of the agreement. We have to keep some security deposit for covering the risk of late delivery deductions by the overseas customers and other unforeseen losses involved. In your case the deposit was to be taken from the proceeds of the first consignment. But I will use my discretionary power to release the payment without such deduction.’

‘OK, we are extremely grateful for this gesture. But that wouldn’t be sufficient for bailing us out of this crisis. We need more concrete support from you.’

‘At the moment I can help you’ Ranjan said after thinking over for a while, ‘by making arrangement for some additional loan, if you so desire’

‘But how is that possible? We have already taken the maximum that we could. Our machinery and stock have already been pledged and our house already hypothecated.’

‘That, I think, is not a big problem. Some banks provide loan as second charge on the same property. Also, I think, your shop is free from all liabilities. Loan can be arranged against that also.’

‘You mean we should pressurize our parents again for bearing additional burden, though unwillingly. What you don’t comprehend is that it would lower our image in their eyes. We don’t want even to let them know of this situation. Papa is already a patient of hypertension, you know. And if you are not to extend any helping hand, then of what use is keeping in our business relations intact. If we are to arrange for our funds at our own then why shouldn’t we market our produce independently?’

‘That is your outlook. We don’t pressurize our associates to be bound with our will. I won’t recommend you to do this because of the long personal association with you, but have no problem in parting our ways in business activities.’

‘No, no, Kamini, don’t be provoked due to spur of this bad moment.’ Kuldipak interfered. ‘And Ranjan, you should know that Kamini’s discomfort is only due to her inability to cope up with the bad times she is facing first time in her life. Would you snap the ties, so old and precious, due to such trifling events?’

‘I believe in keeping business and personal relations in separate brackets, though, at times, these get mixed up, unintentionally or intentionally. For example, I have given preference to you folks for taking you as our business associates over many other well-qualified and experienced parties. In my opinion any relations can last only through reciprocation. One-sided relations don’t have any value. I would not linger behind in my response to any hand of friendship, but won’t die for holding it if it brings contempt.’

‘No, Dipu, he just wants to get rid of us. Sorry Ranjan, I could not understand you in so many years. I was under the false impression that you are a guy who would stand for friend’s sake with a fair degree of sincerity. But you turned out to be a fair weather friend. Okay, we float or we sink, but won’t come to you for any help.’

‘Kuldipakji, it would be better if you ask her to leave. I am not in a habit to tolerate such an insult. Your payment will be sent to you as per the terms of the agreement. I will send you the notice needed for termination of the agreement, which will be annulled in the manner prescribed for.’

Kuldipak had no choice but to go alongwith Kamini, knowing little what to do further in such a demanding situation. His brain was totally frozen to understand even the normal things. How could, then, he understand the drama Kamini and Ranjan were performing with such a real and natural acting?

Working of one year in AIIMS, Delhi was quite good for Subodh to learn and gain experience. The experience proved to be of immense importance for developing confidence in him for opening of his own nursing home. He spared no stone unturned in his efforts to learn maximum in the limited available time. He used to work extra time almost daily. At times he could not find time even to talk to Saksham. Many a times he had to switch off his phone for attending to the cases in casualty ward. And when he talked to her later on, with apology on his lips for not calling her, or for not attending to her call, she would laugh it off, saying she knew the problems of a doctor, and that when she had herself chosen a doctor for her lifetime company, she has no business to complain. He could not spare much time for paying regular visits to Saksham's family in Delhi. He went to the house only three or four times, and to the office of Kuldipak only twice, once on inauguration of his factory, and second time when he was passing by that area, which was the only time he met a family member of Saksham in her absence. Saksham used to come to Delhi every two three months. And he used to go to Mumbai at similar intervals. And when he submitted one months notice cum resignation and asked for his relieving on one year of completion of his service, it appeared to him that the month had expanded that time enormously. And on relieving from the job he traveled to his home city in very relaxed mood. His father had purchased a good space, good as per Mumbai standards owing to the high costs involved in comparison to other cities, for establishing his nursing home.

He was given a grand welcome in Mumbai, not only by his family or by Saksham's family, but also by his old friends, who were waiting eagerly for his return. He was very happy on his homecoming and wanted to enjoy the pleasant situation, but could not find time for celebrations, though having full support from the friends for that. The reasons for that were obvious. He was to arrange for the celebrations related to his marriage with Saksham, which was to be solemnized within fifteen days from his return. And what was the logic for celebrating other trifling events when mother of all celebrations was knocking at his door. He remained busy in formalities of sending invitations to his friends and relatives, in making arrangements for the ceremony and in shopping for the occasion.

And the occasion turned out to be a big gathering of high-class society, welcomed with a lavish hospitality. After all it was a marriage involving an only son of a rich family with an established writer and only daughter of a well to do family. Saksham was against all pomp and show because of her ideals related to simplicity in life. But she had to relent keeping in view the emotions of others attached to this marriage. All her relatives, including some distant ones, attended, despite situated at far away places, except for Kuldipak and his wife, whose presence she wished the most. But their absence was compensated to a great extent, partly by their constant touch with her with their perpetual phone calls and mainly due to the satisfaction she got due to the change of nature of his brother, who could now shoulder all the responsibilities with his sincere efforts. Another person she missed was Neelu, who was away for her honeymoon after her recent marriage with Rahul. She herself was reluctant to go abroad for honeymoon at this stage, as the important job of establishing the nursing home was to be accomplished, and the

travel could be postponed. But she had to agree here also keeping in view the zeal and happiness it could provide to her loved ones, Doctor Subodh including.

On returning from abroad both of them got busy than ever before. Subodh had to arrange for the opening of his nursing home, and Saksham had to help him in this in addition to her office responsibilities, which had been increased due to some work gone in arrears owing to her absence due to her marriage. Her creative writing had also been affected, but she was happy that she was utilizing the time for setting up of nursing home for her loving hubby. She used to visit the site for nursing home as and when she could spare time. Today Subodh was waiting for her at the site, where they were to discuss and give final shape to some important proposals. They had planned to go home together after finalizing that assignment. He was surprised to hear the voice of Rahul:

‘Would you take this heart patient under your able treatment, doctor?’ He was smiling at the door, alongwith Neelu with mischievous shine in her eyes.

‘Oh, great, Rahul, at last you have come.’ Subodh exclaimed. ‘And, oho, your daughter, I mean would be mother of your daughter, is also along.’ He hugged them both. ‘But I think your heart is quite hale and hearty.’ He said looking at Neelu carefully.

‘And how is your heart doing?’

‘Coming just now, you ask directly.’

Incidentally, Saksham came at this very moment, and was pleased to see the guests. She embraced them and complained:

‘We are extremely angry with you. Why didn’t you come in our marriage ceremony?’

‘No complaints, no excuses.’ Rahul said. ‘You could not come in ours and we could not in yours, while all of us were willing, rather anxious to join.’

‘Yeah, then an operation case got complicated, needing my presence. Saksham was also there, who could not leave me at that difficult time. With the grace of God I could save the patient, but at the cost of being deprived of the pleasure of watching the marriage ceremony of a friend.’

‘Not a friend, but of two friends.’ Neelu interrupted.

‘Two friends going to become one.’ Subodh also enjoyed the sweet and sour.

‘Now will you carry on talking or arrange for some eatables also?’ Saksham just reminded him. Subodh called a worker and asked him to make arrangements for snacks.

‘You know, Neelu, we are not only the frineds, but I am also a distant relative of Subodh, and that too from two sides.’ Rahul continued during snacks.

‘Oh, really? Then how should I address him?’

‘From one side he is son of my maternal aunt’s sister, and from the other he is son of my father’s maternal uncle’s cousin.’

‘The chains are too long to comprehend. You tell me, simply, if I have to touch his feet or he has to touch mine.’

‘No need. We shall confine ourselves to friendship only. True friends have more bondage than any relatives.’ Subodh said.

And when they asked for their leave, Subodh asked them to leave after dinner at their home. But they left with a promise to accompany them at their dining table on some other day.

Evening had already set in when Kuldipak and Kamini left Ranjan's factory. They drove straight to their own factory. Kuldipak was just driving the car, but his brain was blank, with all the traffic of ideas diverted towards some other route. Only thing he could discuss in the car was that their decision to scrap the agreement due to rush of blood was a hasty decision. But Kamini was firm. She argued that she knew Ranjan better than him, and that he was just finding some excuses to get rid of them so that he could avoid the help they needed. He turned out to be a fair weather friend only. She advised him not to lose heart, and that they would discuss the matter in detail, weigh all the alternatives, and reach at an appropriate decision to get through these difficult times.

When they reached the factory the time for closure of office had already passed. There were not many staff members on roll in their office, but a few assistants they had for their routine jobs had already gone. Only personal assistant of Kuldipak was present, who gave him a list of phone calls and important messages, and asked for leaving. Kuldipak allowed him to go. Both sat in his office, can't say for discussion or for relaxing.

'What is the way out now? My brain is numb, I can't think anything at the moment.' Kuldipak expressed complete surrender to the situation.

'We will have to think, and think fast as well. We can't see the storm take us away unaware. We have to hold something very solid, and hold it very soon.'

'The ladies can use their brains more effectively in such situations as compared to the men. Okay you think over and suggest the way out.' Kuldipak said while watching the list of urgent messages.

'In my opinion we should start selling our produce in the local market or to other exporters directly. We can also appoint our sole marketing agents for different areas.'

'But how is that possible? Payment terms of local market are three months, which, at times, are stretched further in some situations. Marketing agents would take away all our profits in the name of commission and overheads. And the rates offered by other exporters are too less, so much so that it would be difficult even to break even. '

'But how other people supplying to them manage all this? Now all are not exporting through Ranjan and company.'

'That I don't know. All I know is that what they pay as price would be less even than what is needed to cover our cost of production.'

'The other day I casually discussed this point with my assistant. I was informed that they use the raw material much cheaper than the one we use. And if that is acceptable to the exporters, we can also earn something. That day you were also telling that an agent of a company had contacted you for such materials.'

‘Yes, there was an offer, quite a good one. But they were demanding full payment against documents through bank.’

‘That would be risky affair. If they send substandard material, and don’t replace it later on, our funds would be blocked.’ Kamini expressed her concerns.

‘Problem is not that. They were ready to supply with quality certificate of the batch from a laboratory recognized by Indian Standard Institute. The real problem is of funds needed for requirement of additional working capital in order to switch over to full payment instead of 50% credit. And when our export payment is blocked, we are unable to make the balance payment of our present suppliers. And if we don’t pay, they will stop our future supplies, and start litigation. Our production will stop due to shortage of raw materials, and we shall be out of business, rendered jobless, with all the liabilities intact, inflating at a rapid pace due to interest and other liabilities.’

‘The problem does not end here. Suppose we make payment to our suppliers, and they continue their supplies, even then we can’t continue our production as we shall not be able to sell it at the rates being offered earlier.’

‘Then what should we do?’ Kuldipak said after spending some time in thinking.

‘In this situation we are left with only one feasible alternative.’ Kamini said with authority of an expert executive. ‘We should withhold the payment of our present suppliers, which can be released after some time, when position improves, contact the cheaper suppliers and ask them to supply on credit, or against similar terms as being followed by other suppliers. And last, but not the least, rather of utmost importance, arrange for some additional funds.’

‘No, the party is not ready to supply on credit right in the beginning. I had discussed it then, but as per their policy, they would consider credit terms only after watching our credibility in payments. Initially we will have to buy cash, which we do not possess, even for relinquishing our current liabilities. And what about your matter of utmost importance? How will we arrange additional funds?’

‘For that, please don’t mind, we will have to knock at the doors of our dear parents.’

‘I don’t think they can arrange more funds now.’

‘They certainly can. Question is whether they would or not. What are we to do with the property if it does not save us from these gallows?’

‘You mean by selling the house? But I don’t think they would agree to it. They have spent their life there and would not like to part with it. In fact I also don’t like to.’

‘Question is not of liking it or not. Question is what will happen if we don’t do it. Our factory will be shut down. We shall not be able to repay our loans. The machines and

stock would not fetch even half the price we have paid for that. And the bank would start action for recovery of loan, which would end up in auction of all machines, stocks and then the house. I don't think that would be tolerable to any member of the house, including me. So let us not be emotional, but try to realize the situation. You should also have another go for making that party agree for credit supplies. But don't waste time in delaying the discussion for selling the house, as the sale of property on short notice is not that easy, and extra time means inflating of liabilities and diminishing of our credibility in the market.'

Kuldipak noticed now, watching the messages list, that the representative of the new supplier had left a message for him. He dialed the number and started discussion on their rates, terms of supply, terms of payment, and possibilities of some relaxations in that.

Little did he know that the supplier was not to relax the terms, as he was the man sent by Ranjan in order to tighten the noose on his neck.

The news of some murky affairs in the business started by their son came not less than a shock to the family. They did not have any experience of such business, and were against starting of a new venture when their own business was sufficient for their livelihood. But they were not in a position to do anything for damage control at this stage; they were having neither the will nor any expertise. And they were not even willing to invest more in that business, lest that also goes in drain. Moreover, they did not have any spare funds for that. All the funds that they had saved for a rainy day were already taken away by this business. What to say of the savings, even there was loan liability still hovering over their head, ready to gulp their house also, which could now be saved only by diverting some funds from the shop and by taking some help from some near and dear ones, provided, of course, if Kuldipak shuts down the business and diverts the proceeds from sale of assets for relinquishing this liability. And what was the problem if he starts helping, rather taking up the shop business seriously. But all the arguments on the subject bore no fruit. Kuldipak was adamant with the reasoning that the proceeds from closing of factory would not suffice for repaying the loan, especially in view of the delay in receipt of payments for the exported consignments. As the delay would continue, the loan would continue to swell due to interest. So, instead of suffering the total loss, argued Kuldipak, duly supported by Kamini, they had no choice but to have another go for it. They could not refuse him, but there was clear bitterness in their relations now. Durga put full blame on Kamini for entangling her innocent grandson by pursuing him to start the enterprise not in his or her capability. Hasmukh had then expressed his doubts, but nobody had taken his advice seriously. But Pratha was not in agreement with her mother-in-law. Why to blame someone else's daughter when your own blood was in no mood to relax. Sansar was blaming this all on their luck, and was of the opinion that that was the testing time for them, which could be made favorable by showing courage in such situation and with sincere efforts. The religious gurus say that even the luck can be changed with hard and sincere work.

Arguments continued for two days, but no decision was reached at. Time was running out for Kuldipak, as the raw material stock in the factory was not much and there was danger of shut down if funds were not arranged in a few days, which could, eminently, result in more losses. All were unable to press their view point of closing the factory and taking up familiar family business seriously, as Kuldipak was not relenting. Presence of Hasmukh, Subhagini and Saksham was felt necessary by them all, including Kuldipak. And they also did not disappoint them, as they came within no time to be with the family in such a difficult and decisive times. Saksham had to come despite a huge workload in her office and requirement of her presence in Subodh's family in initial stage of working of their nursing home. All the members had discussed the matter with them separately and all hoped that the best solution from him would be the one as suggested by him or her. Kuldipak and Kamini pressed their point that though they have been facing a crunch situation, yet that was only due to paucity of funds. They insisted that they had not suffered any huge losses, rather they were not even in loss. It was only blockage of funds in various deals. And that once the funds start flowing in they would surely earn profits, rather huge profits; profits which can not even be dreamed from the shop. They further argued that in case of closure of factory they will have to follow a lengthy procedure during which fixed costs would continue to incur. And machinery of the factory would

not fetch even half the price they had paid. Same was the case with other stocks. There seemed a solid point in his view point. Sansar and Pratha were so frightened with the losses that they foresaw further losses if factory is not closed. Durga and Azad were not ready move out of the house they had been living in for so long. Though they did not have argument to counter the logics of Kuldipak and Kamini, yet some hidden feeling was telling them that carrying on the factory was a dangerous proposition. Today they gathered for finalizing the decision making process.

‘Now whole situation is clear to you uncle,’ Kuldipak voice contained more of a demand than an argument in his address to Hasmukh. ‘Closing of factory at this stage, you see, is very costly proposition. But all here are adamant on closing it. Is it not better if we dispose off this house and save ourselves from sticky position? How embarrassing would it be when we would not be able to repay the bank loan even after closure of the factory and the house is auctioned by the bank!’

‘But who is responsible for this all?’ Sansar was very angry in his tone. ‘When he initially proposed this factory we all opposed it. Didn’t we?’ He was addressing Hasmukh now. ‘Even you opposed it with the argument that he did not have the requisite experience for running such business. But he had no respect for our opinion then, nor he has now.’

‘Please bade papa, don’t talk like that,’ Saksham came forward for his rescue. ‘What is the use of quarreling at this stage? Let us arrive at an amicable solution. Papa what is your opinion?’ She asked to Hasmukh.

‘There is some substance in his argument. We shall certainly be put to some loss if factory is closed. But what guarantee is there that you will not incur further losses?’ Hasmukh asked Kuldipak.

Kuldipak explained his intentions of marketing his products independently and about availability of cheap raw materials.

‘Now you tell me, uncle, is this proposal not workable?’ he asked after summing up.

‘Do you agree with him Kamini?’ Hasmukh put a question to Kamini in stead. ‘Can you market your product and match the intensity of enthusiasm of Kuldipak?’

‘Yes uncle, that is the only way we can make up for the losses’ she seemed quite confident.

‘What do you say Saksham?’ Hasmukh was not in a mood to thrust his views and wanted a democratic decision.

‘The proposal is workable only if conditions remain ideal as envisaged by him. But he has not discounted for the unforeseen events in the same manner as was not done earlier also.’ Saksham expressed her doubts.

‘Now which business does not have risk factors? As per your argument, didi, all people should stop manufacturing.’ Kuldipak was a bit angry.

‘Others keep their production volumes at level where their debts remain manageable. They keep cushion for delay in receivables and see that their business does not suffer for small delays. You also could have done so if you had started at a low level initially and increased production keeping in view the profitability. But you started at a level much higher than your capacity and the financial crunch which could have been absorbed at that level as a small jerk has proven to be a big shock now.’ Saksham saw clear lines of anger on Kuldipak’s face when she was speaking.

‘It is very easy to analyze a situation after the happenings are over.’ Kuldipak said in a bitter tone.

‘You are right. But past mistakes are the best guide for future actions. I have already asked bade papa to not to indulge in blame game but to think future course of action. How can, then, I myself indulge in blame game? I am just analyzing the past in order to tackle future in a better way. I have tried to analyze where you went wrong so that you could remain careful in future.’ Saksham noticed that her logic was not impressive for Kuldipak, as was visible from the emotions at his face.

‘Okay,’ Kuldipak had sarcasm in his voice, ‘it is easy to blame at this stage. Now what was proper course of action for starting this venture.’

‘A wise entrepreneur would have entered the industry for learning tricks of the trade, but you felt those were known to you. By working in that field you could have known exact position of the market and had made your contacts with the parties. You could have worked out what would have been your most optimum product range and quality standards. You could have gained experience on selection of markets and proper modes of packing and dispatching. You started this all before becoming properly mature for it, and are again going for an unripe plan prematurely.’

‘Ok ok, I was a fool to start the project. I did not envisage the negative points of delay in recovery of payments in view of unforeseen events of damage to consignments while in transit. Now you analyze the risks involved in my future plans.’ As if Kuldipak was testing Saksham.

‘Risks are the same as were earlier dear. Rather these are enhanced now. Earlier you were using standard raw materials with guaranteed quality of your finished products. But you have not yet tested the cheap raw materials for quality of the end product. What will be the situation if a large quantity is rejected by the market? You should use new raw material in small quantities initially and if its results are favorable only then it should be adopted in full.’

‘And till then we should keep manufacturing with the same costly raw materials and keep supplying at below cost. Or we should stop production and continue surveying the market for our token production with new raw materials and let the fixed costs accumulate to swallow the whole factory, huh.’

‘Can manufacturing with costly raw materials achieve break even?’ Hasmukh thought fir to intervene.

‘We easily can if we manufacture under brand name of Ranjan’s company, Kamini intervened. ‘But same quality under another name will take time to be accepted and we are not in a position to absorb the cost of that wait.’

‘And for that too additional funds are needed’ said Kuldipak, which can’t be arranged without disposal of the house.’

‘Ok,’ Subhagini, who was listening all that while, also participated, ‘even if we decide to sell the house, how will we get hypothecation to the bank removed?’

‘We have taken this additional loan on second charge to our assets for which this hypothecation is as collateral security’, clarified Kuldipak. ‘We will return that loan and use balance funds in the factory. Original loan against machinery and other assets will continue.’

‘How can you use the whole proceeds of sale of house?’ interrupted Pratha. ‘Well you can use our share. But how can you use Hasmukh’s share? You know they also have claims on this property.’

‘No bhabhi, question is not of claims,’ Hasmukh clarified his intentions, ‘I can forgo that, rather I have never thought of claiming it. It can be used in the manner best suited for whole of the family. But what is needed at the moment is wisdom for treading cautiously. And Kuldipak’s proposal is a step in haste and panic. I also have doubts about success of his proposal. Before any further investments he should have proper knowledge about secrets of that trade. Till he gains that he should try to salvage whatsoever he can from that factory. And Kuldipak, we can save this house only in this manner.’

‘Ok, we sell our factory,’ Kuldipak was not ready to surrender. ‘But proceeds will not be enough to cover all the loans. Then howthe house would be saved?’

‘We have taken only about fifty percent of original value of the assets and have used own savings in acquiring the balance fifty percent. Even if sale of factory fetches proceeds only to cover only the loan amount then we shall be still able to save the house.’

‘And the whole world will be free to deride me as a worthless fellow who siphoned off all the family savings through a foolish adventure.’

‘You can’t hold the tongue of others, but we all shall stand with you. You can make up for those losses by pursuing the family business of shop. You know bhai and pitaji can’t pull on that business alone. They need you there. If you take proper interest then you will, I am sure, take that to new heights.’

‘I am not a loser to surrender so easily. I have to surrender because of the attitude of my family. If you don’t want to sell the house, okay, don’t sell; we shall dispose off the factory. You keep the house intact. But I can’t live here with ignominy of being a failure. I and Kamini shall go somewhere else, away from this suffocation, away from this house, away from this city.’

How could now the family have resisted? ‘But who told you that we are not selling the house?’ Durga responded hurriedly. ‘We were just discussing pros and cons of the decision. What all do we possess in the name of property all belongs to you. It is to be transferred to you after our life. What objection can we raise if it all is taken away by you now?’

Saksham still had intentions to continue this debate and make Kuldipak realize the dangers of false pride he was nurturing. But Hasmukh indicated her not to do that. She had to keep mum in view of the emotions of Durga. But Pratha could not resist herself.

‘Ok, even if we sell the house, we shall not keep the share of Hasmukh. They can use our share only and let Hasmukh keep his intact.’

‘Yes, I will keep my share and purchase a small house with that amount so that all are not forced to look for a rented house.’

‘Then what is the use in selling it.’ Kuldipak realized that his old tactics still had powers to bend the family members. ‘Nothing will be left for investing in factory then. No, you don’t sell the house and leave us alone. We shall face whatsoever is in our destiny, away from this city.’

Durga was unable to endure his dear grandson’s sufferings and not ready live without him even in her dreams. How could she let him go away and suffer when she was alive for caring him? ‘I know my son better than anyone else of you.’ She announced her decision. ‘Kuldipak will not keep his share, but will take it as a loan from him, which would be returned to him in due course. He will show you how he recovers all the losses from this business, you don’t know the mettle of my grandson. And as far as living in a rented accommodation is concerned, we have no problem in living there.’

Now what could Hasmukh or Saksham do? Hasmukh was not ready to hurt feelings of his mother despite the surity in his mind that it was a wrong proposition. And Saksham knew it and was unable to press her view because of her love and respect for Hasmukh.

The house did not fetch the expected price, but that cannot be termed as low if proper weightage is given to the urgency of the family to sell it and to time taken for realization of money. The funds were still not sufficient for the smooth running of factory, but were barely enough for pulling on. The old suppliers, who had been supplying the materials at such an exorbitant rates, were now pressing hard for release of their payments. But Kuldipak was just stretching them, waiting for easing out of the situation when they could start receiving the payments against the sale or on realization of insurance claim. His problems would have been solved if the new suppliers had agreed for credit. But they were adamant at this stage, with a promise to relent after watching their payments. But still the deal was not that bad, as the rates offered by them were much less than the ones offered by their previous suppliers. It was only these rates which were affordable to Kuldipak. There was no scope for profit at old rates. And these difficult times were expected to ease out soon, when the cycle of payments is streamlined and credit is allowed by current suppliers. Kuldipak also tried to explore some other suppliers also, who could supply at the rates of present suppliers, but against some credit. But the parties were reluctant owing partly to their recent entry in this business and mainly to the information they possessed about their previous supplies abroad through Ranjan's firm.

The new suppliers seemed quite professional in their transactions. They would send them a sample of the material to be supplied, alongwith their batch number and date of manufacturing written on the pack, alongwith a certificate from the Govt. approved laboratory certifying its quality. Before final dispatch of their material they used to get final approval of acceptance of quality, which Kuldipak could also get verified at his own level also. The material used to be found of a good quality on getting tested from a local laboratory. On getting his nod the material was being supplied with the swiftness, which only they could show. Their funds crunch was reduced to some extent on getting a part payment from Ranjan for the first and last consignments, which they utilized for discharging other current liabilities and for making payments to staff and workers. Now they had spent three months without taking any help from Ranjan, and were able to manufacture with raw material of optimum quality purchased without his involvement, but at lesser rates, and could market their product without his assistance through some other exporters. They were considering two more months as a difficult phase in their business, after which they were expecting credit facility would be extended to them, the payments against sale would start pouring in, and blocked payment of insurance claim from Ranjan's damaged consignment would be released.

But it was not easy for them to get through these two months so easily. The old suppliers would not let them sit over their payments for long and would start legal action. Delay in payment of statutory taxes and duties would fetch heavy penalties. They were discussing the strategy to cope up with the present situation while in their office.

'It would not be possible to maintain the present level of production with the stock of raw materials available with us.' Kuldipak was telling Kamini. 'We will have either to reduce the production or raise additional funds for raw materials, which is not possible now.'

'And our interests would be affected in either way.' Kamini said.

‘Yes, but question is how these interests are least affected?’

‘This question arises only if we have got some possibility of arranging additional funds. Now only possibility we have left with is to reduce production.’

‘That means reduction in profits. What else can we do to maintain that level?’

‘We can try to convince the suppliers to extend some credit at this stage.’

‘Yeah, but the party is so stubborn. I don’t know how to cope with them. They never agree to our proposal and dictate their own terms. Let this time phase away, we shall teach them a lesson when our day comes.’

‘Okay, that later on. Now you talk to them, but be careful to remain polite, okay.’

Kuldipak dialed some numbers and continued a long discussion, with lot of pleas and requests, but the party was not ready to relax the terms at this stage.

‘No, they don’t agree.’ Kuldipak tried to control his rage in vain.

‘Don’t lose heart. We shall try again in a few days. And what if they still not agree. At the most we will lose some production, and that would not be of much concern, as the recovery of our payments would start enabling us to increase our level to some additional heights.’

‘Can’t say anything at this stage. But what can not be cured has to be endured.’ Kuldipak was complaining aimlessly, when the phone bell rang.

Kuldipak picked up the receiver. His face changed many colors on hearing the voice from other side.

Sansar had got a severe heart attack.

Problem with many of us is that we take many things needing serious attention very casually, especially when related to our health. It is said that on seeing a cat the pigeon closes its eyes and presumes that it has become invisible, only to fall an easy prey to the cat. May be, similar is the case with us. Fear of some serious illness is deep rooted in our unconscious mind. If our doctor advises us some tests for detecting a probable serious illness, we hesitate to go through those tests just to avoid the news of some possible serious trouble. How many of us possess the presence of mind or courage to face the reality in case the tests confirm the seriousness? And people with limited sources of income find it difficult to pay for the heavy cost of tests and treatment. People in developed countries can afford periodic check ups because of free hospitalization. But such facilities are not available in India. Why should they, therefore, incur expenditure to buy the news of trouble for them? But is this avoidance beneficial or justified? Answer is absolute no. But even then this trait is still present in many of us, rather all of us, with the variation of intensity only. Sansar can be described as fore runner for top honors in this quality. Many a times he was advised to go for some tests by his doctor. But every time he avoided. He continued the medication prescribed for hypertension, but that too not with proper regularity. He used to take the medicine in higher dose if feeling some giddiness in his head and would skip it if feeling fit. He was also not ready to avoid spicy and salty food, what to say of avoiding smoking or excessive fat in his diet. He used to attribute pain in his chest to acidity in his stomach instead of linking it to heart trouble. And his doubts, if any, would be removed with a pill or two for treatment of acidity making him feel better.

And when he felt some chest pain today immediately after lending his hand for shifting of a heavy sack to the helper in his shop, he again took a tablet for acidity. But today the pain continued to aggravate for about fifteen minutes only to fall him unconscious. Although the boys in the shop did not take much time for shifting him to the nearby hospital, but the damage for ignoring the advice of his doctor was severe. He was rushed to the ICCU of the hospital in the state of coma much before the arrival of his other family members. Azad Singh had completed the formalities for his admission and emergency treatment. And when Kuldipak reached there, a few minutes after Pratha and Durga had, he was told that the patient was in ICCU, undergoing several tests. He was handed over a list of costly medicines and injections needed for his treatment, for which he was to make arrangements. At that moment he had no choice but to purchase those medicines. He was also to deposit some amount as advance for treatment. He went to see the medical superintendent in order to get an idea of the severity of the disease, rather of the expenditure involved in the treatment. Pratha was also with him.

‘What is the exact condition of our patient, doctor?’ He enquired.

‘Your patient is ill very very seriously. How to explain you.....okay, you know the blood supply to the whole body from the heart starts to flow initially through the arteries. With deposit of fat and with use of tobacco etc. the arteries get clogged, resulting in high blood pressure. One of the arteries got ruptured due to a little exertion, which led to clotting of blood in almost all the major limbs. He is being operated upon for repair of the arteries.

And if the operation succeeds, let us hope that it will, the efforts will be made for diluting or removing the clots in other parts, including brain and lungs.'

'What are the prospects of his recovery, doctor, and how much time would it require?'

'Look, sir, this disease is very rare. We have handled only two or three such cases in the past many years. The chances of survival or recovery depend upon the time we take to start the treatment. Luckily, much time was not wasted in bringing the patient to hospital. We are trying our best and hope that our efforts and your prayers would pay off.'

'And would he be perfectly alright if your efforts succeed?'

'That also can't be ascertained. Rather, I should confess, maximum chances are that some portion of brain would be affected, which may result in some related complications.'

'And how much time is expected for full recovery?'

'That can also not be foretold. The person who survived last time remained in coma for a month or so, and then in recovery room for about ten or fifteen days.'

'And how much money we would have to arrange for it.'

'You see, our cost of maintaining ICCU is quite high. So, although we work on no profit no loss basis in such cases, even then the expenditure would be quite high, as we have to recover our costs. The injections needed for diluting the clots are also very costly, but would be needed continuously. So you will have to arrange for sufficient funds. I think you have already been told to deposit two lac rupees immediately.'

'Yes, doctor, we are just depositing.' Kuldipak uttered this line, but was unable to work out as to how this unforeseen expenditure is to be met with.

He had no choice but to discuss the position with Kamini. She was sitting in the room meant for the relatives of the patients. He signaled her to come outside and both went away in an isolated place.

'Doctor says we have to deposit two lac rupees today. And expenditure per day would not be less than forty fifty thousand per day. I am not in a position to understand from where this money is to be arranged.'

'How can we arrange this money? We don't have enough funds even for our factory. This contingency was to occur at this point only!'

'What has happened has happened. Our further action should be how to negotiate with this situation.'

‘There are two way outs. First, we should close our factory and divert the funds for the treatment. And second is, we should arrange money against the shop, either through mortgage or through disposing off.’

‘There is third option also. We can ask uncle to bear the burden right now. We shall refund his money in due course, when our position improves.’

‘I don’t think mom or others would agree to it. Don’t you remember how angry were they when his share was diverted to our factory?’

‘Yeah, but they will have to agree, otherwise we will be in a very tight spot.’

‘Okay, suppose they agree, but would Hasmukh uncle be willing to help?’

‘Oh yes, sure, I am confident. Don’t you see how he lent his share in the house to us? If he can do so for that situation he can go to any limit when his family is in trouble.’

‘And what if this confidence deserts us? What if there remain only two alternatives feared by me? Family members will pressurize for closing of factory as they have emotional attachment with the shop, like they had with the house they sold.’

‘And we have emotional attachment with the factory. O God, better this old guy dies, and dies soon, and relieves us from this stingy situation.’

‘That is not in our hand. He dies or survives, but one thing is sure; we shall not live peacefully now.’

‘That is true. Presently we have no choice, but to deposit the amount. We shall think over before depositing the next installment.’ They started moving back to the room with signs of worry on their faces.

They were not aware that Pratha had heard the last portion of their conversation.

Both, Pratha and Kuldipak could not find time for rest during whole of that night. The atmosphere in the hospital usually does not let you sleep peacefully. And they were to cope with continuous requirements of some medicines, injections and equipments. Durga and Azad insisted to stay, but what they were to do there? They were very old to endure such exertion and trauma. Kamini was sent home for taking care of the elders. Kuldipak was feeling totally broken till the daybreak. It was not the physical fatigue which was responsible for his condition, but he was shattered with the mental fatigue; the worry for the additional requirement of money totally unexpectedly. He was curious to discuss this problem with Pratha, but was hesitating in such a condition. But the problem can't just be wrapped and pushed under the carpet. That has to be tackled sooner or later. And when in the early morning Pratha was trying to have a nap due to some reduction in the demands from the ICCU staff, he could not afford further postponement.

'Mom, you have seen that the treatment is very costly. I am worried as to how shall we arrange such a huge sum.'

'But, my son, what is the alternative? We will have to arrange.'

'That is true. But from where? We don't have any spare money.'

'Such expenditure is not met with spare money only. We have to incur this expenditure at whatever cost.' There was no indication on her face that she had heard what he had said to his wife.

'Okay, we shall, but the question is how, when treatment is expected to be costly and lengthy.'

'In my opinion you should suspend the production of you factory and divert that money for the treatment. You can wind up that business in due course and start looking after the shop when your papa recovers a bit.'

'How can we close that business? We will have to bear heavy losses in the shape of compensations to workers and due to recovery of only a small portion of our investment on machinery and stock.'

'Now what else has this business given to you. Situation was different earlier when your papa and grandpa were looking after the shop. But now they will need your presence there. It would not be possible for you to look after both the enterprises.'

'In that case why to wind up the factory, why not the shop?'

'Because shop has never put us in losses and has assured us good income for the last so many years while the factory has heaped problems only.'

‘Mom, you are my mother and still want to see me as a loser. I cannot accept defeat so easily. I may have faltered somewhere to some extent, but that does not mean I should run away as a coward.’

‘There is nothing of that sort. Why do you take every situation in life as a war? There are numerous instances where people started some business, could not find that feasible, wound it up and shifted to some other profession. You should change your attitude, which will, otherwise, be instrumental only in inflicting trouble in your life.’

‘I am ready to face any trouble but can’t tolerate the ignominy of failure. I will not shut down the factory business. I will show to all of you what success means.’

‘And you can face ignominy of your failure to arrange money for the treatment of your father!’

‘Now, how can I arrange everything from the small enterprise, which is yet to bloom? Why don’t you arrange it from some other source?’

‘You mean I should arrange the money? But, tell me, from where? What source of income do I have?’

‘By ‘you’ I mean you all, not only you, mom.’

‘And you don’t consider yourself or your wife in this ‘all’, right?’

‘Okay, I also consider to be a part of this family, and, hence, propose to arrange funds from some other source, not by winding up the factory.’

‘Okay, now being a responsible member, would you suggest that other source?’

‘We can ask Hasmukh uncle to bear this burden for the time being. We shall return his money later on.’

‘Have you returned the money you are already using in the factory? If he is gentle enough to allow you use his share in the property for your business purpose due to the love and affection he has got for us, that does not mean that he will allow such liberalism without any check.’

‘But what is the harm in asking him? He is our family member.’

‘Harm? Our self-respect, our prestige is at stake. Family remains united only if you do something for other members, not expect other members to do something for you. He has already given a lot, we shall not accept anything more now, not even at this hour of crisis.’

‘Then there remains only one alternative, you dispose off the shop. I have been contacted by a prospective buyer, who is offering a good amount.’

‘So, you have initiated the action for disposing off the shop with which your papa and grandpa are attached with so much emotions. Bravo, my son, keep it up.’

‘Now mom, don’t get carried away and be practical. Have you not noticed what doctors have told? He told that survival chances are not many. And even if papa survives, there are chances that some limbs get affected. How will he look after the shop then. And grandpa is already very old.’

‘Okay, then you go to the doctor and ask him to give him a mercy injection. He will be relieved of all the pain and problems. And you will be spared of any useless expenditure. And your wish for early demise of the old guy will be fulfilled.’ Pratha’s face was becoming red with anger.

‘Okay then, I am sorry, I cannot help you, you arrange at your own, and spare me of this liability.’

‘And you need not come back again. We live or die, but will not accept dependence upon you.’

Kuldipak left the room adroitly so as to enable him hide the signs of embarrassment, similar to the ones appearing on the face of a thief when caught red handed. He was not able to understand why his mother was bent upon closing his prestigious factory and not ready to take help from Hasmukh, or close the lowly shop business instead. But the last words of Pratha cleared all the mist about her attitude. She certainly had heard the conversation.

And Pratha remained in pensive condition for long. She was recalling the time when they had used all the means, ethical or unethical, for getting themselves blessed with him. The faces of three girls appeared in her thoughts and started jeering her. She shook her head and started thinking about Saksham. She was sure that she knows she was going to be aborted, as Hasmukh had not hid anything from her. But still she had never shown any feeling of anguish or ill will for them and showed nearly the same love for them as for Hasmukh and Subhagini. Perhaps it was the effect of her bringing up by gentle people like Hasmukh and Subhagini. But what deficiency was there in raising of Kuldipak by them?

News of Sansar's critical condition shocked Hasmukh's family. He was away for some official work in Singapore, and got the news while in the meeting. Luckily his assignment was nearly over. But still it was not possible to reach Delhi the same day. Saksham was still in her office at that time. She immediately talked to Subodh, who booked two seats in the earliest available flight; he was not willing to let Saksham go alone and accompanied her despite his busy schedule. Subhagini was persuaded to stay home. But the earliest available flight was in the morning only. Both could not reach the Hospital before noon.

Upset face of Pratha did not pose any threat of exposure of the differences between her and her son, as those could easily be attributed to the sudden shocking phase she was passing through. Saksham embraced her and prayed for early recovery of Sansar. Subodh, being a doctor, was allowed to see the patient in the ICU along with Saksham, which is not generally allowed otherwise. It is another matter that she could not control her emotions on seeing his condition. And when they came back, trying to look cheerful, they found Pratha still in a broken condition. Subodh explained the condition of the patient in a positive way, with the remarks that chances of recovery were quite bright. But the reaction of Pratha was not in line with the encouragement. Saksham could notice it. She had a clue for this, as she knew that the treatment was very costly. The matter was discussed in between them during flight as well. But the real person to extend the helping hand was not there, and Saksham did not find it right to discuss it on phone with her father, since he was not to stay away for long. She expected his arrival in Delhi when she would be still there and could discuss there. But Subodh had other ideas, and wanted to extend his hand at this difficult moment. He proposed postponement of the construction of a section of the nursing home and divert the funds for treatment, which, Saksham was sure, would not be acceptable to other family members. She also had spared a large amount from her salary and income from her writings. Hence she also felt no need for stopping the construction. She intended to lend monetary help to her family, for which Subodh and family also had no objection.

'Now cheer up badey (elder) mummy, everything would be all right. Where has Kuldipak gone?' She asked when noticed that Kuldipak was not there.

'I have sent him home. He has to look after his factory also, you know.' Pratha did not disclose that she had asked him not to come to see his father in the hospital.

'Don't worry, you can relieve him of this responsibility; I have come and will remain with you till recovery of badey papa. Subodh has allowed me for it.'

'And what about your job?' Tears rolled down her cheeks.

'My company knows my urgency and would allow me leave.' Saksham said wiping her tears. 'Now you are a brave lady, mama, don't worry, everything will be all right.'

'God bless you, my child. I am proud to have a daughter.....' Pratha could not speak further, as her throat was choked, presumably due to emotional pressure.'

‘And what about the finances for this costly treatment, mom?’ Subodh stepped in. ‘How to arrange such a huge amounts at such a short notice?’

‘That will have to be arranged, my son. And we shall arrange. You should not worry about that.’

‘Why shouldn’t I, mom? Am I not a part of this family? And, being so, I have every right to share this expenditure. I have talked to the hospital staff here and deposited some amount with the cashier. Don’t worry, it was not the money from my papa’s earnings but has been deposited from Saksham’s earnings. I have told Saksham to call me when this amount is consumed and I shall send a cheque for the required amount.’

‘No, no, that is not the right thing you have done. How can we accept daughter’s money? How much amount have you deposited? You get that refunded, or receive it from us. And don’t deposit any money now.’

‘This money is not from your daughter, but from your son’ Saksham was rightly presenting herself as a son. The son is the person who takes care of the old parents. And who was doing that at that time? And who was, then, the real son?

‘You are far more than my son. But in reality you are my daughter, married daughter. And our traditions, our customs don’t allow us accept money from the daughters and from the son-in-laws as well.’

‘Those are the primitive views,’ opined Subodh, ‘not acceptable in modern times. That is the reason for our society to attach more significance to a son than a daughter, though, we all know, that the daughter is more sincere to the parents than the sons.’

‘You might be right, my son, but it is not possible for me to break away from the traditions and from the society.’

‘Okay, if you don’t want any help, you can still keep this money, as a loan from us, and refund it when you feel like it.’

‘I am proud of your gesture. But I will let you know when it is needed. At present we don’t need it, so you will have to accept the refund.’

‘No, mom, I will not agree to it.’ This time it was Saksham. ‘The heavens won’t fall if a daughter extends a helping hand. Why this responsibility is fixed on sons only and why it is not the right of a daughter? And how many sons acquit themselves creditably of this responsibility? We shall not get this refund, and will spend more, if need be.’

Pratha embraced them both with two streams running out of her eyes.

Hasmukh reached hospital in the evening, barely six hours after Subodh and Saksahm had, who were still in the hospital. Pratha was so relieved to see him there. She engulfed him in her arms and kept weeping for long. Hasmukh also could not control himself. Saksham tried to calm them down, but they, especially Pratha, were not having any effect of her endeavors. And when the emotions came in the range of their control, it was the time to discuss the problems and find out the solutions.

‘Now, first of all, bhabhiji (brother’s wife), What is the expected expenditure, and what arrangement is to be made for the finances?’ Hasmukh started in a matter of fact way.

‘As you are aware, all the savings, the house and movable assets have already been spent for Dipu’s factory. Now only one source is left, which is the shop. If you agree, we shall dispose that off.’

‘How can I disagree, bhabhi? You need not ask me even. But what is the need to sell it when we have spare funds for such eventualities? You don’t worry, I shall arrange for all the funds.’

‘I know that you will stand with us during the hour of crisis, and am proud of you for that. But we cannot live with the stain of having used your rightful share for our personal expenditure. We already owe you a lot. We haven’t paid your share from the house property yet. Now we shall use the amount realized from this transaction only after paying your dues.’

‘What is the matter?’ Hasmukh smelt a rat in Pratha’s behaviour. ‘Why are you talking like that? I suspect something very serious happened to you.’

Pratha started crying inconsolably. ‘You don’t be emotional Hasmukh. Money is a big thing. Don’t waste it on a dying brother. Why are you bothered so much when his son, the real blood, can wish his early demise to spare him of this unnecessary expenditure.’ She continued sobbing.

Hasmukh comprehended the situation now. He was now sure that Pratha would not accept anything from him now. She was in dire need of his support, but that support was emotional, not financial. Or, we can say, financial support, though needed, was useless without emotional support.

‘Problem with we people are that we place all our hopes on our siblings, especially sons.’ Hasmukh tried to console her. ‘But they are also human beings, having their own problems. And when they cannot bear the load of our expectations they suddenly appear to be villains when viewed from our angle. You take care of your health, bhabhi. Our Dipu is better than many.’

‘Yeah, that is why he refused to share the burden of treatment’

‘That might be his compulsion. You see he has invested his all in the factory and, as per your explanation, he has also used my share. Now from where will he bring money for treatment?’

‘He has already lost a lot in that business, but is still adamant to continue it. That girl is has his controls in her hand. I don’t think anybody can save him now.’

‘I had told you then that the boy should be discouraged from investing such a huge funds in a business alien to us all. But, now if he has taken the risk, we should help him.’

‘My sixth sense smells conspiracy in that. You don’t know that girl was having some affairs with the boy who was instrumental in persuading Dipu to start the factory. I don’t know why she preferred Dipu for marriage over him when he was far richer than him. There certainly is something wrong at the bottom. I tried to talk to Dipu about it, but he gets enraged over this topic. The girl, it seems, has used some exorcism on him.’

‘It is all your anger, nothing else. Don’t worry, we shall look into it later on. First we have more urgent work in hand. Now let me talk to the hospital staff and arrange for the advance needed for treatment.....Don’t worry, you can return it when you wish, okay.’

Prath felt as if a big load was removed from her mind. After all some one with so much care for them was with her at that crucial juncture.

The endeavors of the hospital staff bore fruit and Sansar came in to his senses, but not before thirty five days of continuous coma, during which he remained suspended between life and death, with the scales keeping tilting one way or the other. The life won at last, though the cost was exorbitant in financial terms. But his speech and left side limbs were damaged. He was having problems in respiration as well. He remained in recovery room for a few more days, during which the condition improved to some extent. The doctors then recommended his discharge from the hospital and prescribed some medicines to be given at home, with the instructions of periodic check ups in OPD. Hasmukh and Saksham remained there turn by turn for that period. Kuldipak once tried to reconcile when he came to see them, but was rebuked by Pratha.

But what all they had in the name of home was only a house, taken on rent, where apple of their eyes no longer lived. The shop had been disposed off for meeting the expenditure for treatment. And otherwise also who was there to run it? After paying for the share of Hasmukh, both for shop and the house, and after paying the hospital bill, a significant amount was still left for them; significant not as per the requirements for maintaining their existing level of quality of life, but, yet, significant for keeping their bodies and souls together. But heavy expenses were still staring at them in the shape of costly medicines still needed for Sansar. But nobody was much worried about the problems looming ahead. And why should they when nothing was left in their lives? What were they to live for? They were to just spend the remaining years of their lives. The life had already deserted them.

Situation was well in the comprehension of Hasmukh. He had two alternatives for its revival. He could have gone to Kuldipak to persuade him for living with the family. He would have certainly succeeded in his attempts. But there was a risk of another possibility of altercation between him and some other family member, which could be harmful to the patient. The second alternative was to take them all away from this atmosphere and try to soothe them in a lovely and lighter family environment. The second alternative seemed more appropriate, as that was the immediate need. The treatment of Time, the great healer, was likely to have a positive effect in due course. Presently someone very dear and very near was needed to be with them. And who could be more closer than Saksham in their case?

And when the doctors told him that the patient would be discharged the next day, Hasmukh found the time appropriate to talk to his sister-in-law.

‘So, with the grace of God he is quite okay now. He shall be discharged tomorrow.’

‘Yes, it is a good news. At last we will go home.’ Pratha uttered these words with a great pain.

‘Yes, in our own home. We were all yearning to live together during all these years, but the circumstances did not allow us for that. But now God has given us an opportunity, which we shall grasp with both hands.’

‘What do you mean?’ Pratha could not follow.

‘Now let me tell you straightforwardly. You paid me for my share in the shop and in the house. I acknowledge, though hesitantly, my share in the house property. But I don’t think I should have any right in the shop, where I did not put any efforts. I have used that money for purchasing a flat in Mumbai, which is in the joint names of yours and bhai’s. It is very near to Saksham’s house. We shall spend our retired life there.’

‘That is not the right thing done by you. We can live with you even in your house. Then why did you enter my name in the property?’

‘Because it was your rightful entitlement.’

‘I don’t agree with you. It is only your love for the whole family that you are talking like that. But even if we consider your intention as not undue favor for us, there remains an angle from where your blunder in this action is exposed.’

‘What is that?’

‘By purchasing the property in our name you have invited Dipu to put forth his claims after our demise. It was better if the property was purchased in your own name, or, alternatively, in Saksham’s name.’

‘I had given a thought to that idea also. But that way we could have enraged Dipu further. Presently he is angry and not in his proper senses. Tomorrow when he realizes his mistake and wants to return to us, we shall welcome him with open arms.’

‘There seems no reason for Dipu to complain. Saksham is our daughter and has every right to own what we like her to own.’

‘Yes, she is our daughter, but at the same time Dipu is our son. We all are connected not only with the bond of relationship but also with the knot of love and affection.’

‘I don’t want any discussion about Dipu. But is that not injustice with Saksham if her rights are shared by him?’

‘You may be right, but that was her decision. She had her own viewpoint on this issue, and I did not think it proper to enforce my will on her. You can discuss the matter with her.’

‘What is to be discussed with me?’ Saksham just came in.

‘Bhabhi was enquiring why the flat in Mumbai was not purchased in your name.’
Explained Hasmukh.

‘Because mom, I want your love, not the property, an opportunity to serve you when in need, but not for any returns. You people have made me capable of leading a quality life. And I want to reciprocate it by making your life easy to the extent possible. I had asked papa that you all live with me in Mumbai. But papa was firm for purchasing the flat. No problems, the flat is very near to my house, where I can take care of you. I shall be with you people virtually during all the available time. You know, luckily, Subodh and his family are quite co-operative in this matter.’

‘And we shall have to be dependent on daughter. What a tragedy!’

‘That is a little too much mom. Why the daughter does not have the right to serve or support the parents? That is the reason why they are seen only as a liability. The society needs to change its psyche and the feeling that nothing should be taken from the daughters. If you can spend a lot on them why can’t they spend something on you, especially if they have the capability to do that? This shift in thinking will enhance the value of daughter in the society. And I want you to get yourself liberated of this psyche as soon as possible.’

‘Now I can say that ignominy of having a son has been replaced with the pride of having a daughter.’ Pratha was feeling so relieved.

‘But mom, we shall provide Dipu every opportunity to return to his roots. Let us see how long he likes this isolation.’

Pratha embraced Saksham in an attempt to hide her tears from her. Now this is the girl they were daring to abort!

Initially they did not like the life in Mumbai. There was a big difference in the lives of two cities. While Delhiites were eager to mix up with the people around them, the Mumbaikars did not like interference by the neighbors. They liked to remain confined to their own circle. Hasmukh was aware of this problem for new comers to that city. He ensured that somebody from them should remain with them, though initially, for a few days. They arranged the things in that manner and managed one person's presence with them turn by turn. Some day it was Saksham or Subhagini and the other day it would be Hasmukh or even Subodh. But soon their circle also started to develop and the need of a family member for whole of the day started lessening. They also employed a nurse for helping in routine duties of caring the patient, and also a part-time maid for petty jobs. The evenings were now more enjoyable for Hasmukh and Subhagini in the company of the family after so many years. Saksham used to come daily and stay with them for long before going back with Subodh. She used to take keen interest in participating in cooking and other household activities, and would share dinner with them alongwith Subodh. Saksham discontinued her creative activities for the time being in order to take care of her family. They were also impressed with the nature of Subodh and his family, who were broadminded enough to allow Saksham take care of her family also, though they were losing some of her precious time she could have spared for them.

Saksham was trying her best to keep them all happy. But dependence of Sansar even for his natural activities was a source of pain for them. But was it the only cause of invisible distress they were going through? They used to smile and pretend happiness in front of Saksham and others. But, somewhere in a corner of their hearts, they had a feeling of a big loss suffered by them in the shape of desertion by their only son. Hasmukh and Saksham tried to contact him on phone, but his behavior was not yet conducive to improve the relations. They preferred to wait and watch for an appropriate time. They did not have much information about him; accept the one, gathered through some acquaintances in Delhi that he and Kamini were living in her mother's house and were busy in their factory affairs.

Pratha did not like to talk about Kuldipak anymore. Durga and Azad Singh did not want to hurt her by doing so, but still had a great desire that he comes back to them and takes the responsibility of supporting them. They were aware that their desire would remain only a wish, without materializing into his homecoming. Perhaps Sansar was the most affected person in the family. His shop was gone, his health was gone, and his son was gone. And with that all, his desire to live was gone. Perhaps that was the reason for the slow pace of his recovery. He could not yet be able speak properly. He could not move his left side limbs, although could stand if supported by some one. Doctors had advised them to assist him in walking, as that would be the major contributor in his early healing. The members were very keen and helpful and showed no hesitation in extending their hands for his well-being. Their devotion bore fruit. Within a month or so he was able to stand on his own with the support of crutches. He could also sit in his wheel chair with a slight help, but moving it was still difficult due to weak left arm. They used to go to the nearby park for his outing, where he also tried to walk with the help of someone. In a few days they befriended some other walkers there. Mumbai was now becoming suitable

for their liking. But still he was considering his life as a burden, not only on others, but also on his own self. And one day, when Hasmukh was pushing his wheel chair in the park, he shared his feelings with him.

‘What kind of life is this?’ He said in a trembling voice. His words were not comprehensible properly, but could be understood with a little extra effort.

‘No, no, my brother, don’t lose heart. You will become normal very soon, and life would be as enjoyable as ever before.’ Hasmukh encouraged him.

‘May God fulfill your wish. But of what use is my life now? I have no work to do. I will only be a burden on all of you. Why God does not call me back?’

‘It is not the time for such thinking. You have a lot of work to do. You have to remain with Saksham and Kuldipak and guide them in their day-to-day activities. You have to shower your blessings on you grand children. And, you know, my retirement is approaching soon. I also can’t sit idle during that life and have decided to open my own office for providing consultancy services. And who other than you will be more appropriate person to accompany me in that?’

‘See, how many elderly people you and Saksham have to take care off. Don’t you or Saksham get fed up with this all?’

‘Have you ever thought how Saksham takes it? She feels that it is not she who is caring us all, but it is we all caring her.’

‘That is the effect of her bringing up under your parenthood.’

Treatment meted out to Kuldipak by his mother and other family members was totally unacceptable to him. He was pondering over the whole scenario and trying to see what had went wrong. There seemed no logic in exerting pressure on him for winding up the factory. He might have faltered a bit due to lack of experience, but what experience he was having for smooth running of the shop, for which his mother and other members were insisting? At that juncture he had at least some experience of factory; then why to switch over to the business totally alien to him? It was certainly the anguish of his mother for his words he uttered to Kamini, which might have been overheard. But that also was not a sufficient cause for the ill treatment he received. He put many a questions to himself, but could not reach at any conclusion as to what was the real cause. He was not able to understand the reason for change in the behavior of his grandparents as well. It was he and his wife who remained in their company when his mother was in hospital. His wife used to cook meals for them and did other household tasks despite her busy schedule in the factory. But even they did not support his cause. The only decision he reached at was that he had to bid farewell to the family and start living separately and avoid the recurring insult. And it was only at the time he conveyed his intentions that his grandparents tried to stop him. But the domain of their concerns was not that how he would feel while remaining cut off the family. They were worried only for the problems likely to be faced by Sansar after he is discharged from the hospital. They were worried that even if he becomes fully fit after the hospitalization, chances of which were very remote, even then the problems will not end. The life would become dull and insipid for them when they would be deprived of the only pillar of support in the shape of Kuldipak. How would they manage to arrange money for their day-to-day expenditure when the only source of their livelihood was also gone, and the rising cost of living was playing havoc with the lives of earning persons also? This should have been thought over before shunting him out of the house, he had argued. But he was declared a villain for deserting them in the hour of need.

He was very angry with Saksham and Hasmukh. How did they grab the opportunity to establish them as the only saviors of the family! Had they stayed away, these people would have learnt a good lesson. But they were shrewd enough for showing their sympathies and grabbing the share from the property through emotional black mailing. And they were able to snatch his parents and grand parents by taking them away from the city they had lived in for whole of their lives. But what could he do when his own people were not able to detect their evil designs? And why should he disclose them and become a further target for contempt? How low have they stooped accepting the dependence from a daughter while their son is alive; just for inflicting humiliation on him! And why should he care for them when they don't care for his dignity?

Kuldipak did not have to rent a house for his residence, as Kamini's mom was living near the factory, had a big house, and a big heart as well. Rather she was happy to see his daughter and son-in-law living with her. A month had passed since his family had shifted to Mumbai. He had severed the ties with the family well before they left the city, and was not interested to know how they were pulling on. But the people in their contact were always passing him the information, even though he had never asked them for that. He

did not try to contact his family even on phone. And why should he after enduring so much hatred and humiliation? But Hasmukh and Saksham had tried to contact him, who were warned not to contact him again, and let him live, or die, but peacefully. And he had many other useful jobs to do than wasting his energy in such superfluous thinking. There were a lot of problems in his factory needing his attention far more urgently than worrying for his parents.

The hard times were likely to pass away now. Payment of his consignments was due now and was likely to flow in within a few days. The suppliers had also promised him credit, which was likely to be effected from next supply. Payment of insurance claim for the damaged consignments was also nearing settlement and would be available within a few days. And with smooth flow of funds their business was sure to earn good dividends. Only thing for him to pay immediate attention was to follow up the payments due from the debtors, so that other liabilities were controlled beneficially. He was sitting in the office in a jolly mood today. Kamini was sitting in her chamber with her mother. Shanti had taken a break from her office and had accompanied her daughter. She had started showing interests in her daughter's business affairs. Her experience was found very useful in settling many issues, which otherwise were very complicated for them. On looking at his cheerful mood both came inside.

“What is the matter, you are looking very cheerful today?”

‘Yeah Kamini, it is the time to be happy. Our payments will start flowing in now, and all our worries will be eased out now.’

‘Yes, you are right, you talk to the exporters right now. Now the time of our credits has expired. They should make our payments immediately. You take care of the factory for a while; I have to go with mom for petty shopping. We shall be back within half an hour or so.’

‘Okay, no problem.’ Kuldipak did not know that shopping was only an excuse for remaining away from him at this moment.

Both went out, smiling, as if showing him gratitude for his cheerfulness after so long, but talking to each other through eye contacts. And when they stepped outside, the eye language started flowing out of their mouths.

‘You see how happy the scoundrel was?’

‘Don't worry mom, perhaps it was the last laugh in his life.’

Kamini drew out her mobile from the purse and clutched it in her hand. She was giving frequent impatient looks to the mobile, as if waiting for a call very eagerly. And when the bell rang, in about fifteen minutes after they had left the factory, her eyes started glittering.

‘See, he is calling, mom.’

‘Attend and see what does he say.’

‘Not yet mom, let him loose his patience.’

She let the bell ring continuously and enjoyed the frustration of the caller with two more missed calls. And when she attended the phone after that, her voice seemed laced with honey.

‘I had begged half an hour from you darling, and you can’t let me go away for more than fifteen minutes. Now don’t tell me that you miss me. I know you miss me, you can’t live without me, even for half an hour. And similar is the case with me. But life is not that easy. We have to remain away from each other for some time.’ She was not listening to what the caller was saying, giving him no opportunity to speak. She stopped only when there was a shriek from the other end.

‘Stop it, Kamini. Matter is very serious. You suspend all the shopping and come back immediately.’

‘Okay, we are coming.’ Kamini disconnected the call and looked at her mom with a winning smile in her eyes. She opened a contact and pressed the call button.

‘Matter is over now. You reach there immediately, I will wait for you’ she instructed and disconnected.

Kamini took much longer than expected to return to factory. And when she reached there she saw Kuldipak sitting in his office with his face showing his condition as of a broken man. She did not show any signs of worry or shock on her face.

‘What is the matter? What happened now?’ Her way of talking was not polite.

‘Kamini, we have been cheated. The raw material supplied by these new suppliers has been found to be spurious. It looked perfectly all right but lacked the basic quality. The yarn remains intact till not washed. But the product gets destroyed on washing. Our consignments are not being accepted and are being returned.’

‘Did you talk to the suppliers?’

‘Yes, but they say that they had been dispatching the proper materials, with proper batch number of the manufacturers and duly checked and okayed by a Govt. approved laboratory. They were sending test certificate alongwith.’

‘How can it be possible? They might be using fake certificates.’

‘No, that I had already checked. Certificates were genuine, but something was wrong in the batch numbers of supplied material.’

‘We can file a case of cheating against them.’

‘That will not solve our problems. It will not be easy to prove that. And even if it is proved even then it will not be easy to recover our losses. Suppose we succeed in that also, our legal system is such that years would have passed by then. I don’t know why they have done so. They are a reputed party, supplying quality material to other manufacturers. What was the motive for this cheating? What enmity they have with us?’

‘They have no enmity with you,’ it was Ranjan at the entrance of the office, ‘but we certainly have.’

Kuldipak was shocked to see him there. ‘Oh, no, now I understand, that supplier is under your influence. But why did you do so? You were our good friend. Please, I apologize for the hot conversation Kamini indulged in with you that day. Please do something, or otherwise we shall be ruined. Kamini, please say sorry to him.’

‘Sorry Dipu, we have already been ruined. Earlier it was me, who had been ruined, but today it is ‘we’, I mean, you and me, both.’

‘You mean...you’ Kuldipak was not able to speak properly.

‘Yes, it was my conspiracy. Don’t you think you really deserved the kind of treatment you got for your filthy act? See, justice of almighty was also with us, who made our efforts easy and fast with that stroke to your father. Poor man, had to suffer for the crime committed by his son.’

Kuldipak could not utter anything. He kept lying on the chair and listening them without any response with his tongue, but with his eyes, full upto the brim with mercy petition, which soon converted into disappointment and then to remorse. Now he was not listening to what they were saying to him. His brain had gone senseless, unable to respond to other sensory organs. So much so that he was not aware that his mobile was ringing, but he had no idea what to do with it. Kamini pulled out the mobile from his pocket, talked to the caller for a while, and, when finished, looked at him. She could see it clearly that Kuldipak had listened nothing, as he was not aware what was going on there. She caught hold of his shoulder and vibrated him with a great force.

‘And don’t behave like a statue now. You have to face many problems, and go through many hurdles yet. You see, how God has helped us in our cause, as we were treading a rightful path. And now again He has supported us at the appropriate time. You get up and get ready to face another salvo of His justice.....Your father has got another attack.’

She threw the mobile on his table and went out of the office rapidly, followed by Shanti and Ranjan, but returned again.

‘Although you don’t deserve any mercy,’ she said, ‘yet I can’t be so cruel, like you were that day, because a gentleman, victim of your sins, might be waiting eagerly for you. Ranjan, please open the net and book a seat for him in the next available flight.’

Available flight was in the evening. It was past midnight when the plane landed in Mumbai. He went straight to the hospital where his father was informed as admitted. Perhaps he was not in his proper senses, which can be judged from his behavior. He should have rung Saksham or Hasmukh on reaching Mumbai and chalk out the next program accordingly. But he went straight to the hospital, as he had been informed, where father had been admitted. And when he got the news that his father could not survive the attack this time, there was no body to hold his hand; nobody to console him. And it was in the early morning when he reached at the given address. Body of his father was lying on the carpet. Durga and Azad were sitting beside it with grief writ large on their faces. He engulfed the body in his arms and started wailing inconsolably. He was removed from the body by soothing hands of Saksham. He embraced her in his arms, crying, 'it is all due to me, didi (elder sister), you all are suffering because of me, because of my sins.'

'It is all as per His will, brother. Now control yourself, you have to take care of all the family now. If you lose heart, who will save the family?'

Hasmukh also came and kept his soothing hand on his head. He could be taken away from the body with a great difficulty. And when Hasmukh was taking him away, his eyes were searching for Pratha. He saw her sitting in the ladies with Subhagini at her side. He went to them and started crying again. Subhagini embraced him and tried to console him. But Pratha simply put her hand on his head and said, 'Calm down, please, don't cry. Accept it as Almighty's will.' It appeared she had compromised with the fate and had decided to accept whatsoever it had in store for her.

Body was taken to the cremation ground in the noon. It was shouldered by Hasmukh, Kuldipak, Subodh and his father. Some people started talking about the role of the son-in-law in this ritual. Son-in-laws are not allowed, in this part of the world, to shoulder the body, or lit the pyre, and even, in some areas, prohibited to accompany the body upto the cremation ground. But Pratha had allowed him, rather requested him for it. He took active part in arranging the wood for the pyre and laying the body on it. All the gentlemen were near the pyre, but ladies were sitting at some distant place. Pratha was the only lady who had come in the area meant for men.

All the arrangements for cremation were now complete. Pandit (Person with religious knowledge) was reciting the Mantras (religious hymns). 'Now who is to present Agni (fire) to the pyre, please come forward,' he asked when the Mantras were over.

Hasmukh gestured Kuldipak to come forward, but Pratha suddenly approached them and forbade Kuldipak from performing the last rites. She called Saksham instead for the ritual. People started talking to each other in hushed tones. Pandit started explaining the tradition of offering Agni (Fire) to the deceased. Pratha cut short his explanation and showed firmness in her stand.

‘I am aware of the traditions and religious customs.’ She suggested to Panditji and other reputed persons. ‘I know that it is the honor of elder son to show Agni if the deceased has living sons after his demise. In case there is no son then the privilege passes to his father, brothers and then to nephews. Girls and son-in-laws are not allowed to lit the pyre. That way we diminish the value of our daughters, who prove to be more sincere and affectionate to the parents than the sons. Our daughters continue to prove it with their devotion for the parents. My daughter has proved it with her selfless services to us. That is why I want to provide my daughter her rightful place. I don’t want to demean my son, but he can realize who is the most appropriate person for this noble task.’

‘Yes, mom, I can realize. Come on, didi, you are the real person justified to perform these rites.’ Kuldipak was now in a peaceful frame of mind. Saksham came to them on seeing Kuldipak’s gesture. Pratha asked, rather ordered, to have the honor of lighting the pyre in place of Kuldipak.

‘I can undertake the rituals without any arguments at this juncture, mom, if you show your ever present greatness by forgiving Dipu. He has realized his mistakes, and, I am sure, he will become a big asset for our family now.’

Pratha nodded in agreement. Saksham went ahead with burning hay in her hands.


