

Kaurav Sabha

(A novel depicting the seamy side of
Indian Judicial System)

Kaurav Sabha (Novel)

English Version of original Punjabi classic **Kaurav Sabha**

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From Director's desk

The present

From the translator's desk

The present novel is an English avatar of its original 'Kaurav Sabha' in Punjabi. I was privileged enough to take upon myself the responsibility of translating it into English. While going through some of his novels, I found that Mitter Sain Meeta is at his best in this novel. The entire structure of the novel rests on an epic metaphor i.e. the metaphor of Kauravas' court. This is the place where the reader of Mahabharat finds the great patriarch Bhishma Pitamaha sitting as a mute spectator to the diabolic act of disrobing Draupadi – the daughter-in-law of the royal family – at the hands of Kauravas. Due to his avowed allegiance to the state, he stands by the sinners only.

'Kaurav Sabha' too is an attempt of the writer to bring out the seamy side of law today which is absolutely pro-accused. In the country of justice-loving kings like Vikramaditya, we find how the whole gamut of judiciary from the meanest court-clerk to the chief-justice, is besmeared with the muck of graft.

Translating a piece of literature from a regional language into the idiom of an international language is really an uphill task. Sometimes, the translator has to face a very tough time in finding the appropriate expression. Mark Twain has said that difference between a right word and an almost right word is the same as that between lightning and a light-bug. So this is the challenge that stares the translator in the face while transcribing a text from one language into another. This way, I don't claim to be a perfect translator as perfection is just a euphemism for stagnation. But still I feel an immense pleasure in dedicating this English version of a Punjabi classic to the readers with a deep sense of gratitude towards the writer who deemed me fit for the same.

Oct. 20 2012

– Parvesh Sharma

PART-I



**Victory implies defeat
and
defeat signifies death**
*— a Punjabi saying
(Regarding Litigation)*

As soon as Ramnath began to take the second round of park he got a message from home. There was a phone call from Mayanagar. Sister Neelam's house was plundered. The whole family was injured.

'Stop your stroll. Come home immediately.'

They had to leave immediately for Mayanagar.

He was already gasping for breath due to brisk walking. News about armed robbery made the heart beat faster. Stars started fleeting before his eyes.

In a bid to contain his staggering self, he squatted on the ground and removed his shoes. Wiped his face dry, drank some water and sprinkled some on his eyes. As he gathered himself a bit he got up and seated himself on the pillion of his daughter's moped.

His wife Sangita provided details as he reached home.

What bothered him more than the armed robbery was the fact that the telephone call was made by one of Neelam's neighbours. Why did no member from Neelam's elder brother-in-law, Mohan Lal's family, inform them?

Mohan's was not an ordinary family. It was one of the few affluent families of Mayanagar. He had a very flourishing business and access to corridors of power. He was a renowned figure of the city. Did none of them reach the spot? If not, why?

Helping his wife, who was preparing to go to the city, Ramnath was trying to find an answer to this puzzle.

The question that was bothering his mind was not at all irrelevant. It had a vast background.

The two families were at loggerheads for some time. The

property dispute had slipped from their hands and reached the courts. Mutual relations had soured. There was just no communication.

Ramnath went on thinking about the same. Did that family got it done?

His doubt was not baseless. A word of caution had come from none other than Mayadevi, Neelam's elder co-sister. Despite all animosity between Ved and his nephews, Maya Devi had no love lost for Ved and his family.

The situation was different when Mohan Lal was alive. Now the unbridled boys behaved like spoilt brats. Maya Devi had many a time, overheard them talking in a hush-hush manner over drinks and planning some evil designs. Sometimes, they said, "*Chacha* Ved is very proud of his muscles made during youth. We'll crush his biceps. And Neelam! She thinks herself very sensible and intellectual. We'll break her skull in to smithereens." Neha, the poor thing, had never done any harm to anybody. They talked of stripping her, their younger sister, naked in the market-place. Ved's only heir Kamal was the biggest eyesore for them. Sometimes they were overheard planning to eliminate him.

As a gesture of sympathy, Maya Devi had suggested Ved to make peace with the boys by giving them 'something'.

"Don't say I never told you, if something goes wrong tomorrow," she in a way warned him.

Ramnath had got an inkling of this warning but he did not bother much. As a student of law he had read in criminology that civilized classes never resort to physical violence. They believe more in a legal battle than a sanguinary strife. It was not merely a theory. Ramnath experienced it in the day-to-daylife. A migrant labourer would behead another of his own tribe in a dispute over a paltry sum of fifty rupees only. On the other hand in *Mayanagar*, there were people involved in mutual litigation and common business at the same time. Husband-wife would spend a night with each other even after getting divorced.

Acting upon the criminological theory, Ramnath had advised Ved not to worry much about the warning. But now he was repenting for the same.

Ramnath called for a taxi for going to *Mayanagar*. He removed his track-suit and put on *kurta-pajama*. He opened the steel *almirah*, took a bundle of currency notes worth ten thousand and thrust it into his pocket.

Then Ramnath called his younger brother Mangat and apprised him of the whole situation. He entrusted him the responsibility of looking after the children in his absence and handed him a cheque of twenty thousand rupees to be encashed later from the bank. He would ring him up from *Mayanagar*. "If the matter is not very serious I'll be back by evening or if need be I'll call you also," said Ramnath to Mangat.

It was one-hour distance from his city to *Mayanagar*. Earlier, this distance was covered within no time but today every moment seemed to have stretched into an eternity. Feeling uneasy at heart he was fidgeting on his seat. Anxiety about the family of sister Neelam was gnawing at his heart "Nobody ever discloses truth over telephone in such matters. Much more is concealed than revealed. God Forbid...." he was praying within his heart.

"Who might have committed this dastardly act? "Various questions started crowding Ramnath's mind as the car came on to the road to *Mayanagar*.

"Now-a-days, the *kala kachha* gang is notoriously involved in such incidents. May be a similar gang was behind all this."

But the very next moment, he ruled out the possibility of *kala kachha* gang's involvement as they often committed such crimes in the colonies settled on the outskirts of cities. Neelam's house was in the thick of the city. There were big iron-gates on both ends of the street. A watchman would be on vigil throughout the night.

This incident seemed to be well-contemplated.

On Ramnath's instruction the driver accelerated the vehicle to a speed of 100 kilometers per hour. With the same speed flew Ramnath's thoughts, struggling hard to reach some logical conclusion.

Ramnath smelt the hand of Mohan Lal's sons but found it utterly indigestible that they would ever get thirsty for the blood of their own uncle's family.

Mohan Lal was no less than a father to Ved, his younger brother. He was only ten years older than Ved but a hundred times bigger in status.

Ved was only in his third standard when Mohan had joined Civil Engineering stream in the most reputed Engineering College of *Mayanagar*. At that time only a few chosen could get admission in this college.

Immediately after getting his engineering degree, he got a job as Sub-Divisional Officer in P.W.D. department. He was posted at Bathinda, which was a town galloping its way towards progress during those days. A Thermal Power Plant was under construction somewhere and somewhere else it was a fertilizer factory. Hotels and Cinemas were coming up fast and army cantonment was sprawling on the other end of the town.

To facilitate traffic, the government was laying a network of roads and the governmental buildings were mushrooming here and there on the soil of Bathinda.

Mohan Lal hailed from a family that was earning its livelihood from manual work. Thus manual labour was no alien to him. Nature had been generous in endowing him with a sharp intellect. The rare combination of muscles and brains made his presence felt all around. He earned a reputation of completing every road, every building before the scheduled time.

Beside name, Mohan also earned plenty of wealth. Right from the labour contractor to the contractors of charcoal and cement, everybody had to dole out a specific commission to him. Gradually, he made friends with the contractor and entered into partnership with him, rather than accepting commission from him.

In due recognition of his talent, a well-known contractor of the city married off his daughter to him. Now he secured a strong foothold in Bathinda.

After consolidating his own position, Mohan Lal paid attention to his family. Ordinary house was replaced with a double storied mansion. He made his father leave the archaic *Karyana* shop and occupy a modern cloth show-room.

Mohan tried his best to see that Ved got good education

and joined a promising line of profession like medicine or engineering. But Ved was interested more in sports than studies. Wrestling was his first love. He spent almost the whole day in taking physical exercises.

Had it been the modern times, Mohan would have 'purchased' admission for him through the magic wand of donation. But those were the days when merit prevailed and this was the most elusive commodity for Ved.

As Ved passed B.A with kicks and starts, Mohan Lal talked to the President of Municipal Committee and got him recruited as a clerk. He also got an assurance from the President that whenever there is a vacancy for the post of Octroi or Tax Inspector, Ved would be adjusted there.

Keeping in view the position and social status of Mohan Lal, Ramnath's father married off his beautiful, graduate daughter to him.

Now Ved was content and life seemed a beautiful song to him.

After five years, when Mohan Lal's officer was transferred to Patiala, he managed to get Mohan also transferred to Patiala. He gave a face lift to Patiala and filled his own coffers as well.

The officer was again relocated to *Mayanagar* on promotion. Mohan Lal too was due for a promotion. He wanted the blessings of the boss for an unhindered promotion.

The officer at once acceded to his request. Hard-working and loyal officers were becoming a rare species. Mohan Lal was endowed with both these qualities. Thus the boss got him transferred to *Mayanagar*.

There were many hard working officers like Mohan Lal in *Mayanagar*. They were less loyal, but expert manipulators.

Mohan Lal was lost in the crowd of officers. But who can stop a flowing river? Mohan Lal started exploring the possibilities of private business in *Mayanagar* after giving a kick to the government job.

The conventional method of spreading charcoal on the roads was turning unviable and work too was not up to the mark. Keeping in view all the pros and cons, the government gave an assenting nod to spreading the carpet of material prepared by

mix-plant on the roads. Mohan Lal made up his mind to make use of his experience and within a few days he set up a mix-plant by making all those officers, who could be useful in running the plant, his partners.

The quantity of material that was spread on roads was far less than what remained behind as surplus. The earning from surplus material exceeded that from the road-spread. The investment in the plant was recovered within a couple of years. By the time other traders could know the lucrative nature of this business, Mohan Lal had minted *crores* out of it.

He had purchased two brick kilns and a *rice-Sheller* on the outskirts of city. Coal-brokerage was churning out plenteous money. Fine quality bricks were lifted by the traders of *Mayanagar* while the half-baked inferior quality was adjusted on public roads and buildings. Along with coal, Mohan Lal also obtained tenders for supplying charcoal to the government. Seventy five percent of charcoal was sold in Mathura itself while only twenty five percent reached *Mayanagar*.

Money flowed into the house of Mohan Lal incessantly and it became a problem for him to somehow contain it .

The friends asked him to conceal black money in real estate. In *Mayanagar*, the price of plots was soaring to mind boggling rates, like 50 lacs per plot. One lac worth white money camouflaged 49 lacs of black money.

There was maximum booty in this business. Leaving sale-purchase of plots, he started developing the colonies.

The landed property of the deceased and issueless people was available at throw away prices. The connivance with revenue and police authorities turned this land in to a gold mine.

The colony business proved useful in another way also. He started coming into regular contact with the officers, private-bankers and traders. He was now in a position to absorb the black money of politicians. His circle of acquaintance widened a lot and there were no longer any obstacles in this work.

As the number of his friends increased, so did the number of his adversaries. Sometimes there was an income tax raid and at others it was the crackdown by vigilance department. His assets were probed. Criminal cases were filed against him.

He did not want to leave government job. He was a senior officer with a great reputation in the department. On the basis of his departmental status he could easily meet the officers, visit hotels and clubs.

Day in and day out, it was becoming difficult to carry on trade alongside the government job. The children were young as yet. Wife too, was not very clever. *Mayanagar* had everything else but loyalty. Nobody could be relied upon. The very persons whom Mohan Lal had made contractors from daily wagers had deserted him in the times of need. Whom should he rely on? His wife had offered him a solution to this problem.

“Even our servants have become owners of *kothis* and factories. Why don’t you call Ved to the city? If he earns a few bucks, they will remain in our family only. A brother is a big support after all. He will stand by us through thick and thin,” she said.

In the beginning Ved showed a little reluctance. He was going on well in his town and felt quite comfortable there. Also, he had no lust for money.

But when Neelam heard of this, she was all agog at this offer. *Mayanagar* was known as the Manchester of India. If the children are business-minded they can become owners of crores. If at all they have to pursue higher education, they can become doctors or engineers at home. There was a university for other higher courses. The best doctors of North India lived in this very city. There were hotels and clubs for recreation. There were big show rooms for shopping as well.

Goaded by Neelam, Ved changed his mind. He was ready to do anything for the career of his children.

Ramnath’s taxi was heading towards *Mayanagar*. But Ramnath wanted to push the time backwards.

Had Ved not left his city; had he rejected Mohan Lal’s offer, he would not have seen this day. Who could ever think at that time that fraternal Rama-Lakshmana love would convert into Sugriva-Bali relations?

As long as business was being shared by Mohan and Ved, nothing went awry. Whatever responsibility was entrusted by Mohan to Ved, he discharged it in all earnestness. He put his

signatures blindly on any document put before him by Mohan. In lieu of this extreme trust, Mohan gave him his share of profit without any hitch.

When Ved had shifted to *Mayanagar*, his entire luggage was transported in a single four-wheeler. Now he had everything a middle class citizen could aspire for. He had a *kothi* in 500 sq. yard plot in a posh colony of the city besides two other plots in his name. He had his partnership in many firms owned by Mohan. Apart from this he had his independent business of property dealership. He sat in an air-conditioned office and travelled in an air-conditioned car. His wife had about one kilogram of gold. Both their children had heavy fixed deposits in their names. Due to his gentle nature, Ved was held in high esteem in his business circle.

Neelam was a very noble lady who commanded respect in her neighborhood.

Both the families were leading a very comfortable life.

Ram Nath's car entered civil lines area. As it was approaching its destination, his heart beat was getting faster. Who knew what inauspicious message awaited them ahead? Some seriously wounded member of the family could succumb to the injuries. Sweat appeared on Ramnath's forehead at the very idea of death. He felt a sort of dizziness and severe pain in his left arm. These were the symptoms of a heart-attack, a thought that made him all the more restless. Mohan Lal also had a heart attack, Ramnath remembered. It was this very ailment which had created a split between the two families. He had his first heart attack ten years back at the age of fifty. By undergoing bye-pass surgery, he had not only recovered fully but started feeling more energetic than before.

For full one year, Mohan Lal followed the instructions of the doctors, kept going for long walks and restricted his food habits.

The circle of his friends kept expanding with the expansion of his business. To strengthen his business links, he had to visit hotels and clubs.

Mohan was not the only one to have gone through bye pass surgery. Here, more than fifty percent of the business people

moved with the ripped chests. Nobody cared much for the medical advice. Mental tension could not be dispelled without a few daily drinks. They preferred an 'eat-drink and be merry' style of living to remaining famished.

Going by this philosophy, he started taking one peg initially, then two and finally reached three-pegs-a-day routine.

Mohan Lal's age and business were increasing simultaneously.

On the other hand, Judaism in business was also increasing. Sometimes even a close associate would play foul with him. When resented, he would reply, "Everything is fair in business."

Due to pulls and pressures of business, Mohan Lal fell prey to mental tension. He became a patient of diabetes followed by fluctuation of blood pressure.

The doctor cautioned danger and advised strict regimen.. His blood was thickening. And the thickness of blood was affecting the functioning of his heart. Another surgical operation was not advisable. And just one more heart attack could turn fatal.

Despite all medical warnings, there was another attack.

This attack had no immediate effect on Mohan Lal. But Ramnath felt its severe and irrevocable impact on Ved's family now.

After the second attack, Mohan Lal was totally confined to bed. Now it was time to get rid of all kinds of mental tension. It in turn, required complete disengagement from business.

Mohan Lal was well aware of condition. Any day could become the last day for him.

He had made a great blunder by ignoring his health. Once recovered, he would never repeat the same mistake, he thought. Now the situation was changed. The palatial *kothis*, cars, factories, gold and silver, everything was there. It would be enough if all this remained intact.

The boys are capable of handling the business now.

Pankaj had returned from America after doing his MBA. The younger, Neeraj, had qualified in Mechanical Engineering from Roorkee. Both were well qualified.

Mohan had earned much, but through an untiring struggle.

He had stood on roadside for hours together, swallowing the dust flying all around. He had even damaged his lungs by inhaling the smoke of the boiling charcoal. He frequented a number of offices and played obsequious to the officers. All this formed a part of his job and business.

Mohan did not want his children to face the rough and tumble of life like him. He wanted to bequeath them some heavy industry.

His friends advised him to invest in iron industry. Due to spurt in this business iron mills were turning iron into gold. This advice touched Mohan's heart and he started dreaming of an iron mill.

A two-acre plot with high walls raised on sides was purchased for this purpose. A big iron-plant was installed in its middle. On one side an air-conditioned office was constructed and on the other, a range of servant quarters. There was four-gates, with a sentry deployed at each. Luxury cars, unending wealth and salutes from all sides to enjoy.

After giving a serious thought, Mohan Lal announced installation of an *iron-mill*. Heavy industry. Better dump all black money at one point.

Ved was least interested in this labyrinth worth crores of rupees. The price of bare plot of land amounted to fifty lacs. Two crores were required for machinery. Ten crores were to be invested from their own sources. Loan, running into several crores, was to be taken from the government. Ved was a complete illiterate for such a complicated type of business.

Once again Neelam succeeded in prevailing upon him.

Ved had agreed to her, but he could hear the danger bells ringing from within. Some voice of sanity seemed to warn him that partnership with the elder brother was okay, but he would not be able to pull on with the nephews. They were well-qualified. Business was quite new to him. How will he grapple with them? It was beyond his understanding indeed.

Going towards Deep Nagar, Ramnath was realizing that Ved was intelligent. He was absolutely right. Had he been strong enough to withstand Neelam's wish, he would not have faced such a grim situation today.

Ved could never understand the basics of this business. Mohan had invested all his capital into it. Following him blindly, Ved also handed over to him whatever he had. Ved knew nothing like wherefrom the money came and where it was spent.

From where was the loan taken? What and how much property was hypothecated? Like a loyal soldier he kept putting on his signatures wherever he was asked to.

But there was something else in store for Mohan Lal.

There was a change of regime at the center. The new government fell heavy on industrial sector. Conditions for obtaining loan became more stringent, subsidies were cut down considerably. Tax-rebates were abolished. The export-import conditions were relaxed. The imported items proved economical. The cost of power and raw-material increased. All outlets of chicanery were blocked.

The sanction for the installation of mill was getting more and more delayed. The expenses were soaring day in and day out. The budget started staggering.

On the other hand, Mohan's condition worsened. Pankaj and Neeraj had to shuttle between the factory and Delhi very frequently.

Lacs of rupees had been spent in documentation and greasing the relevant palms. The installments of the plot had been paid off. Advance amount had been sent for the purchase of machinery. There was no going back now at this stage.

The specialists in the business line advised Mohan Lal's sons to somehow start the mill. The situation can turn favorable any time. The competition had become very tough and the weaker units were liable to fall off their feet in this time of cut throat competition. The remaining units were again likely to prevail upon their business.

These circumstances of uncertainty delayed the functioning of mill for two years.

On one hand, there was an increase in the cost of machinery and on the other, installments of loan were blocked. The loan had to be advanced in accordance with the progress of the mill. The establishment expenses made the economic burden still heavier.

Mohan Lal could no longer move about now. Keeping in view his adverse health conditions, the loss caused by the mill was concealed from him.

But how long could cat be hidden in the bag. The mill project was losing fast its viability with every passing day and had turned into a dragon devouring all that they had with its hunger still unsatisfied.

At last the bitter pill had to be swallowed. The construction of the mill was stalled and it was put on sale.

Most of the capital reserves of both the families had been sapped by this mill. Everything had passed through the hands of Pankaj and Neeraj. They were conversant with all the intricacies of loss incurred in the whole process. Ved had faith in his nephews. So he bore all this with a stoic patience.

But Neelam failed to understand the magnitude of this crushing loss. She could trust Mohan Lal, of course, but how could the nephews brought up in a materialistic environment of *Mayanagar* be trusted at all. She could not trust them blindly.

One of Neelam's remote nephews had his mill at Mandi Gobindgarh which was running profitably. Just recently he had met her during a marriage and talked over this issue.

Ved tried to persuade Neelam saying that the Gobindgarh mill was an old establishment with an investment on old rates. They must therefore, be going comfortably on the basis of their well- established goodwill.

But Neelam was not ready to fall in line with him. She kept forcing him all the time to go and talk to his nephews on this account. At least she should know the cause of this colossal deficit and then sit in peace. Ved on his side had no courage to talk to the boys over this issue.

Fed up with the obstinacy of her husband and loss in the business, Neelam started blurting out her ire in her characteristic feminine way.

First, she expressed her bitterness against the deceitfulness of the nephews to her distant relatives and then to those in the close friendly circle. The feminine talk took wings and travelled to Mohan Lal. To cover up the ingenuity of his brother, he tried to ignore the whole thing saying that it was a mischievous

attempt of some malicious element to create a wedge between them.

But when this matter reached the in-laws of Pankaj, and from them to Pankaj, it got out of Mohan Lal's orbit.

It led to an eerie whisper in the family. Mohan Lal tried to persuade everybody. But the boys became adamant.

"Let there be a get-together. Settle accounts and snap all partnership with them," they fumed and frothed.

Neelam's jabber and the decision of Mohan's sons took his mental tension to its climax. First his diabetic level increased, and then the heart throb, followed by the third massive heart attack which silenced his heart beat forever.

"Children, time and place of death are always pre-destined. All other things are petty excuses. There is nobody to blame in it," the family elders, priests and some other saintly acquaintances tried their best to console them with such words. But they could not help laying the blame of their father's untimely death on Ved's family.

The loss in mill-enterprise, accusations levelled against them and the untimely death of their father were the reasons potent enough to poison their hearts.

"How to humble the family of Ved *chacha*," was the only issue that pre-occupied their minds all the time these days.

On the occasion of Mohan Lal's *Bhog* ceremony accounts were presented in the presence of relatives. Earlier, there was no bungling on the part of the brother-duo. Then the accounts were maneuvered in a way that showed the loss double than the actual one. Earlier, nobody ever talked of sharing the loss. Now every pie was taken in to account.

Ved had a share of 20 lacs in the mill. Now another five lacs were shown outstanding against him. Its payment was demanded within three months.

During the days of his illness, Mohan Lal familiarized both his sons with each and every detail of his business and property. There was a long list of such *benami* estates which were actually owned by Mohan Lal, but they were in the name of Ved in revenue-records.

This give and take ceremony concluded peacefully except

for a few heated exchanges. At one or two points the mediators had to settle the issue through their intervention. When the issue of a one thousand square-yard plot allotted by Improvement Trust in the posh-colony of Gurdev Nagar could not be solved in anyway, it led to a mutual exchange of profanities and even threats to kill and eviction.

Ved pleaded that he had got this plot allotted on his own and paid the whole amount from his personal account. The Trust chairman was a good friend of Mohan Lal and it was in due deference to his friendship that he had deceitfully managed the draw of plot in favour of Ved. But Mohan had no intention to have his share in the plot.

Pankaj claimed his father's right on the plot contending that the rate of plot was seven thousand rupees per square yard in the colony at that time and the plot was allotted at the rate of seven hundred rupees per square yard. Ved was known as a *munshi* in those days. The chairman was not mad enough to allot a plot costing about 70 lac in the name of a worker. As such, it belonged to their father and they had a claim over it.

Anyway, as gesture of obligation towards his late brother, Ved agreed to forgo his claim on half of the plot. Leaving whole of it would have thrown his dreams to the winds. This was his security. He planned to build a *kothi* in the half portion of this plot while the remaining half was to be sold for marrying off his daughter Neha in a befitting manner.

Ved called Ramnath and showed him the documents to seek legal opinion.

Law stood by Ved's side. Eight years had elapsed after the allotment. Right from filing of application for its allotment, it had been in his name. All its installments had been deposited through cheque by him. No court in the country could question Ved's claim over the plot.

Today Ramnath was repentant over his legal opinion. He should better have intervened and settled the whole issue through mutual give and take. All other disputes had already been settled. Living apart, nobody would have anything against each other.

In utter exasperation, Pankaj filed a suit in the court. From time to time he would issue threats also.

“I have to take this plot by all means. Either by hook or crook”.

Ramnath’s experience inferred that this gory incident of plunder formed a part of Pankaj’s design to take the plot by crook.

2

Neelam’s kothi was situated in street No. 4 of Deep Nagar.

As Ramnath’s car reached the corner of the street, a police-vehicle with red-light dancing atop and spreading sensation with the sound of its hooter passed by. It was carrying a senior police officer, not below the rank of Senior Superintendent of Police or even a DIG. Such high ranking Police Officers come to investigate murder cases only.

Ramnath became apprehensive from within. Some misfortune had definitely struck the family! He somehow controlled the emotional turmoil within his heart, but he could not help heaving a deep sigh.

“O God! Have mercy on us”! He prayed and hurried to the site of incident.

The whole street was flooded with people. Some of them flurried here and there while some others were gossiping in small groups.

A couple of police vehicles had cordoned the ill-fated *kothi* altogether.

Ramnath got his vehicle parked at a distance. Ramnath and Sangeeta prepared themselves to listen to the worst possible news and headed fast towards the *kothi*.

Some of the neighbours who knew Ramnath came near him.

“It’s really unfortunate, *Vakil Sahib*,” said the neighbor who had informed Ramnath on telephone.

“Are the things alright here?” More than the material loss caused by the plunderers, Ram nath was more worried over the possibility of a loss of life. “Others are Okay, but Kamal...” the neighbour clung to Ramnath’s shoulder and burst into tears as if his own son had been murdered.

“What about others? Are they alive?” asked Ramnath as if he would be content with a lesser disaster.

“Yes, they are well, but in the hospital,” replied another neighbour, gripping Ramnath’s hand and consoling him at the same time,

Police was inspecting the site. To ensure that no proofs are tampered with, nobody from outside was allowed to enter the house.

Just like others Ramnath too stopped at the main gate of the *kothi*.

One of the neighbours informed the constable guarding the gate about Ramnath saying that he was an advocate and Ved’s brother-in-law. The police-inspector was already waiting for him.

The constable took him to the Inspector who was sitting inside.

Sangeeta was stopped outside. The scene inside was horrifying. That is why women were not allowed to get in.

The trail of blood stains had reached the main gate. As Ramnath proceeded, the size and number of the stains was increasing. Near the door of the lobby, a pool of blood presented a spectacle of blood bath in the literal sense of the term.

The scene inside the lobby was rather more horrendous.

The furniture lay scattered all around. The broken showpieces seemed to be narrating their woeful tale.

The glass-top of the central table had turned into a clutter of splinters. The contents of *almirahs* and chests lay strewn everywhere. The household material was not only looted but manically destroyed as well.

The most blood-curdling scene awaited him near the door of Neha’s bedroom where Kamal’s dead body laid soaked in blood.

Kamal’s face was smashed like a pumpkin. With the eyes bulging out, mouth agape, hair drenched with blood, the dead body presented a ghastly sight. The abdominal stabs had brought out his intestines. His vest was torn and night-suit was crimsoned with blood.

The Police had arrived just then. First of all, the police

superintendent checked on the spot and ordered not to make an iota of change in the scene. He had the entire gory view photographed and video-graphed in his presence. Forensic experts were yet to reach the scene and gather more evidence. The Superintendent had left now and further action had to be initiated by the Station House Officer concerned.

He had asked for a piece of cloth from the neighbours to cover the dead body. But since none of them came forward, the corpse had to be kept uncovered. The Inspector realized his mistake on Ramnath's arrival. He then himself took a bed-sheet from Kamal's bed-room and covered his dead body.

Ramnath was watching everything like a mute spectator. His sensory organs seemed to have failed; as if they had lost all contact with the brain. That is why he was watching such a horrible scene with utmost ease. There was visibly no reaction on his face. Though he was fully conscious of his behavior, but still he remained as unmoved as a stone. Perhaps a kind of mental inertia had gripped him for the time being.

The cops were trying to collect the clues left behind by the culprits. Someone was looking for finger-prints; someone else was looking for the weapons used in the criminal incident. A dog-squad led by uniformed men was trying to track down the culprits by following their foot prints.

"Very sad and very unfortunate, *Vakil Sahib*," said the investigating Inspector as he came close to Ramnath to express his sympathies.

"How did all this take happen?" for the first time some words escaped the lips of Ramnath as some tears rolled down his cheeks.

"This seems to be the handiwork of the *kala kachha* gangsters. They are active in this area these days. The modus operandi is the same. Do you suspect anyone?"

After a few words of sympathy, the SHO jumped to the real issue.

The incident was gruesome. There was a murder; two persons were seriously injured while a young girl had been raped. The inventory of looted material was very long. No clue of the accused was coming in sight. It was a blind case and the

SHO was sure to face a tough time in registering the case. The press people were unusually keen to collect information and file their stories. On the other hand the officers were exerting their pressure, as they were supposed to report the whole affair to the Chief-Minister.

Post-mortem had to be carried out. Injury-reports had to be obtained from the doctors. The rape victim's statement was to be recorded, provided she regained her consciousness. There were many things to be done. The Inspector did not have much time to waste in expressing sympathies.

"You should have better asked my sister and her husband. Only they can tell something."

Ramnath's needle of suspicion pointed to Pankaj and his associates. But he could not name anybody without first consulting his sister and brother-in-law.

"They are lying in the hospital. They are seriously injured. The doctor must have given them an injection of anesthesia by now. We'll take some time in our inquiries. You go and consult them in the hospital. We'll register the case as per your version."

The preliminary inquiry made by the Inspector had shown this incident as perpetrated by *kala kachha* gang. The looters were to be booked under the charges of dacoity and murder, in an attempt to commit the dacoity.

Since Ramnath himself was a lawyer the Inspector indicated the subject of the case and the sections to be invoked therein. Now it was for Ramnath to capture the hint.

Ramnath could say nothing without meeting the members of the family.

Moreover, looking after the injured was more important than pursuing the case. For the time being Sangeeta had no role to play here.

Accompanied by Sangeeta and a neighbor, Ramnath left for the hospital.

On the way, the neighbour started narrating the incident in detail.

He and Ved used to go for a morning walk daily at four. If Ved woke-up first, he would ring the bell at Jai Narain's door; otherwise Jai Narain would come and wake up Ved.

Today when, till four-thirty there was no sign of Ved coming to him, he reached his house and pressed the button of call-bell. But bell did not ring at all. Light was on. Then why the bell didn't ring? May be it has gone out of order, he thought.

Till 10 last night they were together and there was no chance of Ved's going out "He glanced at the latch behind the iron-gate. But the gate was not latch-locked at all. So he pushed open the door and went inside. May be Ved was in the bath-room and therefore not responding. A few steps ahead, Jai Narain saw some blood stains. Still it did not occur to him that such a tragic incident had taken place. But when in the porch he saw blood puddle, he was taken aback. He immediately came out into the street and screamed aloud.

There was a flurry of commotion in the street. The Police control-room was contacted on telephone. When no policeman appeared on the spot even half an hour after the phone call was made, some of the neighbours rushed to the Police Station.

It was early in the morning. There was nobody in the Police Station except the Sentry and the *munshi*. Someone was brushing his teeth and someone was easing himself in the toilets. This incident of rape and dacoity, it seemed, meant a lot for the neighbours and little for the Police. The constables were awakened by visiting their quarters personally and *Thanedars* were called by making repeated phone calls.

The police reached the spot two hours after they were informed. No neighbour had dared enter the looted house out of scare. They accompanied the cops into the house. Kamal's body had already bid adieu to its soul and was cooled by the icy hand of death. The other three were unconscious. Blood had profusely drained out of Kamal's body. Nobody knew when the incident had taken place. May be, the timely arrival of Police could have saved him.

The Police took the injured to the hospital in an ambulance. Four neighbours accompanied them to look after.

Jai Narain rang up at Mohan Lal's house. The boys had gone out of station, he was told.

All the members of the family had been injured. Many important decisions had to be taken. Case was to be registered.

To which hospital should the injured be admitted? These were the issues which were to be decided by someone from the family only. By chance, Jai Narain found a visiting card of Ramnath. This is how he rang him up and informed him about the whole thing.

However, Mohan Lal's manager had come along with Maya Devi. He had met the Police Inspector and had a talk with him. Perhaps his palm was greased.

Maya Devi could not bear this horrific scene and felt her heart sinking. The neighbours sent her back.

It was good that Ramnath had come. He was a lawyer. So he was capable enough to handle the whole affair.

3

Some hospitals of *Mayanagar* had a reputation of being among the best hospitals of North India. Ramnath had come to these hospitals several times to call on some of his friends or relatives.

But this was the first time that he had come to the civil hospital.

Law valued the opinion of doctors of civil hospital more than that of the private practitioners on the assumption that the Government employees do not tell a lie. It was under this compulsive situation that those injured in disputes or accidents had to be admitted in the civil hospitals run by the Government where the doctors examined the wounds of the injured. Then a detailed report of injuries was prepared and submitted to the Police which shaped the whole case on the basis of medico legal report.

It was just to fulfill this legal ritual that Ved and his family members were admitted to the civil hospital. Ramnath was eager to know the condition of his relatives as he was to take them away from this hospital.

The general wards of the hospital were to open at eight in the morning. The emergency ward remained functional round the clock. Ved, Neelam and Neha were brought to the hospital at about seven. Even if they were brought here after eight, they would have to be admitted first to the emergency ward only. The doctors on emergency duty were to examine the injuries,

prepare a report to this effect and send the patients to the wards concerned.

Being a lawyer, Ramnath had a lot of experience into the working of civil hospitals. That is why he signaled the driver to park the vehicle right in-front of the emergency ward.

Some of Ved's neighbours were standing outside the emergency ward. One of them, who recognized Ramnath, hurried to him along with some other neighbours.

Within no time Ramnath and Sangeeta were surrounded by the neighbours.

"How is my sister, my brother-in-law? And how is Neha?" asked Ramnath fearing within lest some misfortune should have taken place here.

"They are okay. Nothing much to worry about," a neighbour consoled him in a way.

"*Behanji* must be shifted to some other hospital. She has head injury and there is no neuro-doctor here," said the lady from neighbourhood who had been sitting by Neelam's side till now.

"Where are they?"

"Neha was well. She has been sent to the ladies ward. Ved had injuries on his legs and arms. He's been sent to the ortho ward. *Behanji* is here". She pointed towards the closed door of the emergency ward.

"Just wait, *Babuji*, who are you," the ward boy who seemed to have appeared from the thin air said as he saw Ramnath entering the ward by pushing open the door.

"I'm the brother of the patient. Ramnath advocate." The ward boy mellowed a little at the word 'advocate', but he was not ready to relent so easily.

"Entry is not allowed without permission. See the doctor first."

Laying special stress on the word 'see', the class-four official advised him to meet the doctor.

Ramnath followed the hint. He was a lawyer of criminal cases. He had to pay frequent visits to the civil hospital for protecting the interests of his clients. The desirable injury report could be got prepared by 'seeing' the doctor. That was the basic

purpose of his visits. If he were to fight the case in favour of the respondents, he would manage to reduce the size and gravity of the injuries; and if he were to represent the plaintiff, he would get the injuries caused by a stick converted into injuries caused by an axe. This was what the ward boy was hinting at.

"I'll see the doctor of course. Let me meet the patient first."

Ramnath took Sangeeta along by her arm and bothering little about the ward boy he pushed open the door and went inside.

There was a long wooden table in the room long enough to accommodate a normal person. It was covered with a worn out plastic sheet dirtied by numerous old and new blood stains. Lying on that table, Neelam was writhing with pain.

Her head was bandaged with blood oozing out of the cotton pressed under the bandage. Blood had congealed on her chin, neck and near the ears. Her clothes were besmeared with blood. Due to head injury she had intermittent convulsions and at times she had a sort of epileptic fit. She would start frothing at her mouth as her limbs twisted and eyes bulged out. A bold lady neighbour was trying to control the squirming body of Neelam.

"I'm Neelam's brother. What does the doctor say?" Ramnath introduced himself and enquired about the well-being of his sister from the lady.

Now Sangeeta started taking care of Neelam.

Feeling a bit relieved with the presence of Sangeeta, the lady whispered to Ramnath "Nobody has done anything so far. A scavenger like man had come. He cut the hair, wiped the blood and dressed the wound. He was saying that first the doctor will count and measure the injuries. Then the treatment will start will start. Please do something, brother, otherwise she will die here."

Perhaps, the ward-boy had informed the doctor outside about the arrival of advocate Ramnath. He arrived there with his First-Aid box.

Unwinding the bandage from Neelam's head, he started telling Ramnath about the patient's condition", She had head-injury. The gash is deep. I'm referring the case. You please shift her to some good hospital."

“What treatment have you given her here?” asked Ramnath, looking at his watch.

It was nine by his watch. By looking at the watch he wanted to make the doctor realize that even after lapse of two hours, he had done nothing.

“First aid has been given. In fact a coolie had his arm cut under the train. That is why it took us a little longer. It does not matter. You can take away the patient if you like. Formalities will be looked after later on. You are a lawyer. I have all sympathies for you.”

Ramnath could well understand that the doctor had no sympathy either for the patient or the lawyer. His prime concern was his job only. He had left the patient dangling between life and death at the mercy of God for whole two hours. He had come to realize his mistake only at the arrival of Ramnath. In a bid to avoid a tiff with an advocate, he was trying to placate him with sweet words.

Ramnath could do nothing but swallow the bitter pill.

“Please give her medical aid just to help her reach Daya Nand Hospital. Rest, I’ll see myself.”

To mollify Ramnath, the doctor started filling his syringe with the medicine.

Leaving Sangeeta with Neelam, Ramnath pushed off to see the other two patients.

Female ward came first on the way to orthopedics ward. He turned to that side.

The female ward gave a deserted look. Out of total twenty beds, eighteen were un-occupied. On one bed was lying Neha and another was occupied by a poor migrant labour woman from Bihar. A migrant worker, who was there to look after the woman, was smoking a *bidi*. He was welcomed in the ward by the unpleasant smoke of the *bidi*.

Pallavi, a friend of Neha was sitting on a stool lying close by her. Seeing Ramnath advancing towards Neha she understood that he was someone close to the patient. She got up as a mark of respect.

“How is Neha?”

To get maximum information within minimum time

Ramnath questioned Pallvi and simultaneously started assessing the situation from Neha's uncovered face.

Except face, the whole body of Neha was covered with a green sheet. Although the entire body was still due to anesthetic effect yet her agony could be read easily from her face. Her forehead reflected anger and abhorrence. She had the bloody marks of oral bites on both the cheeks. Blood was exuding also from the abrasions made with nails on her chin and neck. The eyes were swollen with the flood of tears unleashed by them. The earrings were forcibly pulled off the ears. This is what the bleeding ring holes of ears revealed.

"There's nothing to worry about uncle. Neha is unconscious with an injection given to her. But no doctor has come here as yet. She has pain in her stomach and....Blood is oozing. Her clothes are completely spoiled. I had managed to get a suit for her from my house. But nurse would not allow a change. She says that the doctor has to take the worn clothes in her custody. Even the wounds are not dressed. She says, the doctor will see them first".

Whatever Pallavi knew she told Ramnath in partly explicit and partly implicit manner.

Ramnath grasped everything. Neha was raped. He caught his head in utter exasperation for a moment.

"Is she able to speak, otherwise?"

"Yes, she is, I've been here for about an hour. Earlier she mumbled at short intervals saying, 'They have killed Kamal. He martyred himself, saving my modesty. I'm deflowered. Poison me also to death.'"

"Who did all this, did she say something?"

"No. I'd asked, but she said nothing. Perhaps they were some unknown people."

"Why has not the lady doctor come?"

"A gentle-looking Babu had come. He said, 'I'm the cycle-stand contractor. The doctor will come at ten to have a round. Tell me if she's to be called earlier. He asked whether anyone from Neha's relations had come. He also said that if someone comes, ask him to meet me. The patient's report has to be prepared. What type of report do you want?' he asked.

“If anybody comes I’ll let him see you”, I said. “Meet that man, brother and call the doctor. Throw some bucks in her face. Just see how the poor thing is lying here like a withered flower,” a woman from the neighbourhood, who had been with Neha a little earlier, explained the reason for doctor’s absence.

“Uncle, I’d asked the nurse about this attitude of the doctor. She said; the doctor is daughter-in-law to one of the ministers. She need not fear anybody. She’ll come only when she likes; Please do something uncle and save my friend”.

The tears welled up in her eyes as Pallavi shared her experience with Ramnath.

“That is why the ward looks desolate” thought Ramnath. He found it hard to bring the doctor in. The situation was so grim that he could not altercate with anybody. Nobody could be complained against. The real purpose of law was at stake. The patient was being deprived of treatment in the name of law.

The wounds of the patient were festering and bleeding. The clothes were spoilt. There could be acute infection with the dust particles settling on the open wounds. Under the pretext of injury-report the patient was being propelled to death.

Ramnath assessed the situation. He could not see any of the close relatives around. He had delivered the message telephonically at several places so that someone should come and share his responsibility. He thought himself all alone in this mind-boggling situation.

With the arrival of Ramnath, the neighbours felt unburdened and started dispersing one by one. Someone had to attend office; some other had to open his shop; while another had to get a bus in time; someone’s kids were getting late for school.

Ramnath wanted to assess the actual condition of Neha. The traditional flimsy veil of shame between uncle and niece had lost all substance now. Therefore setting aside the tradition governing such social relations, Ramnath removed slowly the sheet covering Neha’s molested self. He wanted to have first-hand assessment of Neha’s body.

The clothes of Neha were badly torn and her arms, breasts and belly bore the marks of barbarity exhibited by the rapist. Similar was the condition of her legs and thighs.

Ramnath felt each and every limb of the victim by touching and tossing it. Thank god! The limbs were undamaged.

Neha's damage was more psychological than physical. Feeling a bit relieved at heart, Ramnath was gripped with anxiety for Ved.

"I'll do something. Coming back within five minutes", saying so, Ramnath patted Pallavi's head in a blessing gesture and left for the orthopedic ward.

It was five-six hours after the injuries but the doctors had not bothered even to touch the patients so far. This neglect on the part of doctors was going to turn more fatal than the savagery of the culprits.

But what could Ramnath do?

For a moment his mind conjured the image of the cycle stand contractor as someone with a heavy paunch, a stubbed beard, dark complexioned, wearing a soiled *kurta-pajama* and a checkered cloth on his shoulder. He must be like any other tout seen most often in the civil hospitals. He must have considered Neha's case just like any other rape case and presently he must be busy managing the doctor's fees.

But this was a peculiar case, of its own kind. The actual case was that of burglary and dacoity. In such cases the accused are generally never apprehended. Even if they are nabbed at all, it is only after a year or so. By that time, it becomes so late that all evidence is destroyed and the blind folded law acquits them by giving benefit of doubt.

This case, too, was to meet the same end Ramnath could see numerous loopholes in the case even at this stage. After sometime, the police was to make haste. Get the case registered. The law demanded meticulous registration of each and every detail of the incident: the names, address and appearance of the accused; which assailant used what type of weapon; where did he hit the victim or victims with that weapon etc.? Everything should be given in minutest detail. Any discrepancy or missing link would render the whole story suspicious. This

is what would give the accused a benefit of doubt.

Among the four persons present on the site of mishap, one had passed away while the others lay unconscious. Who will describe the number and appearance of the culprits and the sequence of events?

This crime was not committed by just ordinary people. They seemed to be hardcore criminals and well-aware of legal lacunae. They must have come well masked, with gloved hands and scented bodies. They must have overpowered Ved and his family members in their sleep. Probably nobody had the chance to understand what disaster had befallen them. No member of the family would be able to recognize them. The accused will again avail the benefit of doubt.

Then why let the doctors fleece us for nothing.

Brooding over this issue, Ramnath did not notice that he had reached the ortho ward.

This ward gave an absolutely desolate look. There was not a single patient there.

Ramnath's palpitation increased when he did not see Ved in the ward. 'May be he, too, has.....' The very thought of death made him shudder to the bones.

"You want to see Ved Ji? Come with me, please. He's in the X-ray department," said a sober-looking man. This gentleman was stranger to both Jai Narain and Ramnath. He was none of Ved's neighbours nor was he any of the relations.

"How is Ved?" Ramnath directed his eagerness towards the stranger.

"He's completely out of danger. Legs and arms are fractured. He has to be X-rayed."

Ramnath had a sigh of relief at these comforting words.

"What about You?" Jai Narain asked the gentleman.

"I'm Sohan Lal, the contractor," the gentleman put his right hand, with three gold rings on the fingers, on his chest and introduced himself.

It took no time for Jai Narayan and Ramnath to understand the whole thing.

"Why is this ward looking deserted?" Jai Narayan asked the contractor just to pass time.

“The doctor of this ward is promoted. This is the most important ward of the hospital. The people with their bones broken in the disputes, come to this ward. Doctors peel off money from both the sides. Many doctors are madly vying with each other for posting in this ward. One goes to the authorities and comes back with the posting orders. Then another goes with a heavier briefcase and obtains his posting by getting the earlier orders cancelled. There have been five transfers in two months. That is how the post is lying vacant. What will the patients do here if there is no doctor at all?”

“Then who will look after our patient?”

“None. Get him X-rayed and get report of your choice. Then shift him to some better hospital you like”.

Apprising them with the realistic situation of the hospital, the contractor took them to the X-ray department.

The X-ray department was bustling with the patients.

An eight-year-old girl had got her leg fractured while she was trying to learn cycling. She was crying with pain. Her parents were trying to console her.

A worker’s shoulder bone had broken when he fell from a height due to displacement of shuttering during the construction of a factory building. Some union leaders had brought him to the hospital. They had to sue the employer in the court after obtaining report from the hospital.

Ved was the first in the queue. He was the first to reach here and his injuries were more grievous. He was accompanied by a policeman who had been sent to get the patients examined.

Ved was lying unconscious on the stretcher. He was surrounded by a few persons. Who were they? And what were they doing? To quell his curiosity Ramnath headed fast towards Ved.

Ramnath felt comforted as he saw Sardari Lal, his *brother-in-law* standing near Ved. He found his strength multiplied manifold in his company. Sardari Lal also had with him Dr. Dev, his friend. Dr. Dev was checking up Ved.

After completing his check-up, Dr. Dev took Ramnath and Sardari Lal, aside.

Ved had multiple fractures on both his arms and legs. A plaster alone would be of no help. Rods had to be put in. One of the jawbones also looked fractured. The real position of that bone could be ascertained only after scanning. There was no risk to life but he required immediate care.

Sardari Lal had come to know the reason for the absence of the radiologist. The radiologist had his own X-ray clinic outside Dayanand Hospital. It was being run in the name of his wife. He had the routine of visiting the hospital for one or two hours only. When a crowd of patients would gather, at around twelve, he x-rayed one or two patients only and that too after charging his fees in a sly manner. For the rest of the patients the stock excuse was that the films were out of stock. The helpless patients went back disappointed.

Today, he had gone for evidence in the court. Nobody knew when he was to turn up after the evidence. Sometimes he would not make till four o' clock in the afternoon. In that case, the pharmacists had to apologies to the patients.

Ramnath got angry at this excuse by the doctor. He was telling a blatant lie. The doctors come to the court at eleven or half past eleven. The judges gave them priority. Their evidence was taken by stalling all other activity just to ensure that the patients do not have to face any harassment. And this stupid doctor was running his clinic under the pretext of court evidence.

"Now what should we do? Wait for the doctor or go somewhere else? What does the legal angle say?"

Sardari Lal threw the whole responsibility on Ramnath's shoulders.

"You tell me, what the problem is. May I call the doctor, if you say? I do have his mobile phone number."

The contractor tried to take advantage of the situation as he saw the attendants of the patient caught in a dilemma.

"But you say he has gone for court evidence?" "Oh! Leave it. He will himself request the court on the plea that some emergency case has arrived in the hospital".

The contractor took out his mobile phone from his pocket and waited for their green signal.

“Call him then. What are you waiting for?” retorted Dr. Dev

“First, settle the fee. Shell out some advance money. Only then the doctor will come.”

“Just wait for a minute,” said the doctor and took Ramnath and Sardari Lal aside.

“The more we delay here, higher will be the risk to the life of our patients. To my mind we should shift them immediately from here. But what does your law say in this regard? It’s for you to see now,” Dr. Dev opined from medical perspective.

“There is hardly any hope of success in this case. Damn the law and the accused! We should try to save our patients only.”

This was the legal opinion.

“Okay then. Get them discharged and move. There is no time to think much,” Dr. Dev decided at once.

Meanwhile a *Hawaladar* brought message from the *kothi*. The police Superintendent had visited the house twice. Some minister was to visit the site now. It necessitated the registration of case before his arrival. The press-reporters and cameramen of TV channels were jostling against each other to get their news stories and file them in time. The minister had called a press-conference. He had to make some announcements on this occasion. All this was stalled in the absence of case-registration. So Ramnath should reach the site and cooperate with the Police in the fulfillment of legal formalities.

Ramnath could understand the compulsions of Police. He bothered little for the media or the minister. What worried him most was the neglected dead body of Kamal. It had to be sent for postmortem before being taken to the crematorium. And the registration of case was essential before the postmortem examination. The case could be registered unless Ramnath tells something about the accused. What had he to submit in the case?

Neelam and Ved were going to take few more days to regain consciousness. It was only Neha who could offer some substantial information regarding the incident. The effect of anesthesia was gradually weakening and after an hour or so she would be in a position to speak.

"You stay in the hospital. Take Neha home after proper dressing and get Police formalities completed. Also look after Kamal's postmortem examination and arrangements for his cremation thereafter. We'll take both the patients to Daya Nand Hospital." Sardari Lal aptly advised.

"All right," said Ramnath and started rummaging his pocket for money.

Neelam was his sister and Ved, her husband, his brother-in-law. He had the same relationship with Sardari Lal. As per the social propriety, it was Ramnath's duty to bear the expenditure on such occasions. With a view to discharging this very responsibility, he was taking out money from his pocket.

"Jija ji, please keep this amount. Get both of them admitted. In the meantime Mangat will come. I've come along with whatever was available at home.

Offering a packet of ten thousand rupees to Sardari Lal, Ramnath, in a way justified the paucity of money, as if he was in the dock.

"Don't heed to any formality, Ramnath! I've come with enough money. You only tackle the situation at hand. Everything else will be taken care of later", saying so, Sardari Lal showed him bag full of currency notes and returned his money in all humility.'

They walked together up to the female ward.

From there Sardari Lal and Dr. Dev turned towards the emergency ward, while Ramnath proceeded to the female ward.

4

The doctor on emergency duty had gauged the gravity of the situation.

It was 11 O'clock. The patients were not given even the first aid so far.

The attendants of the patients had started reaching the hospital. One of them was a lawyer, while another was a doctor. They were sore over the callous attitude of the doctors. Nobody had any cogent reply to their queries. The journalists were hovering around like kites. Some of them had taken away snaps of the injured. Others were pressing hard on the doctors to know

the latest condition of the victims. Whether there was any risk to their life or they were out of danger.

By way of routine fraternal sympathy, the police officials had apprised the medicos with the grimness of the situation. Atmosphere in the city was getting charged with tension and ire. The home minister was coming to visit the city. Naturally, he would be coming to the hospital as well to enquire about the condition of the injured. The doctors must feel the pulse of time.

To absolve himself of his duty, the emergency doctor had informed all the doctors over telephone. He had also reprimanded the radiologist and the gynecologist Dr. Sharanjit. They could come under the axe.

The contractor had submitted his report. Nothing could be expected from this party. Every diagnosis would have to be made free of charge. Dr. Naseeb Mittal had nothing much to bother about. He had gone to court for evidence and every citizen was duty-bound to cooperate with the court. He had also obtained a certificate regarding his appearance as witness from the court. Now he need not worry about the minister. He had directed his pharmacist to ask the patients to come tomorrow.

Dr. Sharanjit had no such a plausible excuse. That is why she had sent a message to her nurse to get ready. On her arrival, she had to attend Neha first of all and then look at the other patients.

When Ramnath reached the female ward, Neha was undergoing medical check-up. Her wounds had been dressed. The torn and blood smeared clothes had been taken into custody. Nurse had put them in a white bag, making a parcel of them.

Sangeeta got her sister-in-law, Seema seated near Neelam and herself came to Neha. Sangeeta and Pallavi were assisting the lady doctor in examining Neha who was lying motionless. It seemed as if she had not yet regained her consciousness.

As she saw Ramnath entering the ward, Sangeeta came to her to enquire about Ved's well-being.

Ramnath took Sangeeta aside. Sangeeta had seen Neha being medically examined. What had happened to her?

Ramnath wanted this information in minutest possible detail which he needed for inclusion in the registration of case.

The girl was in a very pitiable condition. The assailant must have been a very stout and sturdy man. He had attacked the girl like a wolf and seemed to have dug his teeth on every part of her body. She would take some days to contain herself at a psychological level.

Neha was in a state of deep trauma. As and when she regained a little consciousness, she would start talking of finishing herself.

"Is she in a position to tell something?" Ramnath's mind was obsessed with the singular idea of drawing more and more information out of the traumatized girl and strengthens criminal case against the accused.

"People say, the lawyers have no heart in their bosoms. And they are cent per cent right. She is out to kill herself out of shame. And you! You talk of getting details of rape from her? For God's sake don't ever sprinkle salt on her festering wounds by asking her any embarrassing questions. Please spare my poor daughter."

Sangeeta gave vent to her anger through an outburst of tears by throwing her head on Ramnath's shoulder.

"Registration of case is a must. Now tell me what shall I ask the Police to register in the complaint against the accused?"

The tears of Sangeeta made Ramnath feel heavy at heart. But he restrained his tears. After a brief silence he consoled himself and shared his anguish with Sangeeta as she contained herself a bit.

"Hell with your case! Who knows how ferocious the assailants were. Who will stand witness against them? You take care of our own near and dear ones."

"Okay! Let's see."

"Remember one more thing. For God's sake, don't ever mention in the report that Neha was raped. Even a slight mention of it will ruin her future, mind it."

Only a woman could feel the agony of another woman.

For the first time Ramnath realized how petrified he was at

heart. The preoccupation with arriving at substantial proofs seemed to have wiped out all that was human and humane in him. His farsightedness had vanished for the time being. Why didn't it occur to him? He felt a deep sense of remorse at heart. As a lawyer he should have been aware of the future impact of rape.

Anyway, all was not lost as yet. He will not mention incidence of rape in the police report, he decided.

He should start to obliterate the proofs of rape from right now.

Dr. Sharanjit was busy preparing injury report. Ramnath wanted to see the doctor. He must request her to conceal the element of rape altogether in the report and should mention only about other physical injuries .

Ramnath was fully confident that as a woman herself, the Doctor would understand Neha's feminine compulsions. When the plaintiff side had nothing against concealing this unfortunate reality, what objection could the doctor have? She could not have anything against this concealment, if it had been demanded by the respondents.

"What're you saying, *Vakil Sahib!* How can I conceal such an important fact? I've to remain in my job. If somebody else applied for her medical examination from somewhere else, what will be my position then?"

"Who else can be interested in getting her examined? Nobody knows who the culprits are. I'm the *Mama* of the girl. And a lawyer as well. I'm the most concerned person here to care for her good or bad. Her parents are lying on the verge of death. It's a question of the victim's future after all."

Ramnath implored his best to touch the most delicate chord of the doctor's heart. But she was not the one to melt like that. The tears flooding the eyes of Ramnath were no better than some droplets of saline water.

When he persisted with his entreaties a little more, she roared like a hungry tigress, "Please! Don't waste my time. Let me do my work."

Seeing no ray of hope, a disappointed Ramnath came out of her office.

“Uncle, you please see that contractor. He’ll get the needful done,” Pallavi had not forgotten the hospital parking contractor. So she came out with her valuable suggestion.

Once again Ramnath felt irritated at the confusion in his mind. The lawyer in him had died, perhaps. How could he get new ideas? Even the very ordinary ideas were eluding his grasp now. He found himself strangely in troubled waters.

Initially, the contractor started putting on airs. He had been offering his services since morning and nobody had given an ear to him.

Then he agreed. In ordinary cases the doctor charged fees of five thousand rupees. Here there was no one to oppose. Moreover it was a question of girl’s honour. Therefore he started negotiating with four thousand and settled for half the amount.

Ramnath thanked God. The girl’s honour was saved in the world.

One major problem was solved after all. But now another stared him in the face.

Neha could regain consciousness in a few hours. Then she was to be discharged from the hospital. The problem was, where he should take her from the hospital.

Both Ramnath and Sangeeta racked their brains but failed to find a solution to the problem. They could not find a single house in a city of 25 lakhs population, where the girl should be taken to stay for a few days.

Once again Pallavi emerged as an angel.

She was already aware of this impending situation.

Pallavi’s parents were coming to the hospital to take Neha to their place.

Till she recovers properly, Neha will stay with Pallavi.

Once again there was a message from police. Police could not wait any longer.

Moreover, now there was no reason for delay. Ramnath directed Sangeeta to stay at the hospital till Kamal and Ved were discharged and then reach Dayanand Hospital.

He himself was going home in connection with the registration of case.

The news of the gory incident was spreading like wild fire. All the four members of the family had their respective social circles. Anybody belonging to these circles would rush to their house as soon as he or she came to know about this heart-rending tragedy.

By the time Ramnath reached there from the hospital, a large crowd had gathered at the *kothi*.

The police had completed the formality of examining the site of incident. The crime was committed in a very well-designed manner. The accused had not left behind any proofs from their own side. The police had recovered from the scene a rod used for hitting and a bag in which they had brought tools like screw-driver, spanners etc. The footprints and fingerprints were too dim to be easily spotted. To gather more proofs, some forensic experts were yet to arrive. The main part of the *kothi* was sealed to keep it intact for further investigation.

The media persons felt exasperated at the reticence of police. Why was police maintaining a mysterious silence? They were trying to club together bits and pieces to develop their dispatches. The police had stopped them several times from interviewing the people. The neighbours knew nothing.

“Please don’t spoil the whole case by mis-reporting the facts. Have patience, till we issue a press-note,” the press people were requested.

As Ramnath reached home, he was surrounded by the police men. Ved’s relatives had put the whole onus on him. He was a lawyer. Who could know better but a lawyer, how to get the case registered? Whatever he will do, will be acceptable to all.

Ramnath knew the importance of case-registration. It had to be the basis of the entire case. It must be factual in nature. Ramnath knew nothing about the incident. Nothing was clear as to whether the assailants were two, four, ten or twelve in number, whether they had entered the house by scaling down the outer wall or they entered by ringing the doorbell? How were they dressed up? Were they fully dressed or with unclad torsos? Were they the men with long hair, shorn heads or with

a *Maulavi*-cut beard and hair style? Who was attacked first? Who murdered Kamal? Who raped Neha? Was it an individual or gang rape? Who injured Neelam and Ved?

These were the questions which emerged from the situation, but Ramnath had no answer to none of them. The registration of case, merely on the basis of speculation would be disastrous. The guilty were bound to be nabbed sooner or later and they were sure to inform every detail of the incident to their lawyer. The statements of the plaintiff and respondent sides would naturally vary a lot from each other. Lack of any coordination between the statements of both sides would simply help the accused get a benefit of doubt.

Ramnath could not think anything. He was miserably fatigued due to unusual exertion, mental tension, hunger and thirst. On such occasions he would rejuvenate himself by drinking a cup of strong tea. But even tea was not available in the prevailing circumstances.

The Inspector realized Ramnath's perturbed state of mind and took him aside for sharing a technical point.

"Is there a servant also in this house?" he asked Ramnath.

Ramnath understood the purport of the sub-inspector.

Now the domestic servants were no longer as reliable as they used to be earlier. During the last one year, there had been many incidents involving the domestic helps. The Inspector quoted a recent incident to illustrate his point saying,

"Last week a bank Manager's servant mixed some sleep-inducing drug in the meals at night. When all members of the family fell fast asleep, he opened the main gate of the *kothi* for his accomplices. With great ease they looted the house and decamped. So far, neither the servant nor his accomplices have been tracked down."

But Ved's servant was not like that. He was just seven when his uncle had brought him to Punjab. For a couple of years he worked in some other house, but for the last five years, he had been with this family. Neither he ever visited his native place, nor did anybody ever come to see him even once. His uncle came to visit him every year and took away his salary. Ved would treat his servant like his own son.

Ramnath could not even think of his involvement in such an incident.

The closeness of the servant with the family only confirmed the suspicion of the Inspector. The servant knew where money was kept in the house. Human mind changes within no time. Nobody can say when one gets spoiled in bad company. T.V. and films also teach burglary, dacoity and rape to the viewers. The servants, once freed from household work, keep sitting before the T.V. screen, the whole day. The servant might have picked up get-rich-quick message from a feature film. Well, who can rule out this possibility?

The Police officer was right of course. Ramu was really fond of watching TV. The office television was of a very old model. When it came to selling the old set, nobody was ready to pay more than two thousand rupees for it. As such Ved brought it home and rather than selling it at a throw away price, he got it installed in the servant's room. It will keep Ramu happy on one hand and on the other, restrain him from watching TV in the company of children,

"Where is the servant?" before saying something either in favour of Ramu, or against him, Ramnath enquired the Station House Officer about the servant.

"He is under the vigil of Police. His behaviour is strange," the SHO started telling Ramnath the details of incident as received from Ramu.

Till the arrival of police, he was fast asleep in his room with his TV set on.

Such a terrible incident had taken place in the house. All members of the house had a scuffle with the accused. There must have been a great commotion. The household articles were broken and many things had gone out of the house. Didn't all this disturb the servant's sleep at all?

When asked by the police, he had put off the whole thing. Till late in the night he had been doing his work. A film of Amitabh Bachan was being telecast. He didn't know when he fell asleep all of a sudden. He had woken-up only at the arrival of police, he had told the investigation officer.

The servant had not given any cogent information during

the preliminary probe. It required a hard pressing interrogation. But time was not yet ripe enough to resort to any strictness. However, Ramu could not be let loose either. He had to be dealt with tactfully without giving him any chance to escape.

A *Hawaladar* was keeping a strict eye on Ramu's movements. Who, from his fraternity, meets him? What does he talk during such meeting? Whether he is scared or normal. The police had to be vigilant till the investigation moves on a particular track. Ramnath's co-operation was solicited by the police.

Ramnath had no sympathies with the servant. But since he was just like a family member, he should not be thrashed without any convincing proofs against him. This was what Ramnath felt.

Anyway, this issue will be taken care of later. The problem at hand was, against whom and on whose statement the case ought to be registered.

Had the needle of suspicion not pointed to the servant, the case could have been registered on the basis of his statements. He could be made the eye witness to the whole occurrence.

But the SHO did not conform to this view. The case could not be based entirely on the basis of a servant's statement. Who knows who emerges as the killer? Such a witness takes no time in having a U-turn just for a few bucks.

At least the case must get registered by someone from the aggrieved family.

Neha could be that member of the family. The doctor had also declared her fit to give statement.

The Inspector and lawyer both reached the same conclusion i.e. the case should be registered on the basis of Neha's statement. Who cares for the signatures? Ramnath himself should scribble her signatures. The investigation officer will attest it. The problem will be solved without any hitch. There is no need to bother Neha and the case will be registered.

Now the problem was against whom the case should be registered?

The investigation made by the SHO held the *kala kachha* gang

responsible for the crime. If Ramnath suspected anybody else, it could also be considered.

Tallying Maya Devi's statement regarding the inimicable signs of her sons with the grievous injuries of the victims, the architects of this incident stood clearly identified. The plotters would themselves come out with the names of the real culprits.

Ramnath shared with the SHO the acrimonious relations between the two families and threats of intimidation by Pankaj and his brother Neeraj.

The SHO noted down these details in his diary but was not convinced that family level differences of trivial nature could lead to an incident of such a horrendous magnitude. Implicating Ved's nephews just on the basis of suspicion would not be fair. They could be accused later on after a clue is found against them but inclusion of their names in the case must be avoided for the time being.

The SHO had expressed this noble advice on account of more than one reason.

First, *prima facie*, it looked like a common incident of burglary turned into dacoity. No affluent family would stoop so low as to devise such heinous plots. The SHO was likely to stir the hornets' nest by including the names of opulent and influential persons in the case. What would he get but stings by doing so?

Secondly, it would amount to ingratitude. Pankaj's manager had just now come and greased his palm with ten thousand rupees. The manager had received a phone call made by Pankaj from Delhi in this connection. "The family disputes were confined only to the courts. Blood never turns into water. The inspector should pursue his investigation whole heartedly and the accused must be arrested at any cost." Pankaj did not care about the expenditure. How could the party which was ready to pay ten thousand for making a spirited probe in to the case, be the killer itself? The SHO was not ready to digest this truth.

Third and the most important reason was that Ramnath's hint would provide police an excuse to harass Pankaj and his brother. He could visualize no pecuniary bonanza from the plaintiff's side. Who knows how much time it would take to

nab the accused? The SHO could expect a comfortable gratification from Pankaj only.

Ramnath had to agree to the investigation officer. The inclusion of the names of Mohan Lal's sons in the case without first taking into confidence his sister and her husband could bring only a bad name to him.

There was nothing to think about much now.

Neha's proxy statement was recorded as under:

"I was studying in my room between 2 and 3 O'clock in the thick of night. The doorbell rang. I woke my Papa off his sleep. Mama also woke up along with him. Papa reached the main gate. There were two men in Commando Uniform. Taking them to be the policemen on night patrol, Papa opened the gate. The accused were clad in black. Their faces were covered with black cloth and they had black goggles on their eyes. They said they were policemen and wanted to search the *kothi* as they suspected a thief was hidden there. Under this pretext they came in, followed by two-three others like them. Some of them came into the lobby while some stayed outside the lobby. They started demanding cash and jewelry from Ved. They asked for the keys of *almirah*. This noise awakened Kamal. He came into the lobby and had a scuffle with the ruffians. To help their comrades, those staying outside also came in. Somebody was having a dagger and some other had a rod in his hand. Their faces were uncovered in the scuffle. If produced before my eyes, I can identify them. One of them stabbed Kamal in the stomach, while another hit Mama. Still another hit my Papa. They dragged me forcibly and locked me up in the room. Then they decamped with the looted booty. All members of the family fainted. What happened thereafter, I don't know. "

Getting this statement signed by Ramnath in Neha's name, the I.O. *heaved* a sigh of relief. The headache is over for the time being, he thought.

The crowd started dispersing after the case was registered.

Two constables left for the hospital with Kamal's dead body.

The other policemen turned towards the police station. A lot of written work was yet to be done.

The media persons rushed towards their offices. The onlookers also turned away.

The sorrow-stricken relatives spread carpets in the street.

Very impatiently they started waiting for the return of Kamal's dead body so that cremation takes place well in time.

6

Like Sardari Lal and Sangeeta, Mangat Rai also could not join the cremation rites of Kamal.

They were stuck in Dayanand Hospital looking after Ved and Neelam. Both the patients were in a precarious condition. The doctors were trying their best to save their lives. They needed the support of family attendants at every step.

Neelam was admitted to the neuro emergency ward. Sardari Lal, Sangeeta and Seema were standing outside this ward and fulfilling the medical requirements as directed by the doctors

This ward was on the fifth floor of the hospital.

Ved was lying in the emergency section of ortho ward. Mangat Rai, his wife Sujata and Sangeeta's brother Pawan were there to attend them. This ward was on the first floor.

Dr. Dev was shuttling between the two wards. The hospital doctors were not making anything clear to them. Even Dr. Dev was not allowed to go into the emergency. He was conjecturing the patient's condition on the basis of their medical investigation report.

As soon as he got to know something, he immediately apprised the patient's attendants with the latest situation. Neelam's head injury was very serious. Blood had clotted at several places in her brain. She was in coma. Brain was no longer functioning as a control tower for her body parts. Blood-pressure fluctuated in a very dismal way. Pulse-rate was very slow. Heart too was not in a stable condition. She must be operated upon immediately. But the doctors were not yet able to decide whether the patient was in a position to be operated upon or not. They had conducted tests on her blood, diabetic level, heart, kidneys and pancreas. Final decision was to be taken after the perusal of the report of these tests. Overall, her condition could not be described as 'out of danger'.

Ved's condition too was akin to that of Neelam. His legs and arms were in as critical a condition as Neelam's brain. The broken jaw-bone was the biggest problem. It could neither be plated nor plastered. The bones had to be linked together tightly by passing wires from the nose and mouth. The tautness of wires was very painful. So long as the wires were there, he had to be kept on anesthesia. The pain of injuries and delay in treatment had a very adverse effect on heart. His heartbeat was fluctuating fast. Blood-pressure had mounted and diabetic level had come down. Bones of leg were broken into so many pieces and there seemed to be little hope of their joining together again. Even amputation of any of the legs could be resorted to for saving the life of the patient. It could prove fatal as well.

For the attendants, beside the health of their patients, the expenditure to be made on the operations was also a cause of great anxiety.

Both the patients had been admitted to the hospital by Sardari Lal. The admission fee for each patient was five thousand rupees. Thus, a sum of ten thousand had been spent on the admission of both the patients. Sardari Lal had brought fifty thousand rupees with him. The remaining forty thousand had been spent on the medicines, instruments and clinical tests of Neelam. He had hardly two-three thousand left with him now.

Mangat Rai had withdrawn twenty thousand from Ramnath's account and brought another thirty thousand from his own side. At the time of departure, he had never thought that money would go down the drain so fast like this. Even if he knew, he could not arrange a bigger sum. Collecting from here and there would have been very time-consuming.

Mangat Rai had spent about fifteen thousand on reports like MRI, CT scan and X-ray etc. Another five thousand had been spent on medicines and warm bandages. He had thirty thousand with him. It was to be spent on plates. Where from the money will come hereafter? This anxiety was gnawing at the heart of Mangat Rai.

A five-six hours stay had made the attendants realize that the fees had to be deposited before taking the patients to the operation theatre.

Fees for Neelam's operation was thirty thousand and about twenty thousands were to be spent on medicines, injections etc.

Ved's operation also called for almost the same expenditure including twenty thousand as the operation fees. Four plates were required for setting the bones right. The price of an imported one would cost fifteen to twenty thousand.

Roughly, at least one lac rupees were needed. The attendants started planning about managing the funds while the doctors set upon examining the medical reports.

The doctors had a sense of satisfaction when after the toil of six hours they succeeded in controlling the diabetic level and blood-pressure of the patients.

Having received a green signal from the doctor, the attendants were contacted through the public address system and asked to deposit fees at the counter and sign the papers.

Rather than going to the counter, all the relatives started converging at one place.

Sardari Lal clarified his position. He had spent all the money he had brought along and had all the receipts as a testimony to the fact. He handed over the receipts to Mangat. He had no acquaintances in *Mayanagar*. However, he could get an equal amount managed from his village after the banks opened. In case more was needed, he would have to borrow from someone.

Mangat Rai also offered the thirty thousand he had in his pocket. And he had no other means to manage more at this point of time.

The remaining amount could be arranged in consultation with Ramnath.

Kamal's cremation ceremonies were over by now. Ramnath was expected here any time.

And they started waiting for Ramnath.

7

The Pandit, relatives and neighbours were pressing Ramnath for an early post-mortem. Cremation must take place before the sunset; or else it could be performed only the next day. The dead body had started stinking. It could not be preserved overnight.

Ramnath knew this social inhibition and was trying his best to get the dead body in time.

The concerned officers were quite compassionate to the bereaved family. There was no hitch from any sides but there were so many legal formalities to be completed that the delay was inevitable. Police had to prepare their reports before the post-mortem and the doctors had to do much more after the post-mortem. It was a case of murder. Any discrepancy howsoever small, could lead to the acquittal of the accused. Ramnath was aware of these intricacies. He could ill-afford to advise the officials concerned to leave their proceedings incomplete.

Keeping in view the difficulties of the kith and kin of the deceased, coming from outside, the police and doctors handed over the dead body to the family after completing the bare minimum essential formalities, so that the funeral rites could be performed.

Someone gave a very sensible advice that there was no use taking dead body to the house where the whole atmosphere was charged with awe and horror. Other members of the family were dangling between life and death. Therefore, the will of almighty must be accepted with a feeling of total surrender. Time must be spared to save other members by devoting all possible attention to them.

The dead body was taken straightway to the cremation ground.

The cremation took place in an atmosphere of deadly silence. The relatives seemed to have petrified. Nobody was shedding tears or uttering a single syllable at all.

The relatives, who had some superstitions to worry about, returned to their respective places right from the cremation. But those who bothered more about the relatives rather than absurd superstitions turned their steps towards the hospital.

It took a little longer for Ramnath in solemnizing the funeral rites of Kamal.

He started receiving one message after another from the hospital that the condition of patients was critical. The doctors wanted to operate upon them immediately. Their life was in

danger. Before taking any risk the doctors wanted to take consent of the attendants. Ramnath must come at once and put his signatures on the consent papers.

Ramnath was not the only relative of the patients there. Many relatives like him were present in the hospital. He could read something else from the text of this message. He left every other thing midway and rushed to the hospital.

The relatives had assembled on the first floor.

Ramnath found it difficult to climb upstairs. He felt as if his legs had become incredibly heavy. He was out of his breath and his eyes were swollen. Ramnath knew, these were the symptoms of abnormally high blood pressure.

After walking a few steps ahead he felt some dizziness. Like a drunkard, his steps became uneven. But Sangeeta immediately supported him as he was about to collapse. With her support Ramnath was seated on a chair nearly in lying position.

Sardari Lal appeared at once with a water bottle and put a glass of water to his lips. Ramnath gulped down the whole glass within no time. Sardari Lal gave him another glass. Ramnath drank it also without the slightest pause. This was his first intake of water during the past 15-16 hours,

Coolness of water had the desired effect. Darkness before his eyes dispelled fast and his respiration became stable.

Pawan realized the whole situation. This condition of Ramnath was simply an outcome of prolonged hunger and thirst. He had observed that ever since he had come to *Mayanagar*, he had never seen Ramnath eating or drinking anything. Many a time Pawan had tried to make him eat or drink, but every time he had rejected his offer.

Sangeeta's condition, too, was no different from that of her husband. Although she was not as famished as Ramnath, yet she was awfully hungry.

There must be some other relatives also who may be sitting hungry just out of reluctance that is quite natural in such gloomy situation.

Whatever was inevitable had already happened. Starving would not bring the dead back to life.

It would be worthwhile to take care of the survivors. And it

required them to be hale and hearty so that the traumatized members of the family are well looked after. Ramnath was the hub of all activity. Any harm to his health would spoil everything.

With these ideas of practical wisdom in his mind, Pawan went to the canteen and returned with a jug full of tea and disposable glasses.

Ramnath's body was now no better than a lump of earth due to starvation and incessant fatigue. He could not say *no* to Pawan. But by way of courtesy he took the glass and handed it to Sardari Lal, his brother-in-law. Sardari Lal was also feeling a strong urge for tea but showing a sense of decency he gave the glass to Sangeeta. Pawan kept pouring tea into the plastic glasses and relatives passed them further on to each other.

When all started sipping the refreshing brew, Pawan was encouraged further. He silently went to the canteen and came back with 4-5 packets of bread. He now started distributing slices of bread to everyone.

Everybody was feeling hungry. Nobody refused, and accepted bread along with tea.

After satisfying his hunger, Ramnath felt himself reenergized, as if nothing had gone wrong with him.

Seeing the opportune moment, Dr. Dev apprised Ramnath and other relatives with the latest condition of the patients. He added that any delay in operations could turn fatal. Therefore, the doctors must be allowed to start operation by first completing the formalities of paper work.

Ramnath failed to understand as to why Mangat Rai had not signed the papers so far if the operations were so urgent. Was there any difference between him and Mangat?

To make the situation very clear, Mangat took him aside and explained the expenditure already made and the one that was to be made for the operations.

Pawan also heard the hush-hush talk over the paucity of funds. He was not a very rich person. He was just a scooter-mechanic. He had immediately rushed to the hospital after locking his shop on knowing about the incident. Money is required urgently on such occasions, he knew and brought along

whatever was available in his own safe and coffers of his neighbours. More than one thousand was already spent and eight nine thousand rupees were still with him.

He handed over this amount to Sangeeta.

This initiative by Pawan encouraged others also. Every relative knew this harsh reality that money is needed in such exigencies. Everybody had reached there with some amount according to his or her capacity

The relatives voluntarily started contributing to the pool.

Ramnath signaled to Mangat that he should note down the names and contributions of the benevolent relatives. Neither Ramnath nor the affected relatives had any dearth of money. Everybody's share will be returned with a profound sense of gratitude.

The number of contributors increased manifold as they saw Mangat noting down names and amount given by each and every relative.

The amount accumulated thus was sufficient enough to meet the expenditure on both the patients.

Mangat wanted to return the surplus money but Dr. Dev stopped him saying that expenses were not over as yet. Who knows when a slip bearing prescription of medicines comes out and when an expensive test is required. For the time being, money should be kept in reserve.

After the patients were taken into the operation theatre, most of the relatives were requested with folded hands to go home and have rest.

The close relatives squatted in a corner of the hospital and started waiting for the patients to come out alright from the operation theatre.

8

The police officers kept holding meetings throughout the night and discussed this incident at length.

There had certainly been some incidents earlier as well but this one was the most disgusting. Rape had been unprecedented so far. Earlier incidence showed that the injuries were inflicted only in the case of a stiff resistance. But in this case the attack

was well-contemplated and without almost any resistance by the members of family.

Kamal was an MBA student in the university and an active member of students union. The union leaders had announced indefinite strike from tomorrow. They were demanding immediate arrest of the murderers.

Neha was a diploma holder in journalism. Now she was a student of MA in English literature. Also she was working as a free-lance journalist with Press Trust of India. She had amorous relations with Sagar, a well-known journalist. Both were about to be betrothed. Due to her being a would-be bride of Sagar, it had become an issue of prestige for the journalists of the city. From tomorrow onwards each and every-point of this case would be discussed in the newspapers.

The intelligence department had conveyed both the decisions to the Chief Minister through senior officers. As a result, every officer was pulling up the SSP.

The Chief Minister had announced in a press conference that the probe into the case had been handed over to the SSP. If the killers were not apprehended within a fortnight, the SSP would be transferred, he said.

The opposition was already out to confront the Chief Minister on many fronts. Now it would find a golden opportunity to lambaste him on as crucial an issue as worsening law and order situation in the state. He could not afford to let the opposition castigate him on this account.

This announcement by the chief Minister in the press conference had thrown the SSP off his feet. He would become a scapegoat if the accused were not apprehended within fifteen days.

Therefore, the SSP intensified his efforts to abide by the orders of the Chief Minister by all means. He activated all units working under him. Raids were conducted here and there for tracking down the culprits.

The servant had become an eyesore for the SSP. How could the inquiry progress without interrogating him? He himself wanted to interrogate him.

The SHO had done well to let Ramu go yesterday. The

people trusted his loyalty. Moreover atmosphere was tension-charged and it was not proper to be hard on him.

Now the situation had changed and nobody bothered for the servant. Nobody knew where he had spent the night. If he ran away, it would be very unfortunate for the SSP.

Whole night the SSP kept gnashing his teeth over the servant.

Next morning the SSP decided to visit the site of incident once again. Ramnath and the servant were allowed to join the police on this occasion.

Ramu had spent the night in the neighbouring house. The neighbour had said that Ramu was frightened awfully and he had been tossing in his bed throughout the night. He had hardly swallowed a few morsels of bread due to great mental tension. He insisted upon going to his uncle's house.

This restlessness of Ramu augured well for the SSP. His nervousness showed that he was concealing something.

When the Khaki-clad police officer looked into the eyes of the boy, his bloodshot eyes seemed to have pierced the bosom of poor Ramu. He shuddered at the sight of the ferocity of those eyes.

"Look Beta, the *chowkidar* of the locality has told me everything. The thieves had entered the *kothi* by scaling the outer wall. You had seen them entering the house."

The SSP's words were sugar-coated but the bitterness behind this sugar-coating and the threat hidden in them could not remain unnoticed by the frightened Ramu.

"Yes, Sir".

"What Sir?" the officer could never think that his trick would work so well.

"Very Good! What did you see next. Tell me all that you saw. You will be given a reward. You are a very loyal servant. Your masters are all praise for you. Your younger master has been killed. Elder master and his wife were beaten up mercilessly. Tell me the truth, what happened? Whom of them do you know?"

"I'll tell you, Sir," a trembling Ramu started narrating the whole incident as he witnessed it.

Ramu was watching TV in his room. As a thief entered the *Kothi* by jumping over the iron gate of the *kothi*, a metallic sound was heard. This was what brought Ramu on the roof. From there, he cast a glance at the main gate. By that time the thief who had already entered, opened the gate, thus giving way to his three-four accomplices. Ramu was terrified at the very sight of their black clothes and fearsome faces. Frightened, he came back to his room and tried to sleep by closing his eyes.

After sometime shrieks were heard coming from the house. What happened? To know this, he stealthily came near the stairs and started looking towards the lobby. At that time a thief was stabbing Kamal in the stomach. From another side, he heard cries of Neelam and Neha. When he saw a little more attentively, he saw the contractor Ram Lubhaya of his native state standing there. Although the contractor was also in black dress, yet he had recognized the man.

Ram Lubhaya was a very dreadful man. Had he noticed Ramu standing there, he would have killed him. Thus in sheer fright he had come back to his room.

When, after sometime, he mustered courage to look towards the lobby he found blood all around. Kamal had died while other members were gasping for life.

Seeing the masters in such a pitiable condition, he was horrified. In sheer bewilderment he switched on his Television set and tried to sleep once again.

The identification of one of the accused, gave SSP a sense of relief.

Who is Ram Lubhaya? The SSP became more conscious to know the background of the identified culprit.

Ram Lubhaya was from Ramu's native district. He had been living a well settled life in *Mayanagar* since the times prior to Ramu's birth. He had brought many people to *Mayanagar* from his native place. They remained subservient to him and he too reciprocated them well by taking good care of them. Those who ever tended to move against him were subjected to police-thrashing at his behest. In connivance with the police, he got them implicated in fake criminal cases. In his own native place, it was in the air, that he had burnt some labourers alive in the furnaces

of factories. That is why none could dare utter a word against him.

This was the gist of what Ramu narrated to the SSP.

This elaborate information about Ram Lubhaya was told to Ramu by his uncle. At the *Holi* festival, Ramu would visit his uncle. Since his uncle, too, had been brought to Punjab by Ram Lubhaya, he was heartily grateful to him.

"Well done, *Beta!* You've done a very noble deed." Apparently, the SSP patted Ramu's back but at his heart of hearts, his own. He had solved the tangle with his intellect.

"*Vaqil Sahib!* Please remain tight-lipped lest the whole game is spoilt," taking leave of Ramnath, the police officer warned the former against disclosing what had transpired between him and the servant.

But on his way, the SSP started doubting. "Ramu might have mistaken someone else as Ram Lubhaya. May be, he lied before me out of fear," he thought.

Ramu's words could not be relied upon till Ram Lubhaya was arrested.

Ramu did not know anything about the colony Ram Lubhaya lived in. Nor did he know anything about the whereabouts of his uncle.

Until the arrest of Ram Lubhaya, Ramu must be protected. The meeting between the SSP and Ramu too, should remain a secret.

The next step of the police officer was guided by a rare farsightedness.

As soon as he reached his office, he dispatched two constables in plain clothes to Ved's house.

For an hour or so, they had to stay there and then they were to take the servant at a place directed by the SSP, in a cycle-rickshaw.

Mayanagar had a population of about 25 lacs out of which around six to seven lacs were migrants. About five lacs of them hailed from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh only. They had their colonies on the outskirts of the city. This area looked like a

miniature Bihar. Even the shopkeepers of these colonies were their native brethren. The heads of these colonies were also from amongst them. Some gutsy migrants who had settled here long back, had already become labour-contractors.

There were hundreds of contractors of the same name - Ram Lubhaya living in this city. Which Ram Lubhaya, should the SSP apprehend?

The SSP announced Red Alert to the intelligence wing. Ramu's uncle should be tracked down and picked up from wherever he is found. He should be made to divulge the whereabouts of Ram Lubhaya and the SSP be intimated accordingly. One who comes back with correct information about Ram Lubhaya, would be given a cash prize as well as promotion.

Before the pall of darkness descended over the city, the intelligence people had gathered comprehensive information. A detailed account of Ram Lubhaya's misdeeds so far, was furnished to the SSP.

Ram Lubhaya had come to Punjab, two decades back. A mason from his village had brought him here. The wages of masons were touching dizzying heights those days. The master mason first took Ram Lubhaya as a labour and within a year, trained him in masonry.

Ram Lubhaya was a man of sturdy physique and sharp intellect. By working twelve hours a day, instead of the routine eight hours, he started earning double the normal income. After two years he brought two of his cousins from his village. Leaving his mentor, he formed his own team. Within a year, they became masons. Ram Lubhaya brought more and more men from his village. Within a period of six to seven years, he had a small empire of his own to rule over.

First he obtained from his mentor a contract of plastering a *kothi*. When he came to understand the secrets of his trade, he got a contract of building a *kothi* completely. After earning good enough, he started contracting the construction of three-four *kothis* simultaneously.

He learnt motorcycle driving. First, he purchased a second hand motor bike and then a new one. He brought his family

from his village. His wife started working as a domestic help in the *kothis* to supplement the family income.

When he had some surplus money, he purchased a two-hundred square-yard plot in the fields and constructed four rooms on it by using old debris. He rented all the four rooms to the migrant labourers. This venture benefited him a lot. The labourers became readily available and the rent added to his income as well. He set up a grocery shop for his elder son. The earnings of laborurers started falling back into his pockets through in a circular way.

Ram Lubhaya went ahead and started building factory-buildings rather than *kothis*. As he came into contact with the industrialists, he learnt the knack of getting workers recruited in the factories. Along with building contracts, he started supplying workers to the factories.

He purchased the adjacent plot and built some more rooms. This colony of two to three hundred workers became his estate. Most of the residents of this colony were brought by him from Bihar. He had first taught them work and then got them employed. They gave credit of their improved fortunes to Ram Lubhaya and were ready to lay down their life at his behest.

Ram Lubhaya's importance multiplied manifold during election season. All political parties tried to pamper him.

The Congress party made him an active member and started inviting him in its special meetings by making him president of the colony. He was made the in charge of rallies organized in *Mayanagar*. Buses, trucks, cars and liquor were available against the slip issued by him.

Hereditary habit of picking up disputes and committing minor crimes was there among the workers migrated from UP and Bihar. Every other day police visited the colony under the pretext of inquiry about one or the other crime. He got his people acquitted by pecuniary handshake with the cops. The police also started treating him as a source of income and honoured his recommendation as well.

Factory owners and workers viewed him as a goon. But Ram Lubhaya did not see himself as a goon. Small scale quarrels

and petty thefts formed an integral part of his class culture. He had never locked horns with the natives of the city. What to speak of his own men! They were just like lumps of earth. Treat them as cruelly as you like, there would be no resentment. Next morning again, they would be at your feet. He was a leader of his own clan only.

There were some migrants in his colony, who were involved in stealing and snatchings. Ram Lubhaya was aware of their activities, but he never claimed any share and became a party to all that.

This was for the first time that had committed a crime himself.

He had done so under the influence of his nephew, Pandit. Addicted to drugs Pandit had fallen in bad company. To fulfill the needs, he resorted to petty thefts. Encouraged by his success, he started looting people by standing on roadside in odd hours of night. Once or twice he was caught. But he got free by using the name of his uncle. Recently he had started snatching gold-chains and purses as well. The city was terror-stricken due to such incidents which had become a constant headache for the police.

Ram Lubhaya came to know of these activities of his nephew when *anti-goonda staff* police picked him up. He confessed to having committed many thefts and got several goldsmiths arrested.

Recently he had come out after an imprisonment of four months. Jail had not proved to be reformatory for him. He had come out as a more hardened criminal instead. He had come in contact with the professional criminals.

Some gangster undergoing imprisonment had arranged this killing contract for him. Ram Lubhaya would never come to know about this nefarious contract if the party on the other side had not asked for a reliable mediator. They had to pay one lac rupees for this job. Such a heavy amount could not be handed over to a rascal.

Money was to be given to a man of credibility. There was one more condition. The party would neither show its face or tell its name or address to the accused. This information would remain secure with the mediator only.

Uncle was fed up with the misdeeds of his nephew while the boy was bitter over the naggings of his uncle. The nephew told Ram Lubhaya that he was about to get a fat amount, after that he would board a train for Bombay. He promised that he would never again show his face in *Mayanagar*.

The uncle kept brooding over the pros and cons of the whole affair. He was going to get rid of this spoilt brat, once for all. Well that was the only positive aspect of this wicked plot.

Secondly, the boy might mend his ways. Once he got out of the city safely, police would never be able to get at him. Thousands of new labourers come here and thousands leave daily. Nobody had any permanent settlement. Wherever one gets a job that becomes his foothold. Even the family members cannot find the boy who once leaves his home and hearth for greener pastures. How could the police find such a vagabond? The contractor knew a number of such migrants who had returned to their native places after committing crimes and abducting girls. Police never turned its face towards their villages. The policemen just paid some intimidating visits to this colony and went back. The matter died its own death in due course of time.

Before giving his nephew an assenting nod, the contractor took him to Shiva's temple and made him take an oath that in future neither he would commit any crime nor would ever turn his face towards *Mayanagar*.

After this obnoxious oath taking ceremony was over, the contractor talked to the party giving the murder contract, called *Supari* in common parlance.

The *Supari*-givers told that the accused would be given one lac as their remuneration and another five thousand to purchase tools to be used for the incident.

Then uncle and nephew settled their mutual terms and conditions.

Other accomplices were to be arranged by the nephew.

The two accomplices were to get twenty thousand each from the *Supari* amount and one third share from the looted cash and jewellery. The remaining sixty thousand were to be divided equally between the uncle and the nephew. Similarly, the remaining booty was also to be shared equally by them.

Under the actual plan, the contractor was supposed only to act as a link between the party, giving *Supari* and the accused. Neither he was to visit the site of incident, nor was he to become a party to the incident.

The contractor had a very good reputation in *Mayanagar*. He had become a permanent dweller of this city. His children were admitted to a school. He had everything in life, including his own house, motor cycle, telephone etc. In his village, he was called *Chaudhary* and *Sahukar*. Why earn a bad name in such shady deals?

But his mouth watered as he visited the *kothi* at the instigation of his nephew for making the survey. Since it belonged to a very affluent person, they were bound to lift a good booty from here. They were not to commit a very serious crime. Only the members of the family were to be given a little thrashing and the girl was to be molested a bit.

The contractor knew many such migrants who used to commit such crimes in the name of *kala kachha* gang. Only four-five percent used to be arrested. Other cases were disposed of without much ado.

With a wavering mind Ram Lubhaya surrendered even to this wish of his nephew.

Till the last moment, the contractor had no intention at all to enter the *kothi*. He had to assess the probable danger by staying outside and intimate the insiders if need be.

His second job was to ensure that the men and looted material reaches the destined place after the incident.

Ram Lubhaya was given five thousand rupees for the purchase of arms, bag, gloves, black dresses and black goggles. The clothes were to be burnt after the incident. Then why to purchase new ones? He bought old dresses from a junk shop. There was no need to buy knives or daggers. They were not to murder anybody after all. Two iron-rods were enough for breakage and destruction. He, however, brought a bag and rods from the factory of the *Supari*-givers. Hardly five hundred was spent out of five thousand. The remaining four thousand five hundred was pocketed. Ram Lubhaya felt elated at this happy beginning.

But the very sight of Pandit's accomplices shocked his uncle. They were very ferocious killers. Only two of them were expected, but there was a third one also. He was a boy of very tender age, a novice in the line. This was his first experience on the crime-track.

Ram Lubhaya felt suspicious. The nephew had fallen into the trap of his rascal mentor. He had not brought them along, but it was they who had brought him with them. As per the terms of *Supari*, only minor injuries were to be inflicted on family members. But the accomplices of the nephew had come well prepared for murder. They had two daggers with long blades and sharp edged knives. Beside pliers, screw-drivers and other paraphernalia they also had a master-key to open the chests and *almirahs*.

Ram Lubhaya's conscience cursed him. His inner voice told him that he and his nephew had fallen in a trap laid by some scamps under a deep rooted conspiracy. He was about to be handcuffed, he felt. But there was no running away. Under such compulsive circumstance he also had to cross over the wall and enter the *kothi*.

And there happened inside the house what Ram Lubhaya apprehended but never wished.

After a very little refusal to hand over the keys of *almirah*, Pandit hit the mistress of the house on the head with the rod. She reeled around and fell flat on the ground.

Where was the need to break legs and arms of the master, when moved at the condition of his wife he was ready to surrender everything.

Instead of looting, Dina barged in to the girl's bed-room. When he saw her lying there scantily-clad, the animal in him raised its head. He pounced upon her like a wild dog.

The screams of the girl awakened her brother. He went to her bed-room and grappled with the beast in human form.

Pancham dragged him into the lobby. In spite of repeated pleadings of Ram Lubhaya, he stabbed him into the stomach.

Ram Lubhaya kept entreating them to desist from avoidable violence. He asked them to grab gold and silver by pressing upon the masters. But nobody lent an ear to him. They seemed

to be interested more in violence than looting.

When all the members became unconscious and nothing much could be lifted, they took to their heels by picking up what they could lay their hands upon.

Kalia wrapped up a colour TV in a sheet. Dina took away a Tape-recorder and VCR. Pandit emptied an *almirah* of Saris, Suits etc. and bundled everything in a piece of cloth. Ram Lubhaya succeeded in getting away with some cash and jewellery.

Pandit's accomplices pushed off straight from the site towards their places with their own share of the loot. Pandit went to his residence.

Ram Lubhaya kept hiding himself in his house the whole day. Sometimes he apprehended his arrest and then beamed at the sight of looted material.

"The accomplices of Pandit had decamped from the site. Pandit himself must have boarded the train to Bombay by now. Who is going to name me," the contractor sat thinking in his house.

Caught between the thoughts of fear and joy Ram Lubhaya had been drinking whisky since morning. The intelligence people had failed to judge whether he was drinking to sink his sorrow or celebrate some achievement.

The intelligence officials in plain clothes had laid a siege around his house. They were waiting for the next orders from the SSP who was all praise for the performance of the intelligence personnel and saluted them in his heart.

"Now what are you waiting for? Go ahead."

An overjoyed SSP ordered the constables.

His order was accompanied with a warning that the real cause of Ram Lubhaya's arrest should be kept secret.

10

Even before his night hangover had gone, the police swooped down on Ram Lubhaya. First he took it as a dream as throughout the night he had been having dreams of police raids. The nightmares of beating by police disturbed his sleep many times during the night. As he opened his eyes, he had a sigh of relief that it was only a dream.

But now, when a volley of sticks hit him all over the body, he came to realize that this was no dream but harsh reality.

The dazed wife and terrified children kept watching this scene with a sense of disbelief and helplessness.

Some policemen set upon searching the house and scattering the things here and there.

The early morning police-raids in the colonies of the migrant labourers were no new phenomenon. Recovery of stolen goods during the search of house was also a familiar sight.

What was new this time was the sad reality that the object of police wrath and search was none else than the contractor himself, not an ordinary labourer.

“Come on. Where is the material looted last night? Where is the cash and jewellery? Where have you hidden your other comrades?”

“What money? Which men?” Being a man of stout physique Ram Lubhaya was bearing the caning with a brutal stamina.

Ram Lubhaya’s wife could not bear the sight of her husband being beaten mercilessly. She untied the key off her *salwar* string and threw it before the *Hawaladar* so that he could search the trunk himself.

She thought there would be not more than two-three thousand rupees in the box, taking which, the police’s fury will cool down and they will go off.

A constable brought the steel-trunk to the courtyard and opened it in the presence of everyone. They were taken aback at what they saw therein. Along with seventy thousand hard cash there were two very expensive saris and solid gold necklace.

Cash could belong to the contractor. But the humble wife of Ram Lubhaya was in no position to wear such expensive saris and jewellery.

The police men felt exhilarated at the recovery of Saris and Necklace. They had succeeded in getting the maiden clue that established a link with the incident. Now there was no problem in getting up to other links and complete the chain of events that paved way to the bloody episode.

This success was reported immediately to the SSP and

guidelines were sought for further action.

At the orders of the SSP Ram Lubhaya's house was searched thoroughly. The account-books, a pocket diary, a bag and some visiting cards were seized from the spot.

His house was sealed and it was ordered that nobody should touch anything till the SSP himself visited the site.

The articles recovered from Ram Lubhaya's house were produced before the SSP.

The SSP went through the account books and prepared a list of all those people with whom the contractor had some business dealings.

Ved dealt in sale and purchase of *kothis* and shops. He would need masons and labourers for minor repairs from time to time. So the contractor could be having some link with him.

The details of the subscribers of the phone-numbers written in Ram Lubhaya's diary were collected. One of the cellular phone numbers belonged to Pankaj also.

At first, the SSP cast a cursory glance over the report prepared by the SHO. Although the plaintiff had not expressed suspicion against anybody in the plaint, yet Ramnath had orally mentioned threats to Ved's family from the side of Pankaj. The name of Pankaj was there among the suspects.

The SSP once again glanced over the report, this time with deep insight.

Then the visiting cards recovered from the contractor's bag were scrutinized minutely. One of these belonged to Pankaj.

The second link established between Pankaj and Ram Lubhaya opened a new path for the SSP to probe the case.

Comprehensive information was gathered on all aspects of Pankaj e.g. his background, his business, the spares manufactured in his factory, the number of workers working there etc.

The SSP found substance in Ramnath's suspicion against Pankaj.

Pankaj was one of the most reputed persons in the city. Without any solid proof, laying hands on him was fraught with danger.

The SSP did not have any faith in the SHO. He could spoil

the whole game by acting as informer for the accused.

In this probe intelligence wing was giving its best cooperation to the SSP. Once again he patted the intelligence people. He wanted to know what the contractor had done for Pankaj. Was any of the *kothis* or factories of Pankaj built through him? Did he ever supply labour to him? If the contractor was in possession of Pankaj's phone number and visiting card, there was bound to be some connection between the two. What was this connection?

Directly, Ram Lubhaya had done nothing for Pankaj and his family. During the last week he had visited their factory twice. On both occasions, both the brothers were present in the factory. The contractor and the factory owners had exclusive meetings. After the second meeting, the contractor had taken two rods and two small bags from the factory. An entry to this effect was made in the factory record.

The district police chief had almost reached its goal. The accused had used two rods in the incident. One of them was recovered from the site, while the other was taken away by the culprits. Similarly, one bag was recovered from the site while the other was seized from the contractor's house. What remained to be confirmed was whether the rods and bags were the same which were taken from the factory.

The case was property scrutinized once again.

The bag recovered from the site bore the name of Pankaj's factory. Pankaj used to gift such bags to his workers. Another bag recovered from Ram Lubhaya was also identical to this one.

A layer of blood smeared dust was settled on the rod. There was no point in taking the risk of doing away with these proofs unless it was first ascertained whether the products of this factory bore any trade mark or not.

The intelligence department worked on this point.

The products of the factory owned by Pankaj and Neeraj were of a high quality and were costlier than ordinary products. To make their identity felt, they used to brand their trademark on each and every product. As specimen, an intelligence man purchased a rod from the market and placed it before the SSP.

The rod was scanned scientifically. The trade-mark of

Neeraj's factory peeped from under a blot of blood.

The conspiracy of Pankaj and Neeraj had been unraveled now. These proofs were sufficient to arrest them.

Late in the night the SSP called a press-conference. The contractor, along with the material recovered from him was produced before the scribes.

Assuring the news persons of getting track of the other accused and their imminent arrest, the SSP bade farewell to them.

11

Through police Pankaj had got a tip-off that Ramnath had expressed his suspicion about him. Due to fear and anger they had not even looked towards the hospital.

Floating on the air, this information reached the ears of the relatives as well.

Most of the common relatives were inclined towards the powerful. Occasionally, out of obligation, some of them paid a visit to the hospital, sat with the patients for a while and then stole their way out of the hospital premises. At their hearts there lurked a fear lest Mohan Lal's family should come to know about their attachment to the victims' family and sever all links with them.

But relatives from Neelam's parental side had been hovering there like crows since the day one.

Ramnath had three sisters and two brothers. Ramnath was the eldest of all. Next to him was Neelam and then Mangat Rai who was a Junior Engineer in Electricity Board. The youngest was a steno in the office of Block Development and Panchayat Officer. The younger sisters were primary teachers in private schools while their husbands were government school teachers.

Ramnath's town was at a distance of about seventy or seventy five kilometers from *Mayanagar*. Other relatives were settled at far off places ranging from one hundred to one hundred fifty kilometers.

Distance notwithstanding, all the twelve relatives had been camping in hospital for the last three days.

Ramnath and his brothers, though living separately, were

together at a social level and fulfilled all social customs jointly. Their mutual affection and visits to each other's family were still intact. They whole heartedly stood by each other through thick and thin.

This was for the first time that such a calamity had befallen their family. They were trying to share the woes of their sister and her family.

Neha was suffering more psychologically than physically. She was in a state of delirium. Whenever she regained a little consciousness, she started plucking her hair and screaming out for Kamal. Sometimes she felt perturbed at the very thought of being deflowered and then she apprehended Sagar's disengagement with him on this account. Sometimes she would talk of committing suicide, and at others of killing the killers.

The doctors were giving anesthesia to Neha. They were of the opinion that she needed the company of a sister-like friend or a motherly aunt.

Ramnath's youngest sister Sushma took over this responsibility. She was Neha's maternal aunt and could shower maternal love on her. There was a difference of only seven years in their age. Therefore they had always been like friends. She had been a confidant to Neha. So she could act as a friend to her.

Without any sense of shame Sushma had been camping at Pallavi's house.

Mangat and his wife Sujata were looking after Ved who had escaped amputation of his leg. The doctors had declared him out of danger. The broken jaw-bone was not letting him recover from unconsciousness. After keeping him in intensive care unit for three days he had been shifted to the general ward. Due to his unconsciousness, the attendants did not have to face any problem yet. They had to sit in attendance at Ved's bed side round the clock.

All other relatives were attending upon Neelam.

Neelam's condition was critical. She was kept in ICU. Tubes had been passed through her nose, throat and stomach. She was put on ventilator. They feared some ominous message anytime.

Other relatives were sitting outside the ICU ward praying for the recovery of Neelam.

Rather than decreasing, Neelam's medication was on the increase. Tests and scans were being conducted frequently on her. Blood transfusion was on and her heartbeat was fluctuating fast.

Ramnath was asking the doctors time and again, but he was put off every time with the words, " wait for next twenty four hours."

12

A full week had elapsed but the situation had not changed.

Some attendants of other patients admitted there started advising Ramnath.

"This hospital has only a big name. Like civil hospitals, here also the doctors expect some gratification. They call it consultation fee. You, grease the doctor's palm by going to his residence, and then see how he opens his mouth."

Coaxed by them, Ramnath reached senior doctor's *kothi*. Having asked something about the patient's condition, he offered one thousand rupees as consultation fee to the doctor.

"No fee is charged for asking about a patient admitted in the hospital. We'll charge when you come again for consultation after the patient is discharged and sent home."

Saying this, the doctor rejected the money.

But Ramnath's problem stood where it was.

Some patients of Neuro ward started disheartening Ramnath. From their personal experience they could feel that Neelam's condition was worsening day by day. The doctors would never come out with the actual condition of the patient till he breathed his last. They had their share in test fees and other charges. They were concerned more with their fees than the life of the patient.

The patients were pressing hard on Ramnath to shift Neelam to some other hospital.

But where should he take the patients? Dayanand Hospital was one of the most reputed hospitals of North India and Neelam was undergoing treatment under the supervision of senior doctors of international repute. As a matter of routine one or the other country called them for sharing their

experiences with their doctors. Neelam was lying in ICU. Every ultramodern technology was being put to use for saving her life. What more could be expected from a good hospital.

“Let’s consult the doctors at Apollo Hospital, I think, so that we don’t have to repent later on,” said someone who was father of one of Kamal’s friends and had been visiting hospital for several days to enquire about Neelam’s well-being.

Ramnath felt shaken from within at this suggestion. He talked to his family members and other relations.

All the relatives who gathered there were well-wishers of Neelam and wanted that she must be saved at all costs.

Everybody suggested that she should be shifted to Delhi but at the same time avoided going there himself to attend on her.

There were many problems in going to Delhi. The most serious one was that of money. The expenses of this hospital had exhausted all their sources. The Apollo Hospital was far more expensive than this one. There was no expenditure on meals here. The relatives, some of them, if not all, who came to see the patients in the hospital, brought tiffin with them. But in Delhi, the bill on eating and drinking would amount to hundreds a day. Here, the relatives were not very far off from their places and could look after their own families by reaching there once in a while. But it would be very difficult to do so from Delhi. So anybody who went to Delhi would get stuck there, thus leaving other members of the family to their own fate.

Monetary problem could be solved somehow. Till now entire expenditure was made by the relatives. Now Neha was in a position to speak. She could be apprised with the whole situation and asked for money.

But who will stay with Neelam in Delhi? This was the problem which seemed to have no solution at the moment.

The neuro-patients have very long-term treatments. Many patients had been lying in this ward for the last six months or so. Who knows how much time it will take in Delhi?

Sushma was fed up in a week only. Under one pretext or the other, she had expressed a desire to go home. She had her own compulsions. Being on an ad hoc job, she could not avail a

long leave. She was afraid lest she should lose her job by remaining on leave for an unusually long time. Her tuition business was also getting affected. Her mother-in-law was ill. She was passing her days in *Mayanagar* with great uneasiness. It was not possible for her to go to Delhi.

Ramnath found it difficult to get rid of police also. Sometimes, they would visit to examine the site to manage witnesses, while at others they would demand the list of stolen articles and their bills. Sometimes he was asked to identify the accused or the seized material by coming to the police station. Out of the three brothers, at least one should live in the city, where their families lived. The children feel lonesome and afraid without their elders. Ashwini was left out to stay there to look after the children.

“You ask the doctors if she is in a position to be taken to Delhi or not. We are not to keep her here for dying. I’ll stay with her.”

When nobody came forward to go to Delhi, Sangeeta in her capacity of being the elder *Bhabhi*, took upon herself the responsibility of staying with Neelam in Delhi.

But who should ask the doctors in this connection? They would burst out like anything at the very mention of shifting the patient.

The man who had suggested taking Neelam to Delhi gave a solution to this problem. His uncle was the contractor of the drug-store of Apollo Hospital and knew most of the doctors. Given the copy of investigation reports of the patient and medicines administered to her, he could obtain their opinion without any body from *Mayanagar* going there.

What else did Ramnath want! Her record was immediately sent to Delhi.

The Apollo doctors talked to their Dayanand Hospital counterparts on telephone.

By evening the expert opinion reached *Mayanagar*.

“There was nothing to worry about. The patient was getting the same treatment as she was to be given in Delhi. Her condition was satisfactory. After a couple of days she was to be shifted to the general ward.”

This is what happened indeed!

After two days she was declared out of danger and shifted to the general ward.

13

Pankaj and his brother Neeraj lost their wits as they heard of raid on Ram Lubhaya's house. From their own side they had conspired in a very foolproof manner. But within seventy two hours after the incident, the police had nabbed one of the accused and recovered a lot of stolen material also.

The long arm of law could reach them any time via Ram Lubhaya, the contractor. Better manage the situation before it is too late and stall the probe where it is and confine it to the migrant accused, they thought.

First of all, Pankaj rang up the MP. He should not leave for anywhere. Pankaj was coming to him. He needed *Babuji's* help badly. This was the message he gave on phone.

Pankaj had telephoned at the most appropriate time. Had he been late by a few minutes, *Babuji* would have left for Delhi. He had an appointment with the Prime-Minister. He could not afford to lose much time so he called Pankaj at once.

"How dare police to implicate you in a false case? The nephews may be involved in litigation against their uncle. But it does not mean they will manage a dacoity in their own uncle's house or will get their cousin murdered. Police cannot even touch you, rest assured."

Babuji was irked at the temerity of Police as he heard what Pankaj told him.

Had someone else told him that both the brothers were in Delhi on the day the fateful incident took place, he would not have believed at all. But now he was saying this himself. Pankaj and Neeraj were in the company of *Babuji* on that day. A day before, they had gone together to Delhi and had been roaming about in the capital. They had come to know about this incident in Delhi. Leaving all their pursuits midway they had come back to *Mayanagar*. Then how could Pankaj and his brother be a party to the crime? *Babuji* wondered at the high handedness of police.

Their programme of going to Delhi together had been

getting postponed since long. There were many things to be accomplished there. Sometimes *Babuji* had no time and at others Pankaj was held up by some urgent work.

It was with great difficulty that both the sides had found time to go together. *Babuji* had an appointment with the Union Minister for Industries. He was demanding some heavy industries for *Mayanagar*. He hoped sanction for some of these industries. And it was on this issue that they were scheduled to sit together.

Pankaj and his brother wanted to kill two birds with one stone.

For the last few days, Pankaj had been suspicious of some cardiac ailment. The doctors of *Mayanagar* had failed to make a proper diagnosis. He wanted to get himself examined at the Escort Hospital of Delhi.

Along with medical check-up, he would have a chance to have detailed exchange of views with *Babuji* on various issues of domestic, business and public interest during these two days. *Babuji* was to have a sitting with the industries minister. He could get some new industrial project also.

Their company suited *Babuji* also. A City Honda luxury car was there to travel and two millionaire youths at his service. With their capital and his influence some big project could be obtained and he would have a fat bonanza for the generations to come.

The appointment with the industries minister was fixed at six in the evening.

Pankaj should get himself examined till five. Till then *Babuji* would finish with his other engagements.

Till five Pankaj kept undergoing medical tests in the hospital. From blood to kidneys, every test that was made gave a favourable report. Once they had reached there, why leave any doubt? So the doctors kept lengthening the list of tests and Pankaj kept depositing money without any hesitation. The doctors could reach any conclusion only if they detected any fault anywhere. So for reaching a conclusion, more tests were required.

He was asked to come next day once again. The

appointment with the minister stretched from six to eight and then eight to eleven p.m. The minister was busy in his meeting with a foreign delegation.

Due to his delayed arrival in his office, the numbers of visitors to his office had run into hundreds. Some ministers from states and some other MP's also joined the stream of visitors. *Babuji* did not visualize any good coming out of such a hurried meeting. He got appointment from the minister for 3 pm the next day and returned to his flat.

Next day also passed in the same way. Till 1 PM both the brothers remained in the hospital and then went to settle their business dealings with some parties.

Babuji kept roaming about in the offices.

It was during their ongoing meeting with the industries minister that the news of ill-fated incident in *Mayanagar* had reached them. It was imperative on all of them to push off to *Mayanagar*. It was obligatory for *Babuji* as a representative of the people, and for Pankaj and Neeraj due to their close kinship with the victim family.

Babuji postponed all other programmes and started their journey towards *Mayanagar*.

About twenty four hours before the incident took place; both the brothers were in the company of *Babuji*. Their attendance was marked in the Escort Hospital. Every part of Pankaj's body had been examined there. It was very much on the hospital computer records. At the time of entering the minister's *kothi*, their entry passes were made. The passes bore their photographs also. The most credible proof was *Babuji* himself. A gentleman of the status of an MP could not tell a lie.

Taking stock of entire situation, *Babuji* assured them all possible help. If need be, he would speak to the chief minister and seek intervention of Union Home-Minister and the Prime-Minister.

The MP's assurance did assuage the troubled minds of Pankaj and Neeraj a bit, but there was no abatement in their palpitating hearts. Their guilty conscience was making them restless at heart. Time was not yet ripe to share this secret with *Babuji*. The issue could be hushed up even otherwise. Where

was the need to axe our own feet?

But they could feel at ease only after getting inkling from the SSP. At least they should know the latest progress of police investigation. To know this *Babuji* tried to contact the SSP. But he was told both from his office and his residence that “Sahib is out of station,” His mobile phones were switched off.

Babuji smelt a rat. The SSP had never behaved like that. He was very easily accessible. Even if he was busy, he would ring back himself after getting free. *Babuji* had an important role to play in bringing him here as SSP of *Mayanagar*. If he was avoiding a telephone contact with him, there must be some solid reason behind all this. It was very evident. The SSP did not want to share anything regarding this incident.

The matter was quite serious. The protection of people and prestige of government, both were at stake. Politics demanded that national interest should be given precedence over personal gains.

Babuji's interest lay in slinking out of the situation.

“Don’t worry. I’m going to Delhi. I do have my mobile phone with me. I’ll contact the SSP again and tell you. I won’t let you face any injustice.”

Laying special stress on the word injustice, *Babuji* came out of his *kothi* and took his seat in the car.

The word ‘injustice’ escaped from the politician’s lips shook Pankaj from within. He felt as if the MP had come to know the ugly reality behind the episode. That is why perhaps he had promised to stand against injustice, and not in their favour.

They should not hope much in the prevailing situation from *Babuji*.

Inferring that everything is going against them, Pankaj and Neeraj returned with empty hands.

14

Where should they go now? Whom to approach?

These were the questions which stared them formidably in the face and brought them on the crossroads.

“*Bhai Sahib*, before approaching the SSP we should first confirm whether our names figure in the case? The contractor

may have remained tight-lipped and not broken down before the police torture."

Neeraj was not in favour of taking any step in haste.

"You've yet to grow. The hands of police are very long. They must have gone deep into the reality by now. Still, let's remove our doubts, if you say."

Pankaj agreed to Neeraj, just for his consolation.

"Well, let's go to our President. He himself will find a way out," Pankaj hit upon an influential name that could definitely have access to the confidential information of police department.

Neeraj liked Pankaj's suggestion. Within no time they reached the factory of Anil Jain, President of Heavy Industries Association.

"Why do you worry, my dear? You see, the inspector will come here himself and tell everything."

The President bragged about his influence.

He immediately rang up the SHO and hinted that his gift of ten thousand was awaiting him in his drawer. He should come to get it and throw light on the latest position of the case.

The SHO was busy in his investigations. He had no time to spare. But he could not refuse the President. Whenever he had to face any heavy obligation from above, it was only the President who came to his help. Jain was the President of big industrialists. They ran to him whenever they had some problem. He first made SHO pocket his fees and then told him what he had to do. The President had his access to the top brass of police in Chandigarh. When some threat of transfer or an inquiry loomed large on him, Jain would use his good offices to stall the process then and there. He could not say 'no' to the President.

Under the pretext of conducting a raid he reached the President's factory.

Pankaj and Neeraj did not want to face the SHO. They moved into the adjoining room.

The President handed over the 'gift' before offering him a cool drink.

Then he disclosed the purpose of calling him to the factory.

The police officer shuddered to hear that the President wanted to know something about the murder case.

As a matter of fact, he himself was investigating the case. But since the SSP had his own doubts about the integrity of the SHO, the whole process was being kept secret from him.

Now, that the SHO had pocketed ten thousand rupees, he had no other way out but to tell a lie for digesting the gratification.

“So far there is nothing against Pankaj and his brother on file. There is nothing to worry about for the time being. But the fingers are being raised at them. Anyway, they should remain cautious.”

Thus equivocating, the SHO took leave of them.

The President was happy. He could call the SHO to his office. He was proud of himself. If the SHO says, there is nothing to worry about, he should be believed.

But Pankaj and Neeraj were not at peace. They could read between the lines the latent meaning of what the police officer had said. He had talked of fingers being raised at them and warned them to remain cautious. It would be naïve on their part not to follow these hints.

First they received the news about the contractor’s arrest and recovery of stolen material from his possession. Now they had come to know that a pocket diary recovered from Ram Lubhaya’s pocket contained Pankaj’s phone number. His visiting card had also been recovered from his pocket. All this did not augur any good for them.

As they were still sitting with the President, they received a phone call from the manager of the mobile phone company. Police had approached them to get a list of phone calls made by Pankaj and Neeraj during the last one month. The company doubted that their phone calls were being tapped. Since they were regular customers of the company, it was their duty to inform them.

Neeraj now urged Pankaj not to waste much time in building castles in the air and suggested that they must immediately go underground now. They must take their friends and relatives into confidence and strive for legal remedies by hiring a competent lawyer.

This is what both of them now strongly felt.

They immediately parked their vehicle in the garage and switched off their mobile phones.

To evolve next strategy, they came to Ajay's factory. Ajay was a relative of Pankaj from his wife's side.

15

Ajay agreed with Pankaj.

There was hardly any scope for taking a risk. They must apply for anticipatory bail. In case their names were included in the file, the bail would save them from arrest as also harassment at the hands of police. Exclusion of their names would mean a little expenditure. But money should be no consideration on such occasions.

Pankaj had enough experience of civil cases. He would often get involved in the cases of taking or handing over the possession of plots or a piece of landed property here and there. When they set up their factory, they had to face some industrial disputes as well. Sometimes their credits would get stuck somewhere and sometimes a cheque would bounce. So on and so forth.

This was the first time that he had to face a criminal case. Ajay was more a friend and confidant to him than a relative. Moreover he had gone through many criminal cases already.

He had to deal with police for the first time when three persons had died while digging a well in the factory premises due to caving in of earth. The case was that of negligence and carelessness. But under temptation and pressure of the labour union, the police had registered a case of murder. Ajay compromised with the kins of workers by giving them due compensation. The leaders did not relish any compromise made without their involvement. They left no stone unturned in sending Ajay to jail. Ajay also assumed a tough posture. He would undergo life imprisonment and spend every penny he had on the court case but would never be on his knees before the leaders.

In this battle of wits, he had to knock the doors of all courts

right from the session court to the Supreme Court.

That very experience of Ajay had turned advantageous not only for himself but friends and relatives as well.

If the industrialists of *Mayanagar* needed a help from the police they would approach Anil Jain and in the case of court affairs they rushed to Ajay.

From Ajay's factory, they called a couple of friends to get their view in the case at hand. There were two top lawyers in the city-Nand Lal and Mahinder Singh. Ajay had tried both of them.

So far as knowledge of law is concerned, Mahinder Singh was more competent than Nand Lal. But he had an obsession for honesty. He believed more in locking horns with the officers, rather than working in collusion with them. But in modern age, the decisions are based more on extraneous reasons than merit.

Keeping in view the prevailing circumstances, Ajay was in favour of engaging Nand Lal as lawyer. He definitely charged higher than others but once he got his fees, the client's headache was over. If the client had a capacity to spend, he himself settled everything with everybody from an orderly of the court, to a judge of the Supreme Court.

Nand Lal had a great say in the police department. His biddings were done on telephone calls only. The *Thanedars* used to move around him with files in their hands. He had succeeded in building this illusory empire on the basis of his professional skill. If a minister, legislator or police officer chanced to face the court he would immediately rush off to Nand Lal. They paid him his fees and also obliged him in one way or the other.

Nand Lal was nearly seventy in age. Those who used to be magistrates before his eyes were high court judges now. The *Thanedars*, who used to sit by him to understand evidences, had become superintendents of police by now. The old officers had a respect for old friends. Many intricacies of the case were solved at the very mention of Nand Lal's name.

Ajay could not think of any other lawyer than Nand Lal.

"If there is no other option, then why make delay? Give him a ring and get an appointment."

A puzzled Neeraj did not want to waste any time in thinking over and over.

“Nand Lal’s fee is higher than that of others,” Ajay thought it his duty to tell Pankaj and Neeraj about the impending expenditure.

Pankaj and Neeraj both edlitttle about money. The chests were packed with currency notes. Money was a means of adding to the prestige. Prestige could not be forsaken for money. They had committed a blunder. There was every possibility of their being apprehended. They must avoid arrest by all means.

With this in view, both the brothers sanctioned the proposal of hiring Nand Lal as lawyer.

Ajay contacted Nand Lal.

He was arguing in the court that time. He was expected back in his chamber after half an hour. They were asked to come to the court and discuss the whole thing.

Meanwhile Pankaj’s brother-in-law reached there with two of his friends and started participating in the ongoing conversation.

“Going to court is full of risk. Police always keeps moving about in the court premises. You can be arrested anytime. Why not call the lawyer here?”

They called up Nand Lal once again.

But Nand Lal was not the one to go to anybody’s residence for giving consultation. Whosoever is thirsty should come to the well himself, he thought.

“To hell with such a lawyer who is not ready to talk to you even at the initial stage,” said one of the friends of Satish, Pankaj’s brother-in-law. He was interested in handing this case to one of his friends rather than to Nand Lal.

“Nand Lal has grown old now. His graph is getting down Singla is on the rise today and he is one of my friends. We’ll call him here. He’ll never say ‘no’ to me,” Vinay preferred Singla over Nand Lal.

“He is Nand Lal’s disciple only. And the disciples can never exceed their masters. Well, let us call Singla just for consultation and we’ll pay him for this”

Ajay did not like Vijay’s proposal to strike down the name of Nand Lal. He preserved his proposal by making an instant reaction and ensured that Vijay’s does not feel offended, by

suggesting payment of fees to Singla.

“Nand Lal is greedy type of a person. Throw him a few crumbs, and see him coming here.”

Satish knew well about Nand Lal’s avaricious nature. That is why he had proposed calling him here on the basis of his personal experience.

Once again they called him and offered separate fees for this meeting.

“First settle the fees. Rest everything will be seen later on,” said Nand Lal.

There was moderation in his attitude now.

“Have we ever paid you less early? This is my own case. You’ll get what you demand. But please do come first,” Ajay tried to make him have a feel of their friendship.

“I’ll charge one lac rupees as my fees. If I’m to contest this case then fifty thousand extra will be charged. If it suits you send the vehicle with half of my fees,” Nand Lal explained his terms and conditions.

Pankaj found the fees too much. He had never given more than five thousand to a lawyer. As yet there was no negative hint from the police circles and inclusion of his name was just a suspicion. It was merely a stage of applying for anticipatory bail. Any junior lawyer could do that. Nand Lal’s services could be availed at a more serious stage, he thought.

“There is no use acting like the onion thief, lest we should take one hundred onions and then equal number of shoe-beatings and at the end pay fine as well. Nand Lal will not charge less fees at a later stage. The fees given to any other lawyer will be only a waste,” Ajay shared his experience once again.

“Okay then. Send the vehicle and call him. Let’s call Singla also. Two are always better than one.”

Neeraj took decision at once.

16

Singla reached before Nand Lal.

He had been told about the case for which he was called. So he had gathered whatever information he could about the case.

The contractor had been produced before the court. The

magistrate had remanded him to police custody for three days.

Singla had gone through the application given by the police for obtaining police remand. That application had no hint regarding the complicity of Pankaj and Neeraj in the vicious conspiracy. Police had demanded police remand just to enquire about the names of the other co-accused and recovery of the burgled material.

The public prosecutor who had obtained the contractor's police-remand was a close friend of Singla. He had tried to contact the public-prosecutor, but the latter was busy in some other court.

"If I'm permitted to spend something, I can ask him the latest stage of the case file."

In view of the epicurean nature of the Public-Prosecutor, Singla sought permission for the probable expenditure.

"Don't worry about money. You solve the problem," Vinay gave a green signal to Singla before Neeraj could say anything.

The P.P. was contacted on his mobile phone. He had not read the file seriously. The student's union was demonstrating outside the court. The journalists were roaming with their cameras. *Mahila Mukti Samiti* too was staging its *Dharna*. Ever since the day one, the print-media had been picking up every detail of the case. The remand was sure to be given. The PP did not have to plead much. He had not read the file minutely.

"The *Thekedar* has named his accomplices. Do you remember whom he has named?"

"He is familiar with his nephew's name only. Others were known to the nephew. What name are you interested in? Tell me frankly."

Singla conjectured that inquiry was pinned on the migrants known as *Bhayyas* in common parlance. Pankaj and Neeraj had nothing to worry about.

"*Yaar*, the fact is that Ved is involved in a civil case with my friends. They are afraid like anything. I wanted to know about them."

"Brother, actually I haven't read the case diary. If you're that interested, I can enquire about it from the police station. Where are you speaking from? I'll come to you via police station," the PP said.

Singla fixed a sitting with him in Mehfil restaurant.

Pankaj had a sigh of relief. He was safe so far.

But Singla had his own fears. The government pleader seemed to be talking rubbish. What else could he say when he had not read the file at all.

“Whom should I contact now?” Singla was thinking when Babu Nand Lal arrived there.

Singla stood up to show respect to his mentor and touched his knees in obeisance.

Then he started listening patiently to Nand Lal’s proposals.

17

Having listened to the whole sequence of events up till now from Neeraj, Nand Lal stepped ahead.

He had direct access to the district police chief. But he did not want to touch the top rung at the outset. He must start from the lowest rung. That would fetch him authentic information at too economical a rate.

First of all he contacted the *Munshi*. *Munshi* is just like the mother of Police Station. He is conversant with each and every activity of the Police Station.

Recovery made from the site and the accused is deposited with him. The articles put on record are far less than those actually recovered. The material lying with the *Munshi* indicates what the police is going to do further.

And this is what Nand Lal wanted to assess.

“Very little material has reached in the Malkhana; most of it is in the custody of the SSP. Stock register and *Roznamcha* have been kept blank. Who knows what orders the SSP issues in this regard?”

Nand Lal felt that the *Munshi* was talking in a very roundabout way in his characteristic police style.

He never expected that the *Munshi* would prove so ungrateful. It was not even a week that he was acquitted in a corruption case. Had Nand Lal not intervened, the witnesses would not have budged an inch this way or that way. The *Munshi* had entreated before the witnesses in the most cringing manner; approached them through their relatives but they were

not ready to forget the insult and humiliation they were subjected to publicly. He had charged his fees and had them booked for making illicit liquor by seizing their distillery in operation. Moreover, he had given them a thrashing too in the presence of the Panchayat. Only a befitting punishment to the *Munshi* could cool down their seething passions. When the *Munshi* exhausted himself out, Nand Lal had told him about the actual contact person. The *Munshi* contacted the man and at the next hearing, the witnesses retracted from their earlier stance. As a result, the *Munshi* was acquitted.

Now the same accused seemed to be showing his back to him.

“Beta, don’t try to be fool me with your roundabout talk. If you are not grateful to me, come in the evening and take your fees. But tell me what the reality is.”

An irritated Nand Lal admonished the *Munshi*.

The *Munshi* swore his best that he was not telling a lie. He really knew nothing.

“Well, who can deliver the actual information?”

“Bhullar Sahib’s reader. It’s he who is scribing the whole documents. Same Bhullar, who’s facing the case of burning the police diary. You are his lawyer, Sir.”

The *Munshi* made Nand Lal’s job easy by telling him not only the name of the reader but his cell phone number as well.

Bhullar did not disappointed Nand Lal.

The government pleader and *Munshi*, both were right in what they had said. Every proceeding made so far, was just verbal. There was nothing on record. What could anybody tell?

The case was otherwise as clear as a mirror.

In the beginning the contractor kept bearing every blow on his body. He was subjected to third degree torture also and hung upside down. But he did not divulge anything. When suddenly his nephew fell into the police net, he broke down.

From Sherpur Chowk of the city, a bus used to go to Bihar daily at night. The bus-owners had no permission to run the bus on this route. Everything was going on illegally in connivance with the authorities. Most of the bus-passengers

were *Bhayyas*. The police used to cast a cursory glance over these migrant labourers and their shabby luggage before the departure of the bus.

That day, police had been keeping a strict vigil on the railway station and bus-stand due to this incident of rape, dacoity and murder. Every car or bus leaving the city was being searched.

The in charge of Sherpur Police post was complying strictly with the directions of the SSP. Under the pretext of search he was taking ten or twenty rupees from every *Bhayya* by asking him to unbundle his luggage.

As one of the *Bhayyas* placed a colour TV and VCR in the luggage compartment of the bus, he overpowered him at once. At that time his immediate aim was just to fleece him of twenty-fifty rupees. He never knew that big fish was trapped. The bus-owners raised a voice of annoyance at this attitude of the *chowki-in-charge*. The police was given fees just to avoid this harassment. If the passengers were harassed like this, who would board their bus?

To get rid of the bus-owner, the *chowki-in-charge* made an impromptu excuse that such type of articles had been stolen in Deep Nagar burglary. Sahib had directed them strictly to check everybody moving about with such things. He was simply obeying his instructions.

While cooking up this story, an idea flashed across his mind, "May be, this is indeed the stolen material."

He forced the *Bhayya* to disembark the bus along with his luggage. He could not let him go without proper investigation. If the bus owner had any objection to it, he should talk to the SSP.

The bus owner did not want to put himself into any trouble. He started off without this particular passenger.

In the third round of investigation the *Bhayya* started confessing the crime.

He took out his share of jewellery and clothes from his steel trunk and placed them before the police. He also got the rod used in the criminal incident and his blood stained clothes were recovered from the shrubs behind his quarter.

When the uncle and the nephew were brought face to face, the uncle lost his wits. He disclosed all the details of conspiracy.

A police party was dispatched to Bihar to nab the culprits, while another was closely observing the two brothers.

“Well, Mr. Ajay Kumar! Now there is nothing vague about it. Our name is there on the file,” said a beaming Nand Lal. The details of the case as revealed by the SSP’s reader, made him happy rather than anxious. He was feeling proud of his resourcefulness. Had Nand Lal not found a clue to this mystery, police would have nabbed the brothers from their bed-rooms. They would have to remain behind the bars at least for a year.

The time was thus ripe to launch an application for anticipatory bail. Before drafting the application, Nand Lal wanted every minutest detail of the incident.

The accused had to confess their crime and the confession must be made in the exclusive presence of the lawyer. Confession before others could be used against them.

To know the truth, Nand Lal took both the brothers along with Ajay to the adjacent room.

“You’re involved in the case now. As a lawyer, I’ve to defend you. Don’t conceal anything from me. I’ll plan some defence for you only after knowing all the aspects of the case. Tell me everything frankly, without concealing even a bit of it..... One more legal point for your information. Law allows you to lay bare your heart before me. But I’m legally bound. I can’t use any of the revelations made by you against you. Not even when I’m no longer your lawyer.”

The fact was that Pankaj and his brother had hatched a conspiracy. But they never intended to go so far. They simply wanted to teach a lesson to their outrageously outspoken aunt and Kamal who had started showing his fangs to them lately. They had no rancour either against Ved or Neha. Neha was their sister. Her honour was their honour.

It seemed that the contractor’s greed had exceeded all limits. As per the understanding, he was not to be a party to the crime. Perhaps he wanted to pocket the amount of one person through his own participation. He was given five thousand extra for

purchasing uniforms and weapons. Under temptation, he had embezzled that amount also and taken away two rods from the factory.

Why was Kamal murdered? Why was Neha raped? They had nothing to say over these issues. Rather they felt ashamed of these two events and were showing penitence for them.

"The evil days always come un-invited. Whatever was destined to happen has happened. Now bow before the will of God. I myself will defend you to the best of my capacity," Nand Lal consoled the depressed brothers with these words and started familiarizing them with some necessary legal points.

"There are three golden principles of litigation. Remember them. This criminal case will keep clinging to you like a leech for many years. So these points, if remembered, will be of great help to you. The first point: Repose full faith in the man who fights your case. There is many a slip on this path. If some helping officer feels constrained at a particular stage, don't think he has become disloyal to you. Second, have patience. Criminal cases yield very slow results. Any haste may turn harmful. Third, you have enough money. Use it generously. A court case "is just like a 'snake and ladder' game. Nobody knows when you tumble down after reaching 99 marks where a big cobra swallows you down into the blind alley of zero once again. Don't think, the intermediary has digested your money. Start your game afresh from zero. You see, success will be at your feet ultimately," sermonized Nand Lal.

"We'll do as you say."

Nand Lal's sermon sounded like a divine message to the ears of Pankaj and Neeraj who sat listening to him as if in a trance. They listened to all the points very attentively and saved them in the computers of their minds.

"Now, listen to one more thing. I'll tackle every official concerned with the case myself. I'll tell you the names of the officers' men. But it's your job to contact the officers. If you don't find a way out, then tell me and leave it on me.

"Try to contact the Sessions Judge. Build pressure on police. You are men of influence. Go to the political people. What I mean to say is, use your good offices. It's not yet too late. Probe can be jammed at this stage.

“The *Thekedar* has hired a lawyer of his own community. He has studied law in Hindi medium. It’s not even sure whether he has studied at all or just managed to get a degree. If he defends the *Thekedar*’s case, it will be more harmful to us than to *Thekedar* himself. To make sure that The *Thekedar* is not remanded further into police custody and probe is stopped where it is, it will be in our interest that a competent lawyer should plead his case. We must arrange this for our own sake,” Nand Lal was out to establish his faith in his clients by giving such valuable suggestions. He further told Pankaj that he could not plead Ram Lubhaya’s case himself. “I will appear on your side only, because if I appear on behalf of both Pankaj and *Thekedar*, the conspiracy hatched by them will be unraveled. The judge would easily find reason to doubt as to how the *Thekedar* could afford to avail Nand Lal’s services. He must naturally have been funded by Pankaj. No, we won’t let this suspicion take place in the mind of the judge. The *Thekedar* should be provided with such a lawyer who should have no connection with Nand Lal’s chamber”, he said.

Nand Lal himself suggested the name of the lawyer. Singla, who was sitting outside the room, would plead for the *Thekedar*.

Some third lawyer should be engaged for *Thekedar*’s nephew. By making Singla his lawyer, the *Chacha-Bhatija* nexus would come in the open.

Pankaj and Neeraj liked the bits of advice and felt highly impressed, within their hearts. they were all praise for Ajay’s choice,

They now firmly believed that with Nand Lal at their side, no harm could be done to them.

Feeling greatly relieved, Neeraj promised to follow each and every direction given by Nand Lal. They had no dearth of money. They would spend it generously, like water. Nand Lal should only hold the fortress and pave their way to salvation.

Nand Lal looked at his watch. It was two hours that he had been sitting in the factory.

Nand Lal felt that Pankaj and Neeraj had come under his spell. Now the situation was quite favourable to him. He must cash it before the hypnotic spell is gone.

"Now I'll take leave. Half of my fees have reached me. I'm going to my office to prepare the documents. You come after an hour or so and sign the papers and bring along the remaining fees also."

"Right, Sir."

"Yes, one last point. Here we have one Sessions Judge and five additional Sessions Judges. I'm comfortable with all of them except one. If the application goes to any of them, then we need not go anywhere. You try to ensure that it does not go anywhere else."

"Whom should we approach?"

"Sessions Judge, whom else?"

"Whom should we contact to reach the session-judge? We don't have any routine dealings with the court people," the very mention of session-judge made the brothers feels dejected.

"I had cheered up your mood with great effort and again you've pulled your faces. Okay if you can't approach the Sessions Judge, win over his superintendent at least."

Nand Lal was tightening his noose around them in a very tactful manner.

"Please....don't make us face any of these botherations. Do everything yourself. You simply tell us the expenses," Ajay who had been sitting silent till now, intervened.

This is what Nand Lal wanted.

"Please tell me what has to be given to whom?" Fishing out a bundle of currency notes from his pocket, Pankaj said.

"Any other advocate would have demanded twenty thousand. You give me only twelve thousand including the charges of the government pleader. There will be full transparency in account. Whatever is saved will be honestly returned to you," said Nand Lal counting something on his finger tips.

"Don't bother about money *Vaqil Sahib*. Spend fifty in place of five. But police should not be seen at our door," saying so, Pankaj handed over fifteen thousand instead of twelve thousand to the lawyer.

"Hell with the police! Come in the evening for signing the documents along with the fees."

Reminding fees for the third time, Nand Lal came out.

“Singla, you have to plead the *Thekedar’s* case.

Blessing Singla by patting his back, as he came out to see his mentor off, Nand Lal gave him an impression as if he had got this case for Singla

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So long as Nand Lal had been in the factory, etiquette and formality prevailed over the whole atmosphere. He was a very senior lawyer and very short-tempered at that. If somebody wavered a bit, he would throw away his offer of money.

That is why nobody had opened up before him.

Singla was of their age and a friend also. They could lay bare their heart before him. Formality gave way to candor immediately after his departure.

“*Babuji* is a very clever guy. How much did he shear you of beside his own fees?” asked Singla, in order to make the friends aware and make a niche for himself in their hearts.

Nand Lal had asked Ajay not to open his mouth before anyone regarding the sum of fifteen thousand. It was a matter of illegal gratification. The leakage of this issue could cause more harm than benefit to them. Sometimes, afraid of earning a bad name the officers gave adverse decision.

Ajay was in a fix, whether to disclose it or not.

“Come on. Tell me.” Singla was thinking of his own benefit.

Vinay had sensed that there was something wrong at the bottom. He tried to dig the secret out of him and to impress upon them Singla’s ability.

“Not much. Just a little for clerks and *Munshis*,” Pankaj broke the silence.

“Very crafty the old man is indeed! He didn’t feel content with one and a half lacs. After all he is a five star lawyer. He must have charged five star fees for the lower officials also.”

Singla had captured Nand Lal’s weakness. He wanted to get dual benefit out of it. First, he would save Pankaj and his brother from Nand Lal’s exploitation. Second, he would turn them into his own favour. Money has to be spent lavishly in such cases. It has to be spent at every step. Singla could not

charge exorbitant rates like Nand Lal. He had to do with a part of it only. The clients must get disillusioned with Nand Lal.

"Just see, we'll have to please so many people. Clerks, orderlies etc. will be running after me. We're not to pay double to anybody. Tell me how much he has taken and in whose names? I'll put them after the *Babuji*."

Singla was trying to get at the secret by using tactics characteristic to lawyers.

"He has taken fifteen thousand. Said, superintendent has to be taken into confidence. Application has to be admitted with the judge of our choice. Some others also he was talking off. What do we know about who is who?"

Neeraj was not in favour of concealing anything. Both of them were their counselors. Everything should be made clear.

"This is exactly what I feared. The whole expenditure doesn't exceed five hundred. It's no use paying any fees to the Superintendent. The judge himself sends applications to other judges. There is one steno, two court-clerks, one reader and another peon. All of these don't expect more than fifty rupees each and at the most hundred. Anyway, be careful in future. If *Babuji* demands anything in the name of an official, say Singla has already fixed up. It will be enough to turn him away. Otherwise things will go out of control. And once he gets used to these things, you'll find it difficult to say 'no' to him. I deemed it my duty to caution you. Rest is your choice."

"It's wisely said," Pankaj was caught in a dilemma as he said. Whom should he listen to? Both of them seemed right.

Anyway, the hard times must be faced at any cost, thought Pankaj and said

"Don't bother much about money, Singla. You also pay whosoever demands from you. At the most ten or twenty thousand rupees will be spent extra. You tell me whether anticipatory bail is possible or not."

"Try to understand the factual position. This incident has received a wide coverage in the media. Agitation is going on in the university campus over this issue. All this will have its impact on the judges. The police will shy away from helping

us. The issue is quite fresh as yet. But still we must not lose heart. Failure should not unnerve us. There are so many paths leading to success. Sessions Judge is a nice gentleman. If he keeps the application to himself, nothing like that. He never bows under any pressure.

"Any contact of Sessions Judge?"

"As a matter of fact he has no men of his own. You will find a number of people claiming to get the needful done from him, but nobody dares enter his *kothi*. Leave it on God."

"Then what should be done after all?"

"What you should immediately do is, to approach the police somehow or the other. The SSP should be taken into confidence. Then, the lower ranking *Thanedars* should be pleased. Every post has its own importance. Give respect to everybody."

"Any reliable man of the SSP?"

"He has a number of men here. But if you trust me, approach him directly. If you involve some politician or a relative, there will be a lot of harassment and much more to spend. The middleman will first fatten his wallet. If you go straight, the officer will feel happy."

"How can we go straight? He is the district police chief. He'll put us behind the bars."

"Oh, I don't mean going that straight. What I mean is, try to contact a middleman instead of any recommendation."

"Who is middleman, tell us?"

"Go to Melu *dairywala*. He is a very transparent type of person. He will demand ten thousand openly. There will be no foul play at all. He will go with your man and talk to the officer face to face. He will get the amount given to the SSP through your own hands. He will not refuse to go with you if need be, at a later stage also.

"Okay, we'll go to him right now."

"Go ahead! Tell me if there is any problem. Usually, I switch off my telephone after ten at night, but I'll keep it on today. You can wake me up as and when you like. Now I'll leave. The government pleader must have been waiting for me." Looking at his watch Singla got up to leave.

"Please wait for a while, Singla Sahib. You haven't mentioned about your fees. It is four hours since you are racking your brains for us," Ajay held him back.

This is what Singla wanted.

"I don't accept any fee from the near and dear. This is my own job."

"No, no, a lion cannot survive on grass. Friends have to be entertained, no doubt; but friendship is right in its own place. Let's not mix business with friendship. Please tell your fees frankly."

Vinay supported Singla's cause.

"What can I demand from you? I'll accept whatever you give, in all humility."

"Even then, say something!" said Pankaj holding a bundle of currency notes of 500 denomination.

Singla could not decide how much to demand. His highest was eleven thousand, but normally he got five thousand and five hundred only. Sometimes it could be less also. How much he should demand here? Should it be less or more than his usual fees? He found it hard to decide.

"Yaar, I'm not *Babuji* to demand in lacs. You can give me somewhat equal to what his *Munshi* deserves. What more I can say?"

"Fifteen thousand, you mean." Vinay calculated at the rate of ten percent of Nand Lal's fees.

"Take twenty two thousands here;" said Pankaj, pushing forty four notes of Rs. 500 into Singla's pocket.

"You can get something for the government pleader also."

"Why do you put me to shame? We are the friends, who sit together daily over a drink."

Singla was content with what he received as fees.

He did not want to lower his prestige by showing avarice.

"Any other precaution?"

"I think we should not invite any risk. If you have anything risky lying in your house, shift it somewhere else. Police can do any damn thing. For instance they may book you in a case regarding keeping more than permissible number of whisky bottles or send the documents recovered to the income tax

authorities. They may turn the cash lying in the house into a *Hawala* amount and create new problems by implicating you in other cases. Whatever cash, whisky, gold or weapon is lying in the house, should be distributed here and there."

This timely advice of Singla impressed everybody.

There were a number of such things which were illegally kept in their house but nobody had so far smelt any risk that might emanate from them.

Singla's directive was acted upon at once. Neeraj called his residence and instructed the family members to remove all such articles from the house and move them to the relatives' places.

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After Singla's departure all the friends sat together to discuss the prevailing situation and suggestions given by the lawyers.

Singla had said there was no need at all to approach the Sessions Judge. Nand Lal's opinion was quite the contrary. Singla said that the Sessions Judge does not listen to anybody. Nand Lal asked them to approach him, if they failed to approach the Sessions Judge.

Singla had made them wary of Nand Lal's brags. They had already experienced the soaring rates of Babu Nand Lal.

Then what to do? Should they listen to Nand Lal or his pupil?

After a good deal of thinking a middle path was explored. The Sessions Judge must be approached but without the help of any middleman. Some personal acquaintance should be contacted.

Many a name came up for consideration, but unanimity could be reached only on the name of Partap Singh, the Registrar of High Court.

A few years back, he had been working as Additional Sessions Judge in *Mayanagar*. Mohan Lal had made friends with him in the Satluj club.

During those days, Mohan Lal was developing a new colony. It was his wont that whenever he set upon developing a new colony he reserved some selected plots for the officers.

First for the Sessions Judge, Second for the SSP or a higher Police officer, third for *Tehsildar*, SDM or Deputy Commissioner, the fourth for an Income Tax Officer and fifth for Municipal Corporation Mayor or Commissioner. This arrangement could vary also according to the circumstances.

This was a well-contemplated device for Mohan Lal which benefited him and all concerned. The officers would find an outlet for their black money. It fetched good profit also. Mohan Lal allotted plots to the officers at the cost price of land only. They were exempted from all other development expenses.

In lieu of this favour Mohan Lal would get enormous amounts for investment in his project. The officers would send him bags full of money at very liberal rates of interest.

There was another noticeable aspect of this real estate business. There was nothing to earn out of it if the colony were developed by purchasing land at market price. On the other hand, the land acquired at throw-away prices turned out to be a mine of gold. But such a land, being invariably a disputed one, was not without a lot of irksome litigation. Some heir of the property could appear from the thin air with a stay-order, some other would come fretting and fuming with a band of policemen. Still someone would write to the income tax authorities while a mischievous one would scuttle the process of mutation. In such a situation, the concerned officer would come forward as his savior. Due to their vested interests associated with the colony, the officers would themselves settle the whole affair either with the might of their own pen or through other officers.

Due to this practical wisdom of Mohan Lal, there never was any hindrance in his colonization business. He had established himself firmly in this sphere. The plots were sold as soon as the colony was completed.

Mohan Lal had allotted three shops and a 400 Sq. yard plot to Partap Singh.

The first sold plots fetched comparatively less price. But as the number of sold plots increased, their prices kept soaring. When some *kothis* sprang on the plots, the prices of other plots soared still higher.

Partap Singh had no dearth of money. He was the last to sell his plot and had reaped a profit of several lacs. The shops were still in his possession. The shops worth fifty thousand each were touching being sold at the rate of five lacs now.

Apart from this, Mohan Lal had been instrumental in his gaining many similar profits to him. Thus friendship had turned into family ties. On some weekend Mohan Lal would be a guest at Partap Singh's house and on some other weekend Partap Singh would visit Mohan Lal's residence.

Even when Partap Singh was transferred from here, he would visit Mohan Lal off and on. These friendly visits had become less after Mohan Lal's death. Still on occasions, like *Diwali* or *Dussehra*, Pankaj would call at Partap Singh's residence. The family ties were as intimate as they ever were.

Mohan Lal had amicable relations with other judges also but he trusted Partap Singh most of them all.

Partap Singh had a peculiar characteristic about his personality. He used to develop good relations with his officers. He would pay visits to the officers' *kothis* and have their children make purchases of their choice. He had access even to the bed rooms of the officers.

It was due to this feature of his personality that some high court Judges had recommended his name to the Chief-Justice and brought him here. He attended more the on *kothis* of officers than his own office. With him by their side, the officers did not have to worry about their personal works. On occasions like the marriage of a judge's daughter, the entire responsibility from putting up tents to the purchase of dowry articles, was entrusted to him; nay, he himself took it upon his shoulders.

In lieu of these services, the judges danced at his tune.

He was the registrar of High Court. His own authority was in no way less than anybody else's. He wielded abundant authority over the lower-rung judges. Their transfers, promotions, complaints against them, everything was handled by him. Making Mountain of a molehill, and turning a mountain into molehill was a plaything for him. It was not easy to turn down a bidding of the Registrar and particularly, when he is a gutsy officer like Partap Singh.

Neeraj wanted to talk to Partap Singh over telephone.

Ajay admonished Neeraj for his naivety. This was no child's play. They were culprits now. It was not easy to meddle with the affairs of judiciary. Every step should be taken carefully. First of all, the prestige of the officer must be taken care of. Appointment should be taken on telephone and then he should be contacted at Chandigarh, in some club or a hotel, not at his residence.

During meeting care should be taken that the room-rent or dinner bill be issued in the name of someone else.

On the basis of his personal experience, Ajay was forewarning Pankaj and Neeraj against any probability of negligence while meeting a judge. He was saying all this because one of his relatives had lost his job due to such negligence.

One of his distant relatives, Nauhria Ram had to settle a murder case. Both parties were millionaires, carrying brief-cases full of currency notes. The Judge had been honest throughout his life. He was approaching fast towards retirement. The accused had to be acquitted even otherwise. They had made an offer of fifty lacs to him. The amount could increase as well. One of his colleagues was mediating. This affair was being kept very secret. The colleague had only one condition-Nauhria Ram or his wife should only once meet the party and say this much, "The money has reached." Thus every possibility of a misgiving would be ruled out. Nobody could doubt anybody's honesty.

The Judge could not do away with the temptation of getting the fat amount. He gave an assenting nod for sixty lacs.

The younger brother of the judge lived in Faridabad. A room was booked there in a three-star hotel. The judge could never have imagined that he was being followed. It was beyond the imagination of the party as well. They recorded the purpose of visit in the hotel register as, "To meet the judge".

The meeting took place.

The bill was to be footed by the party. And they did it.

The plaintiff party tracked down the whole thing.

Nothing else went against the judge. The case was weak of course. There was nothing wrong about the acquittal of the accused. But why did the judge meet the accused in the hotel

room? Why did the accused foot the hotel bill? Nauhria Ram had nothing to say in his defence.

As advised by Ajay, Partap Singh was contacted on telephone. Ajay and Pankaj took on themselves the responsibility of going to Chandigarh. The private secretary to the Chief Justice was also known to Ajay. He had solved many of his complicated problems. He would also be contacted.

Neeraj and Vinay will stay back and watch out for the police.

Planning to meet again the next day, they took leave of each other.

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They had to meet Partap Singh at 5 PM.

They had sufficient time. They purchased two woolen suits and four Aristocrat Shirts for the Judge and two *Banarsi Saris* for his wife from *Mayanagar*. Scotch, dry-fruit and some other things of utility were to be purchased from Chandigarh. There was a lot of checking on the border. In hard times, problems keep multiplying on their own, Moreover; whisky was comparatively cheaper in Chandigarh.

Two shirts and one track-suit for the private secretary and a silk Sari for his wife were also purchased. Whisky and fruit would be purchased from Chandigarh.

Reaching the city they rang up Partap Singh. They had to see him in the club. But the registrar invited him at his residence. They were allowed entry into the *kothi* by the servant along with their car.

They were seated respectfully in the drawing room. They themselves picked up suits and saris' packets while scotch-box and other things were lifted by the driver. They placed the packets of suits and saris on the central table and scotch box and other things in a corner of the drawing room.

The servant appeared at once with cold water. After satisfying their thirst, they started waiting for the officer.

A frail-looking gentleman clad in immaculate white entered the drawing room with soft steps, shaking hands with both the guests, he welcomed them heartily. A glance over the expensive presents mobilized the servant who took away all the things from there with an unusual swiftness.

The glow that appeared on the face of the officer at the sight of the label 'Teacher' on the scotch-box was comforting for the guests. A ray of hope was kindled within their minds.

"Why did you take so much trouble?" said Partap Singh by way of formal thanks as his eyes glimmered with satisfaction over the gesture of their having brought such admirable presents.

"Sir, we haven't brought anything from outside. He is Ajay, my friend. He's in export business. The saris, I had brought from the South during a visit," replied Pankaj in the same formal tone.

Stillness prevailed for sometime between both the sides.

Partap Singh thought, the sons might be toeing the line of his father. There was a slump in the real estate business during the days of terrorism. But now the situation had become normal. He might have planned to develop a new colony and wanted to reserve a plot for him in the colony.

"How's your business going on? Didn't you develop a new colony after Mohan?" Partap Singh broke the silence with the same ideas in his mind.

"No sir, we had closed down this business during Papa's life-time itself. The *PUDA* people harassed too much. Their conditions were very stringent. We had got two Petrol Stations in the city. Besides, we have a Gas agency also. Also, we had purchased a vegetable oil and flour mill in Khanna. Younger Neeraj sits there. We have a cycle parts factory and partnership in a rolling-mill as well. We can't find time from our business."

"Very good. Do you take drink?" Partap Singh asked just out of formality.

"We do take it Sir, but not today. Let it be some other time," restlessness of heart was making Pankaj feel very uneasy. He wanted to come to the point without any loss of words now.

"Ramu, bring some cold drinks then," Partap Singh was fidgeting on the downy cushioned sofa. He was also anxious that they should come to the actual point and take leave.

"You must have come to Chandigarh for attending some marriage. I think," the officer himself took the initiative.

"No Sir, your help is needed."

"Yes, yes, speak out what I can do for you."

Hoping for a good deal, the withering face of Partap Singh regained its earlier glow. May be they wanted to approach some High Court Judge, he thought.

"Sir, my Papa, you know, had made my uncle a partner in his colony development business. Many *Benami* plots were registered in his name. After Papa's death, he turned dishonest and filed a civil suit against us over one of the plots."

"And that case is decided against you and you want a stay order from the High Court. Only this much?" Partap Singh wanted to avoid any superfluity of words and wanted to come right to the point.

"No sir, you might have read in the newspapers about a dacoity in *Mayanagar*. It took place in my uncle's house. His son was murdered. One of my uncle's brothers-in-law, I mean auntie's brother is an advocate. The case is registered against the *kala kachha* gang. But the advocate is out to settle personal scores with us. He implicated us by bribing the police", Pankaj tried to narrate the problem to Partap Singh.

"Sir, they have lodged an application for anticipatory bail in the court. With your kind grace and cooperation they can be saved from a lot of harassment. We'll make whatever expenditure is needed in the process," Ajay came to the rescue of Pankaj who was hesitating in saying this.

Partap Singh's mind was set in motion immediately like a computer, making all sorts of calculations.

The problem was that of obtaining anticipatory bail. It was a case of murder, dacoity and rape. All of these were non-bailable crimes. But this was a case with all the three committed together. Who the hell could bail them out in anticipation? Moreover the incident was still fresh. The accused had been apprehended. The police was in possession of substantial proofs of the complicity of Pankaj and Neeraj. The media was raking up this issue glamorously. The government was out to save its own skin. No, it was impossible.

On the other hand, this was a big 'party', making a lac or two was easy from them.

For seeking some way out, Partap Singh perused the list of judges posted in *Mayanagar*. The Sessions Judge was not a great expert in law but was indubitably honest. There was no use asking a favour from such a person. Partap Singh was not in favour of getting anything done free of charge. They were no cousins of him. He did not want to pocket the whole amount himself. It would bring him a bad name. Partnership was always good in such affairs. But here there was no chance of partnership either.

Except Sadhu Singh, he could influence all other additional Sessions Judges. Sadhu Singh was a *Sadhu* not only by name; he was a Sadhu by temperament as well. He had neither taken a penny as graft nor would he ever accept it in future. He was not undergoing any probe and he never bothered for good or bad station. Neither anybody ever approached him; nor did he listen to anybody. Even if somebody blundered to approach him through someone, he would insult that party publicly in the court and delivered judgment against them on the plea that they had tried to influence the judge. He could also go to the extent of putting on record the name of the recommending person and land him in trouble.

Since some years the lawyers of *Mayanagar* had been taking up cudgels against the corruption plaguing the judiciary. As a result, a judge was made to proceed on retirement. Out of shame he had to shift overnight from *Mayanagar*. One of the additional sessions judges found it hard to justify his misdeeds. He started having nightmares of dismissal and imprisonment. He had died two months after he was transferred to Sangrur. As per records and the family sources he had succumbed to a cardiac arrest, but everybody knew that he had committed suicide.

In keeping with this crusade of lawyers against corruption, only a few selected judges were being posted in *Mayanagar*, and Sadhu Singh was one of the selected few.

The other judges also figured in the list of honest ones but they were not as obstinate as Sadhu Singh. However, sometimes they compromised, but at the same time, were playing very safe. Half of the industry of Punjab was concentrated in *Mayanagar*. In most of the cases one of the parties was the state.

Such cases normally pertained to power-pilferage, income-tax evasion, allotment of government plots etc. Every other day the government acquired the land of farmers on minimal prices. Then suits were filed to get viable rates. Even if a judge decided the price of land at half the market rate; the compensation payable to the farmers would reach crores. In such cases, nobody would leak anything even if the judge received graft money well poised in his seat. The government pleaders were already in collusion with the land owners.

Such clandestine activities were still going on in *Mayanagar*. To camouflage their activities the judges used to frequent High Court. They had to deal with Partap Singh. They could not refuse the registrar. Any one of them could be approached. Along with the names of judges, Partap Singh was also pondering over the issues on which anticipatory bail could be granted.

The names of the accused did not figure in the report but their acrimonious relations with the plaintiff party were established. The conspiracy hatched between the contractor and Pankaj formed a part of the case file. The judge could grant anticipatory bail for a few days. Moreover if the police cooperated and abstained from demanding police custody, the judge could regularize the bail.

Partap Singh imagined himself occupying the seat of the judge and thought, what he would have decided in this case. In normal circumstances he could take the risk of granting anticipatory bail, but here the case was far from being normal.

The accused party was very rich. Even if the anticipatory bail was granted without accepting any graft, the judge would be prone to the accusations. Media was all out to expose each and everything related to this case. The intelligence wing of the Bar Association President was far more vigilant than the police intelligence. He would smell a penny of graft even if it was taken in the mythical netherland. The judge would be open to risk from all sides.

Partap Singh himself could not dare do it through himself. Why should he recommend doing anything to any of his colleagues what he could not do himself? Having well assessed all pros and cons of the case he concluded that no judge in

Mayanagar could grant an anticipatory bail to the accused. Therefore, for the time being there was no use approaching anybody.

On the other hand, a goose laying golden eggs could not be let loose. The orders rejecting anticipatory bail could be appealed against in the High Court. Nobody could dare speak against this court. Whosoever did so, could be thrown behind the bars for contempt of the court. Partap Singh could get any kind of orders issued by the High Court. Till that time, the party must be kept under hand.

“You are just like a son to me. I cannot misguide you at all. I cannot either get your money wasted. What will my brother in the heaven think of me? Don’t expect anything from *Mayanagar*. Nobody can help you there. I assure you that you will get stay order in the very first hearing from the High Court. At the next hearing, even the Chief Minister cannot stop acceptance of anticipatory bail. This is for me to decide as to which judge your application has to be sent. We’ll send it to one of our friends and then get the desired decision by sitting near him. It’s a matter of just four-five days. Spend your time in the hiding somewhere.”

“Uncle we had come to you with a great hope. Two lacs, three lacs, we’ll spend whatever you order us. But please do the needful,” Ajay thought, the issue lingered because of no settlement of amount. Perhaps the judicial officer was shying away from such a settlement. That is why he touched the issue of money.

The offer of three lacs made Partap Singh rack his brains once again but all in vain.

“The question is not that of money only. There no judge who can do this for you. It will be done here, through me. Still, ring me up tomorrow and tell me to whom your application is sent. We’ll see to it.”

Partap Singh again resumed his lost ground. The offer was big enough. May be it turns the head of some judge.

“Please try asking the sessions judge for sending the application to one of your acquaintances,” Ajay was not yet in a mood to surrender.

"It's of no use. It will simply arouse suspicion in his mind. Let him send it where he likes."

"Right sir. If it's rejected there, will you get it done here?" Pankaj asked Partap Singh in order to get a firm assurance from him.

"Hundred percent guaranteed, Beta. Here, your uncle dominates. I get the noose off the neck. Bail is just a small issue."

Pankaj lost heart as he came out of the registrar's *kothi*. Nobody could do what Partap Singh had failed to do. Imprisonment was unavoidable now, he thought.

"This is no sales tax evasion case. It's a murder case. We'll have to strive a lot. Have patience, as Nand Lal said. Look at the brighter side only. The registrar Sahib has taken on himself the responsibility of getting us bail from the High Court. Is this something small? He has not tried to give us a lollypop of false assurance. This is his greatness."

Ajay wanted to bring Pankaj out of the dark abyss of frustration.

21

Pankaj was desperately sad. He wanted to go back to Mayanagar. How could a class-III official do what the registrar could not?

Ajay was not the one to lose courage. He had full faith in the potential of clerical staff. Sometimes, where the Prime Minister failed, his cooks succeeded. Ajay had tested Lakshman Singh umpteen times. He had been highly useful to him.

Moreover it would have been different if they had not rung him up. Now it would be foolish not to meet the man after getting time from him. The case was not going to end so soon. Who knows how long it would take. They were bound to visit the High Court frequently. It was he who would be of help to them in smaller things.

Persuading Pankaj thus, Ajay took him towards the quarter of the Private Secretary who was already waiting for them. It was past twilight. His drinking time was running out. He found it hard to wait any longer.

Lakshman Singh's quarter was small but his family was big.

He felt ashamed of drinking in the presence of daughter and daughter-in-law. Drinking in hotels or pubs was too expensive to afford. He was also fond of taking non-vegetarian food, but it was not cooked at home.

That is why he was waiting impatiently for the affluent party like Ajay. To add to the mirth of the occasion, he took along *Bhogal*, his neighbor with him. Let him also enjoy the feast free of cost.

Ajay had no time to sit and have a cup of tea by sitting at Lakshman Singh's house. He was asked to have his seat in the vehicle and direct the driver to where he wanted to go for party.

Bhogal wanted to sit in the *Zimidara Dhaba* at old Bus Stand. Soda, eggs and meat, everything was comparatively cheaper there and no sitting charges were taken.

Lakshman Singh pitied the level of *Bhogal's* thinking. *Bhogal* was an employee in education department. The farthest reach of his parties ended up at *Zimidara Dhaba*.

Now he was going with the private secretary of the Chief Justice and an affluent party of *Mayanagar* was taking them in their luxury vehicle. Today, they would enjoy by sitting in an air-conditioned Bar of an elegant hotel.

He directed the vehicle towards a three star hotel.

"Four pegs of Peter Scott. First bring a roasted-chicken. Then bring cheese *pakora*. Two full plates of fish. Boneless," immediately after sitting at a table, the secretary ordered the waiter and then asked the reason of their visit to the state capital.

"Anticipatory bail of a murder accused. Approach to the Sessions-Judge," the whole mood of the secretary was spoiled as he listened to the purpose of their visit.

Lakshman Singh had thought that Ajay might have come to Chandigarh for hiring a High Court lawyer or to obtain a copy of judgement of some old case. In both the cases he had to earn. The lawyer had to pay him his share. He would have acquired the copy from the concerned clerk through his personal influence and pocketed the clerk's fees himself.

There was no complaint against the Judges posted in Mayanagar with the Chief Justice. They had never needed Lakshman Singh.

Earlier, the secretary had obliged Ajay by approaching two judges who were steeped in corruption to neck. There were many complaints against them with the Chief Justice. They would visit High Court at least once a month. Before meeting the chief, they would see the secretary and get a hint on the probable action against them. They would also ask him about the gravity of the complaint and mood of the boss. In lieu of this cooperation they would feel indebted to the secretary and obliged him in one way or the other.

But today, he was in no position to oblige. Gulping down peg after peg and tearing at the bones, he was thinking of saving his face only without forfeiting his influence.

Pankaj had not taken any drink. Due to a lot of mental tension he was yawning. His whole body was aching. His throat was parched. Four-five bottles of coke had failed to quench his thirst.

Ajay could well understand Pankaj's uneasiness. He was also anxious to arrive soon at some conclusion and go back.

But the secretary was silent. He had taken four pegs. Several plates of chicken and fish had already been consumed.

"Should we expect something from you or not?" asked Ajay in irritation to divert his attention from just eating and drinking.

The secretary had started feeling a kick of the scotch. The spicy chicken had caused flatulence while the gas of sodas seemed to have swelled his abdomen like drums. His belt slipped from his paunch down to the waist. The stains of gravy had painted different kinds of maps on his shirt. The part of shirt that came out from the front side of his pants looked very shabby.

The secretary knew that he was not in a position to oblige Ajay. But he did not want to finish the sitting halfway by saying a plain 'no'. He was trying to complete his quota of food and drink in utter haste. He felt very abashed and humiliated at Ajay's rudeness. He was being insulted for just a few draughts of liquor. At once he contained his turbulent mind. There was nothing unusual or unprecedented about it. He wanted to console Ajay by boasting. But Ajay was having a mobile phone. He would immediately dial the number of the judge's phone

and hand the set over to him. Then it would be difficult to get out of one's own trap.

"Don't worry. I'll go to the chief tomorrow morning and ask him to ring up the Sessions Judge. If he wavers a little I'll fall at the feet of his wife for you. She cannot refuse me. And the judge cannot refuse her in turn. This is how our work will be done." After guzzling two large pegs at a stretch, the secretary did not know what he was talking about.

Pankaj had got absolutely fed up with the noisome behaviour of the secretary.

Pankaj had pursued many a trade and had hundreds of meetings with the officers. So by now he had assessed that the secretary was good for nothing. He was eating like a bull. This is what irked Pankaj. What a disgusting obsession with food and drink! He thought.

Had they come herein normal circumstances, he would catch hold of Ajay by the arm and returned with him to *Mayanagar*, leaving this glutton in the hotel. But now he was facing a criminal case. Any exasperated officer could turn damaging to him. Though such an official could do no good, but he was certainly in a position to do great harm. That is why he was putting up with the improprieties of the secretary.

The secretary wanted to have dinner also and take home packed *Ras-Malai* for the children.

"Secretary Sahib! You are out now. Take this last peg and let's move"

Before the secretary could make the waiter note down the dinner order, Ajay handed the last glass to him and announced his decision.

The secretary quietly drained the liquor down his throat and got up utterly annoyed.

Pankaj paid the bill at the counter.

Bhogal supported the secretary as he took him to the car.

They had been receiving phone calls from Neeraj since long. It was already midnight. It was not advisable for him to remain outdoors at such odd hours.

The secretary's family was waiting for him outside his quarter.

Immediately after the secretary and *Bhogal* got out of their vehicle, they drove fast towards *Mayanagar*.

22

Everything advised by advocate Singla was okay, but the one regarding meeting Melu, the milk-vendor, was not palatable.

Pankaj and Neeraj were among a chosen few industrialists of *Mayanagar*. They owned property worth about ten crores. They enjoyed great influence in the city. Political persons used to visit their office very often. In every election, they contributed to the fund of every political party. All officers of *Mayanagar* and almost half of those posted in Chandigarh were known to them. This was the actual investment of their father Mohan Lal. He would never sit at ease unless he developed friendly relations with the officer he met only once. He spent lavishly on the marriages in the officers' families. He used to pay one lac rupees as *shagun* in the marriages of IAS officers and fifty thousand on marriage occasions in the families of PCS officers. During winter season he would go to Chandigarh with two Monte Carlo sweaters for the Sahib and a *Pashmina Shawl* for his wife. The hosiery goods of *Mayanagar* were famous the world over and exported to several countries. If an officer wanted to purchase some hosiery goods, he would invite him to *Mayanagar*. The officer stayed at his residence along with his family for days together. There was a lot of fun and frolic. The children of many an officer had been playmates of Pankaj and Neeraj. Their relations were more intimate than those of their parents.

They would ask some political leader or a high ranking officer rather than Melu, to ring up the SSP. They would go later on for paying his fees at his residence. This is how they always got their works done.

The MP had left for Delhi a day before yesterday. He might have come back. He might have talked to the SSP. He also might have got the Union Home Minister to ring up the police top brass in their favour. He had promised to do so before he left for Delhi. He was true to his word. He might be bluffing others, but to them he was very loyal.

For a couple of years they had developed personal relations

and their business relations had also become more strong.

Mohan Lal had installed his first petrol station at a very high cost. Within a year after its installation, he had grasped the intricacies of this trade.

If the petrol pump is allotted directly by the minister and land for installing it is given by the state government, this business starts churning out gold.

Babuji had become MP for the first time and it was for the first time that his party had come to power at the center. The MP was not yet aware of his powers, nor did he know how to get work done.

First Mohan Lal himself studied the quotas under the discretion of an MP and then apprised the MP with the same. When *Babuji* became aware of his immense powers, he directed all his might towards Mohan Lal. What objection could he have if one or two telephone calls made by him benefit two generations of Mohan Lal.

When Mohan Lal showed the account books of the petrol station to *Babuji*, it opened his eyes. He immediately rang up the Petroleum Minister and did not sit at ease until a new petrol pump was sanctioned for Mohan Lal.

Now the question was where to install the petrol pump.

Since the day one, Mohan Lal had fixed his gaze on a government plot lying vacant in the heart of the city. It could be acquired at a throwaway price. If the petrol station was set up there, the turnover could grow ten folds. If the land was acquired at market rates, the income from this pump would not be able to pay off even the interest of the invested money.

Mohan Lal started maneuvering the allotment of the plot by pleasing the officers concerned. He obliged every officer the way he liked by using all possible means like lucre, liquor and woman. Consequently he got a two crore worth plot at a price of only ten lacs on a ninety-year lease.

This plot was surrounded by government quarters. The installation of petrol pump would cause pollution there. The drivers could resort to vandalism. Traffic jams would also become unavoidable. The dust raised by the vehicles would spoil the outer coating of the quarters and spoil the curtains

and furniture of the inmates of these houses. The residents of these quarters started opposing vehemently the installation of petrol station at this site.

The employees living in the quarters obtained the copies of agreements from the old files and handed over the proofs of the nexus between the petrol pump owner and the officers to the press. The press people sensationalized the issue by scandalizing it to the best of their professional capabilities. The opposition leaders proclaimed their support to the residents of the government quarters. A former Minister staged *dharna* at the site of petrol pump. "Petrol pump can be built on my dead body only," he declared.

The officers were flabbergasted. They started thinking of how to save their own skin.

To cool down the situation Mohan Lal knocked at the door of the High Court. The court ordered status quo on the issue. This was in keeping with the wishes of Mohan Lal. The matter became *sub judice* and the government became helpless. The cancellation of allotment was averted for the time being.

In less than a year Mohan Lal pacified all the parties.

A rapprochement was made with the former minister.

He promised to the residents of the colony that the petrol station was not meant for heavy vehicles. It was meant only for two wheelers. So there was hardly any chance of hooliganism on the part of the drivers.

In the surplus space Mohan Lal would establish a shopping complex where the residents would get cheap and fresh material. So it was in the larger interests of the colony. The crafty businessman thus succeeded in persuading the gullible dwellers of the government quarters.

The decision of the petition was managed in a very sly manner and overnight the pump became operational. In the beginning the petrol station catered only to the two wheelers as directed by the High Court. After six months cars also came to be fuelled from here. The cars were followed by buses and trucks. A workshop also started functioning nearby. If the colony residents had a little bit of inconvenience they found all this comfortable as well. The dust raised by the issue settled on its own in due course of time.

Following the success of the petrol station, *Babuji* got three gas-agencies sectioned for *Mayanagar*. The MP had nothing to do with who were given the two remaining agencies by the Petroleum Ministry authorities. The third one, reserved for backward classes, was actually reserved for *Babuji*. So he got it allotted to the man of his own choice.

These two ventures made the future of the politician very secure and he was grateful to Mohan Lal for this economic security. Now Pankaj was concretizing these relations in his own way.

In this age of globalization, many multi-national companies were trying their level best to set their feet firmly in India. The central government was encouraging foreign investment. The Industry Minister was quite often on a tour to other countries along with a delegation. *Babuji* also had accompanied the minister on some of these foreign trips. He was secretly trying to enter into a deal with some Japanese company. Given generous concessions, the company could think of setting up a heavy motorcycle industry in this part of Punjab. In lieu of his services, *Babuji* could be given some shares of the company. He himself could not become a partner to the company, nor did he have that much capital. Instead of himself, he recommended Pankaj's name. The deal was about to get finalized. Therefore *Babuji* shuttled frequently between Delhi and Mayanagar.

Another offer was made to Pankaj from Germany through a friend. Indian army used to purchase most of the spares of their guns from America. This German company could manufacture the same spares in India. If someone helped them contact the Ministry of Defence, the company could launch its project by making Pankaj its partner. *Babuji* was trying also to see this project launched. It could also make him a denizen of EI Dorado.

With such a deep intimacy of mutual relations between them how could *Babuji* turn his back on Pankaj and his brother?

Neeraj had contacted *Babuji* with great trust,

The residential sources said he was away to Delhi. From Delhi it was told that he had gone to Bangalore for attending the meeting of Executive body. Mobile phone was not functional

there. Another phone call was made. The call was through but nobody was picking up the receiver from the other end.

“What if *Babuji* is out of station. Chairman Sahib is very much available in Mayanagar. He is no less influential than *Babuji*,” they thought and started trying to contact the Chairman.

23

The Chairman had been camping in Mayanagar for the last three days. A camp of the party workers was in progress. The entire onus of management was on him. He called them to the camp. He was not allowed to leave the camp as it was against the party discipline, as well as disruptive for the activities of camp.

The Chairman also assigned Neeraj a duty. He should bring along with him two *petis* of apple and five kilogram *ladoos* for the cadets. Evening refreshment must be from the family of Mohan Lal.

They immediately reached the camp with a little more than what they were asked for.

Seeing him in the uniform of cadets, nobody could say that the man in vest and shorts had been MLA twice and now was the Chairman of Khadi Board. He looked like a drill master of some high school.

Sending the eatables brought by Pankaj and Neeraj into the kitchen, the Chairman took them to the office. There was a personal assistant sitting there near a telephone.

Meeting commoners was prohibited during the camp. But Pankaj and Neeraj were not commoners. They were financiers of the party. Now the party was in power. They could ask any one for funds. During his life time Pankaj’s father used to bear the whole expenditure of the camps, more so at a time when people were scared of even uttering the name of this party. When the party was in opposition, Mohan Lal would oblige the Chairman by supplying a bus, truck, ration or whatever he said without any hesitation.

The party could never be oblivious of Mohan Lal’s favour which he conferred on it by giving a plot for the construction of Sarv Hitkari school building, at cost price. He had also got two rooms constructed from his own pocket for starting the school.

Also, he had introduced scholarships in the memory of his father for the promising children from weaker sections of society.

The sons were moving rather two steps ahead of their father. They built an assembly hall in the school in the memory of Mohan Lal. The number of scholarships was doubled.

The Chairman had met very few people during the camp. Therefore, he was not conversant with the latest developments in the city. He had, however, read about an incident of dacoity in a house in some newspapers. He was shocked to know that the victim was no other than Pankaj's uncle Ved and his family. He was ready to help the bereaved family by all means.

But he turned pale as he heard of complicity of Pankaj and Neeraj in the criminal conspiracy and suspicion of police in this regard. He was stunned. He felt as if he himself was going to be a party to the conspiracy.

His heart seemed to be sinking. It was good that most of the people had not so far come to know about his meeting the suspects. The Chairman had a very spotless reputation. He was afraid lest he be accused of helping the culprits.

"Tell me, what can I do for you? In fact, it is time for my class", looking at his watch the Chairman expressed his restlessness.

"Babu is away in Bangalore. You please call the SSP and tell him that we are innocent in the case. The police should not harass us."

"Where is the need for a telephone call? Such things are not said on phones. These have to be discussed by sitting together. Today, the SSP is visiting the camp to address the cadets. Then I'll talk to him. You don't worry. No injustice will be done to you."

Saying this Chairman got up from his chair.

"Please keep sitting. Have a cup of tea.....Boy! Bring two cups of tea for the guests....bring something to eat as well."

Thus asking a cadet to bring tea, he hastened to the classroom.

This callous outlook of the Chairman anguished Neeraj. For the first time he realized that he was enmeshed in a crisis. He felt that everybody was shunning them.

With an agitated mind they came out of the camp without waiting for tea.

“It seems *Babuji* has deliberately left for Bangalore. You saw the attitude of this hypocrite? Just three days back he had kept sitting in my office throughout the day for taking subscription for this camp. Now he is behaving as if we have become outcasts. We’ll have to go behind the bars, I think.”

Trembling with fear, Neeraj was speaking his heart out.

“O!, nothing will go wrong. Money will set everything right. This is a party of *Banias*. They are fit for business only and avoid disputes. Don’t worry, we’ll find a way out by evening.”

Vinay tried to assuage the feelings of Neeraj whose morale was at the lowest ebb now.

24

After going from pillar to post, Pankaj and Neerajre called Singla’s advice. The court affairs are quite different from other affairs of ordinary life. Perhaps, that is why the lawyers are a class apart in the society.

Acting upon the lawyer’s advice they steered their car towards the dairy of Melu.

“Who is this Melu after all?” with this curiosity they dialled many phone numbers to ascertain the background of this man.

Melu was fond of wrestling ever since his childhood. The then state police chief had also been a wrestler in his past. To ameliorate the lot of wrestlers he recruited many wrestlers in the police force. He provisioned a wrestling ring in every police lines for regular exercise. To test his muscles, Melu started going to the *Akhara*. The ranks of policemen, he came in contact with at the police lines *Akhara*, ranged from inspector to the Deputy Superintendent. He made friends with them.

Pure milk was the first requirement of a wrestler. And this was the scarcest commodity in *Mayanagar*. At the motivation of wrestlers, Melu brought a buffalo in his stable.

Being a wrestler himself, Melu could well realize the importance of pure milk. Adulteration was a sin in his eyes. The honesty in occupation escalated his business on one hand and helped him develop a friendly circle among police personnel on the other.

Faith in the purity of his milk gradually turned into faith in

his words. Really, he was a plain spoken man, fully transparent. No opaqueness of word or deed.

That is why Melu's bidding would be done first of all.

Melu was a milk-vendor, just on a literal level; but his life style was like the owner of a milk plant.

His office had black glass panels on all sides which gave it a majestic look. It was furnished with ultramodern furniture. There were two telephones, a television and refrigerator in the office.

Clad in a white *kurta pajama*, Melu's face had a mystical glow on it. About a five tola bracelet and a golden watch on his sturdy wrist, four studded rings in each of his fingers and a heavy gold chain around his neck made Melu look like an aristocrat. He had a small mobile phone in his hand.

Melu welcomed Neeraj and Pankaj as warmly, as if they were known to each other since ages. The very mention of advocate Singla's name made him understand the purpose of their visit. Perhaps Singla had already phoned him about their arrival.

In accordance to his basic nature and temperament, Melu straightway jumped upon the real point.

Taking his share of ten thousand he slipped it into his big pocket. The SSP's demand would be known only after talking to him.

Melu talked to the SSP over his mobile phone and explained the cause of calling.

The SSP was going to Chandigarh for attending an important meeting. So he said,

"Either come right now or tomorrow."

But it would be better to go now.

It was not advisable for Neeraj to go to the SSP's residence; Vinay could go.

"Have you brought something with you?" before leaving for the *kothi* of SSP. Melu wanted to assess the party.

"It's half a *Peti*."

"What will half a *Peti* do? Make it one atleast. Anyway, manage it on the way; you are not the ones to have any scarcity of money."

To keep the whole deal secret, Melu got their vehicle parked in his own garage. He took out his own Esteem car and drove towards the SSP's residence by seating both the brothers in it.

Neeraj was dropped at Madaan's *kothi*. The remaining amount was taken from him and they reached the SSP's residence five minutes before the scheduled time.

The SSP finished the whole conversation in two minutes. This incident was carried out at the behest of Pankaj and Neeraj. The contractor and his nephew had got the whole narration tape-recorded. By way of proof, the SSP played some excerpts from the narration before them on the tape recorder. The police had got several solid proofs against them. He detailed some of them to Vinjay. He could confirm the same from Neeraj, if he liked," the SSP said.

Vinay talked to Neeraj on phone. "What should be done now," he asked.

Neeraj started crying bitterly. What the SSP was saying was right. Vinay should try to disengage him from this case somehow or the other, he entreated.

The deal was settled in five lacs. The amount should reach Melu by tomorrow. In turn, the SSP would lend them all out support. Many of the proofs would be destroyed. The witnesses would be of Neeraj's choice. They would backtrack from their statements. The police station record would be made in a way that might favour them. They would keep getting a copy of every document.

The SSP laid down one more condition. Since the case was well in the notice of every senior officer and even the Chief Minister, the party would contact them on its own. Under pressure from above and as an eye-wash in public, the police might have to show some movement as well.

He offered a suggestion as well.

The press people must be taken care of from now on. He would try his best to mislead the press. He would present distorted facts, would change the statements every other day. The accused should keep with them the clippings of news regarding the case. These would be of great advantage to them in the hearing of the case.

Moreover, the SSP was in touch with his higher-ups. In case the things seemed to be going out of control, he would handle the officers himself.

“Rest everything will be taken up later. Now go and try for anticipatory bail. Till the bail is granted the police will do everything except arresting you,” the SSP assured.

25

The Sessions Judge did exactly what they apprehended. The application for anticipatory bail was sent to Sadhu Singh. It was no child's play to approach him. What to speak of accepting graft money, he never accepted even a glass of water from anybody. Vinay had enquired about his life style from an orderly working at his *kothi*. According to him, Sadhu Singh's house was no less than a hermit's cottage. No car, no air-conditioner. There was a scooter, that too of an old model. Sofa and double-bed seemed to have been a part of dowry at the time of his marriage. Drawing room was no better than a clerk's sitting room. No carpeting, no expensive show-pieces. He was a man of very simple food habits. He neither took non-vegetarian food, nor had a drink. An embodiment of simple living and high thinking.

He had not minted money of course, but had paid much attention to building the career of his children. His eldest daughter was a lecturer in Punjabi University and son-in-law was a heart-specialist. The younger son was studying Engineering in Electronics in IIT Delhi. He had got a campus-placement in a multinational company of Switzerland. Being a bright student the expenses of his studies were being borne by the company, beside five thousand rupees as extra allowance.

The eldest son was the most brilliant. He had cleared IAS examination in first attempt. He had been allotted Punjab cadre. But rather than getting an appointment letter, he got an invitation from the abode of God. He was involved in a road-accident and deserted Sadhu Singh. This untimely death of his son had left Sadhu Singh a changed man altogether.

He could not adjust himself psychologically with this great injustice of nature. He always kept thinking as to why he was

punished so heavily by Providence. One day a voice from within him answered this query.

“Now do you understand what injustice means? You are occupying a seat of justice. People deem you another God. Do you deliver all the judgements based on justice?”

Sadhu Singh could not reply to these soul-searching queries in the affirmative.

But from that day onwards his hands on the scale of justice never let it tilt in favour of injustice. Now nobody could make him swerve from the path of righteousness.

How was the application for anticipatory bail sent to this rock of a man? The accused contacted Nand Lal to get an answer to this question. He was given ten thousand not to let their application go to Sadhu Singh.

“You fools, this is rightly done. Don’t you see the newspapers are raking the issue every day? In such a situation no ordinary judge can make a merit based judgment. Our side of the case is strong. If there is anybody who can decide in our favour now, it is only Sadhu Singh. I myself have managed the whole thing,” said Nand Lal.

He was not the one to be cowed down by accused so easily.

Earlier, Nand Lal had said that the application must not go to Sadhu Singh. Now he says he himself has done so. What was this riddle? Ajay failed to understand but he found sense in what Nand Lal said. For the time being no judge would decide the matter under monetary temptation. They could have some hope only if the case was decided on merit.

Case was to come up for hearing in the afternoon.

What will be the outcome of their case now? What should be the future course of action? Can Sadhu Singh be approached?

Vinay and Ajay consulted Singla to find an answer to these questions.

“This judge is honest as well as a specialist in jurisprudence. He will decide according to law only. We are not to take any risk of approaching him,” Singla did not think much before giving his categorical opinion.

“What is going to happen in the afternoon?”

“Hearing of the case. The other party cannot attend it as

yet. The judge will base his decision on the arguments advanced by us and according to his own sense of judgment."

"How strong is our case?"

"Our name is not there in the first information report. Nor is there any indication that the crime was committed at our behest. So the plaintiff side is weak. Our mutual relations are laced with acrimony and we are involved in litigation as well. Due to this reason, we've been implicated in the case out of personal vendetta only. It goes in our favor."

"What goes against us?"

"Law has nothing against us. The hue and cry being raised against us in the city would go against us. The judges keep an eye on all developments pertaining to the case. They are surely influenced by the media."

Singla did not want to keep them in dark.

"Now what should we do?"

"Wait. Only wait. We'll think over it after the decision."

Arguments took place in the afternoon.

Sadhu Singh kept listening to arguments very patiently and took note of the points raised by Nand Lal.

When Nand Lal said "there is no mention of the accused in the report," Sadhu Singh interrupted him saying, "But their name does figure in the newspapers."

Nand Lal was irritated at this interruptive comment by Sadhu Singh.

"The judge cannot go beyond the file," quoting references from the decisions of higher courts, the lawyer tried to change the view of Sadhu Singh.

"But I'll go beyond the file inspite of these judgements." said the Judge.

Nand Lal's arguments had no effect on Sadhu Singh. He was adamant on his stand.

The lawyer could make only arguments and that he did. What could he do if the judge did not honour the decisions of higher courts? He kept silent.

This was a drawback in Sadhu Singh. Where law seemed to be weak and the accused tried to take advantage of its lacuna, he stood between the law and the accused. He would frame a

new law by giving his own reasons. Let the accused go and knock at the door of High Court.

That is what he was doing now. It was six days after the case had been registered. The police had got numerous new proofs during these days. Why should the judge blind fold his eyes to ignore all the proofs? He would keep his eyes and ears open. If he gets at some new facts from his own source, he would use it. Let the law say what it does.

Sadhu Singh could not decide the matter on the basis of the police version only. He wanted complete file to delve deep into the reality.

After the arguments he adjourned the case for next day.

The government pleader was directed to come prepared and present his case effectively.

“No interim order. Final judgement will be announced tomorrow.”

26

Immediately after regaining her consciousness, Neha felt like running away from Pallavi’s house.

Prior to this nightmarish incident, Neha spent more time at Pallavi’s house rather than at her own. Pallavi’s mother was a college lecturer and her father was a Telecom engineer. They stayed outdoors from morning till dusk. Most of the time she was alone in the house. Thus, both the friends took full advantage of the peaceful atmosphere of this house.

They were the activists of the youth wing of *Sehyog*, a voluntary organization. The onus of most of the activities of *Sehyog* lay on the shoulders of *Yuva Shakti*.

Sitting together at Pallavi’s house they would be discussing plans to discharge their responsibilities.

Sehyog was established by Mata Kalyani. She claimed herself to be an incarnation of Mother Parvati, the primordial Energy of lord Shiva. She held that spiritual power enters the being in the womb itself, after seventy five days after its conception. This power enters through crown chakra, and passing through all the seven chakras of the body, it activates the parts governed by those chakras. The rest of the power sets coiled in the last,

Mooladhar Chakra, this sleeping force can be awakened through yogic meditation. The energy thus awakened, rises spirally from *Mooladhar* Chakra towards the crown chakra. In the process it energises the Chakras on the way. The new energy revitalizes the organs. The soul establishes its contact with its primal source i.e. God. Coming into contact with God, the Ultimate Reality, man attains eternal bliss. His face starts radiating a spiritual glory.

According to the scriptures, *Kundlini* could be awakened after austere meditation. In mythological times very few Rishis had attained this spiritual elevation.

Mataji had not only awakened her own *Kundlini* but had paved the way for others as well on this path. Her yoga was no illusion. Her followers experienced the arousal of this force called *Kundlini* on their fingers and palms. Cold waves emanated from their fingers and palms during yogic meditation. As the *Kundalini* arose upwards, the coolness of waves increased.

This well tested mystical experience helped a good deal in the expansion of this institution.

Neha was enticed to these pursuits by Pallavi and Pallavi was put on this track by her Delhi-based maternal uncle.

Every year, Pallavi would visit her maternal grandparents during the summer vacation. Last time, her uncle, rather than taking her around to theaters or Disneyland, had taken her to Mataji's *Ashrama*. Mataji was on her visit to Delhi during those days. A meditation camp was being run there under her own stewardship. The whole family of her uncle was busy in the camp with full dedication.

This was the period when efforts were vigorously underway to revive the old Indian traditions. Meditation was becoming a fad with the people. The *Sadhus* were out to raise new institutions for motivating the people for meditation. The newspapers were given advertisements regarding the free meditation camps being organized here and there. The yogis and the blessed ones were being interviewed on television for performing astounding feats through yogic meditation.

Pallavi was very curious to know the mysterious realm of yogic meditation. In Mayanagar, many such institutions were

famous for teaching yogic practices. But due to her commitment to her studies and lack of company, she was devoid of this knowledge. The moment she got the opportunity, she engaged herself heart and soul in yogic meditation.

The people were true in saying that there was a divine power in meditation. After every session she felt herself transformed a bit. She felt she was rising up at every level.

This time when she came back from Delhi, Pallavi was a changed person. Her friends also noticed a change in her. She was no longer a peevish girl as she used to be earlier. Now she did not disturb the concentration of students and the teacher in the classroom. She kept her eyes focused on the blackboard. Her comprehension of classroom lectures had improved considerably. Her performance had improved in the house tests as well. She had become more sprightly and sociable. Her friendly circle had expanded. She never visited canteen to take *dosas* or *burgers*. She, instead, sat in the library with her friends and made them familiar with the yogic postures and their importance.

Just out of sheer curiosity, Neha learnt the method of meditation from Pallavi. She too had a feel of occult power in meditation. She had the realization of changes akinto those witnessed in Pallavi.

The unit of *Sehyog* had been functional in Mayanagar for three years. A teacher and his wife had taken upon themselves the task of disseminating Mataji's message as widely as possible. Every Sunday he made the followers experience awakening of *Kundlini*. But he was not succeeding in motivating the people. The number of *Sehyogis* had not exceeded ten or twelve. If two came into the fold, three others would move out of it. The frustrated missionary was urging Mataji to consecrate Mayanagar with the touch of her feet by paying a visit to this city. But Mataji had been putting him off and was on the lookout for an opportune moment.

During the last visit she had patted her disciple's back. Now it was time for *Sehyog* to flourish in Mayanagar. Mataji blessed Pallavi and asked her to organize young blood in the city in the name of *Yuva Shakti*.

The organization of *Yuva Shakti* breathed a new life in the institution. It started progressing by leaps and bounds.

First, the young girls joined the institution. Then, motivated by them, their parents also started coming. And then they came along with their acquaintances.

Earlier, the *satsang* was held at the residence of the local chief of the institution. To share the onus, the *Sehyogis* divided this responsibility among themselves. Every Sunday one or the other member would host *satsang* at his house. It helped in inspiring the neighbours of the members also to be a part of the institution.

With some lawyers, engineers and industrialists becoming followers of *Sehyog*, there was no more any paucity of funds.

The number of *Sehyogis* was multiplying day by day thus rendering the houses unable to accommodate all of them. Now need for an *Ashrama* was felt keenly by them.

The donors lost no time in piling up money as soon as the idea of building an *Ashrama* crept into their minds. Within days the idea of *Ashrama* was translated into a concrete reality. The *Sehyogis* believed that this could be possible only with the blessings of Mataji; otherwise nobody would pay a ten-paisa coin to a beggar in this city of sinners.

The responsibility of looking after the *Ashrama* was entrusted to *Yuva Shakti* and *Yuva Shakti* was controlled by Neha-Pallavi duo.

The collective *Sehyog* satsang was held every Sunday in the *Ashrama*. The duo discharged the entire responsibility: right from idol-installation to refreshment, very joyously, thus making the atmosphere livelier.

Engaged in the activities of the institution, they spent most of the time together. When separated, they badly missed each other.

Sometime they felt as if they were separate entities only at a physical level; otherwise their soul was one and indivisible.

Now the injuries on Neha's body had bruised the soul of Pallavi.

The anguish that bedeviled Neha's family was the agony of *Sehyog* family as a whole. The *Sehyog* had made tireless endeavor

for the family by paying hectic visits to courts, police-station, hospital etc.

It was only the *Sehyog* family which had taken Neha into its arms. And this was no obligation on her. It was in keeping with the teachings and directives of Mataji. The agony of one member thus belonged to the entire *Sehyog* family.

Pallavi's family was carrying out Mataji's preaching in practice.

27

There was indefinite strike in the university campus. Pallavi stayed at home. The college where her mummy taught was also closed. So she too used to come back after making her attendance. Her husband i.e. Pallavi's Papa had no fixed working hours. He was called even during night time, if there was some fault in the machinery. To avoid this inconvenience, he had taken leave for five days. He would look after Neha till she recovered well, after staying at home.

For the first two days Neha didn't eat or drink anything. She kept shedding tears profusely by remembering Kamal. She would feel enraged at the site of the scratches on her body and squirm from within her heart at the pitiable condition of her parents.

All members of Pallavi's family were on their toes to look after Neha. They were trying to console her by quoting from the discourses of Mataji. But Neha found all such preaching as sham, sheer humbug and nothing else. At times, even Mataji looked like an impostor to her.

Before starting meditation, every *Sehyogi* would take a pledge during which he or she prayed to Mataji for the protection of the seven *chakras* of the body. Mataji accepted the prayer of her disciple and provided him or her the armour known as *Durga kavach* for the required protection. No evil eye could even dare look at this *kavach*, not to speak of damaging it. Neha had expanded her prayer by demanding protection not just for herself but for her family and then the world as a whole. She was asking the Divine Mother called Mataji, why the *kavach* of her beloved daughter was broken to smithereens like crystal

glassware? Why did it fail to protect her brother? For what grievous sin was her family punished? But the mother had no answer to these queries.

The *Sehyogis* believed that Mataji answered each and every inquisition of her disciples. Keep doing your duties earnestly with the question enconced in your heart. Sooner or later the answer will dawn on you itself with the grace of the mother. Earlier, Pallavi alone used to disseminate this concept, but later Neha also joined her. And it was not for nothing. She had been receiving answer to her questions.

Now she was asking something from the Mother but all in vain.

This reticence of the Mother made Neha remember Kamal rather more intensely.

He used to say, "The answers do not come from any divine source. If you start pondering over the solution to the doubts arising in your mind with full concentration, the mind itself activates its dormant knowledge and offers some answers to your questions. Now you call these answers the voice of soul or clairvoyance on the part of a divine mother makes no difference at all."

He even described the concept of *Durga kavach* as a psychological trickery.

"Prayer simply makes you feel safe and you shed all fears. Those who wear this so called. *Durga kavach*, are also as prone to loss like a common man, he would say.

Exhorted by Pallavi, Neha tried to sit in meditation once or twice. But no cool sensation was there. On the contrary her whole body started emitting heat whenever she was in an agitated state of mind. She felt emission of steam from her body. Mataji used to say that only the evil spirits emit hot air. Had she become an evil spirit over night? She was not at all responsible for what had befallen her. It was against her wishes by all means. Why was she being punished for an unfortunate incident that was beyond her control? Mataji was a possessor of rare insight. She should have stopped her being an evil spirit.

As some skeptical thought emerged in her mind, she remembered Kamal.

He used to say that Neha was brought up in a very cosy environment without even a shadow of suffering or sorrow. She had no taste of rough and tumble of life. Similar was the position of Pallavi. That is why their minds were at peace. What would a peaceful mind emit if not coolness, through body? A peaceful mind keeps body also at peace.

Had the coolness of Neha's body been taken away by the perturbation of her mind?

She failed to understand who was right-Mataji or Kamal?

However she was aggrieved at the loss of her spiritual power.

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Neha did not keep her skepticism to herself. She expressed herself out before Pallavi and her parents.

What caused them vexation for was that Neha had lost faith in herself. And it was only the restoration of her religious faith which could retrieve her from the dark abysses of frustration.

Pallavi's parents intensified their efforts to put Neha back on the rails.

Pallavi talked to the Pradhan of the center for holding a collective prayer session next Sunday to pray for peace to the departed soul of Kamal and speedy recovery of other members of the family.

Sehyog gave great importance to collective prayer, so it was accepted at once by the Divine Mother. When an individual prayer was not accepted then all the *Sehyogis* prayed to Mataji in unison. After some such group prayers, some families were blessed with sons, while young sons and daughters in some other families were married to good matches.

Neha was an important member of the institution and she deserved all out help in her distress.

The *Pradhan* had nothing against this prayer. He had already discussed this topic.

But some of the *Sehyogis* had objected to the entry of Neha into the center after her being desecrated. It would defile the sanctity of the *Ashrama*. The *Pradhan* was trying to convince such ignoramuses. He was fully hopeful of his success in his endeavor.

Pallavi talked to all the members of *Yuva Shakti*. For them Neha was as pure as Mother Sita of Ramayana.

Pallavi's parents consulted their *Sehyogi* acquaintance. They were already praying for the well-being of Neha's family. So the collective prayer must be held.

Neha did not feel like going to the *Ashrama*.

If she went to the *Ashrama*, every *Sehyogi* would come to her and touch her festering wounds by asking details of the traumatic incident.

Pallavi pressed her hard.. Her parents also persuaded her saying that it would bring a change in the gloomy atmosphere. Moreover concentrating attention on God would bring back her lost spiritual power.

Before the nerve-shattering incident had occurred, Neha would be the first to reach *Ashrama*. She got carpets and rugs spread and got the venue cleaned under her own supervision. Then she installed the idol of Mataji in a palanquin and decorated the hall with flowers and incense. She would keep prancing like a doe till the last *Sehyogi* left the *Ashrama*.

Today she was deliberately late. As per the tradition of the *Ashrama*, whoever came first occupied the front line. As the *Sehyogis* kept pouring in, they occupied their places in the back rows. Neha wanted to avoid the public gaze.

She came and sat silently in a corner.

She hoped that the organizer would welcome her for coming to the *Ashrama* after missing many sessions. This was the tradition of the center.

First row was reserved for the impresario, choir and *aarti-trio*. Neha was a permanent member of *aarti-trio*. At the end of *satsang*, the Mother's *aarti* was performed by three women. Any woman would deem herself lucky to be a part of *aarti*. *Aarti* had its own choreography and Neha used to be the choreographer. The other two women were from the congregation. They performed *aarti* in tune with Neha.

Neha spent half an hour sitting there. The impresario had seen her sitting. Pallavi was sitting in the first row. She had whispered several times in the ear of the organizer something which had no effect on her.

Neha tried to concentrate her energies in meditation to find an escape route.

As she closed her eyes, the same diabolic scene started appearing on the screen of her mind like a film. A monster was trying to disrobe her. Another was torturing Kamal to death. The third one was dragging her mother while the fourth was trying to murder her father in the most brutal manner. There was blood all around, a trail of destruction and screams.

Neha at once opened her eyes full of tears.

In spite of the efforts made by Pallavi and her parents, Neha was not allowed to sit in the first row, nor was any collective prayer made for the well-being of her parents.

The impresario had not like even Neha's coming to the center.

The *Sehyogis* were concentrating their attention on *agya chakra* following which they had to pray to the mother for weaning them away from anger and pride. Mataji claimed that the moment this feeling enters the mind, anger evocates like camphor and mind cools down.

But when Neha was not called for *aarti*, her *agya chakra* started radiating heat with anger. Her palms emitted heat. All the *Sehyogis* looked like a clique of conceited hypocrites. Nobody tried to assuage her hurt feelings. Rather, a deliberate attempt was made to belittle her.

She left the *Ashrama* before the commencement of *aarti*.

She had no courage to face hundreds of pitying and scornful eyes.

Pallavi and the *Sehyogis* were engrossed in meditation. Nobody took any notice of Neha's departure.

What was Neha to do now in Pallavi's house?

When *Sehyog* disowned her who else was expected to own her?

She started thinking of espousing death, rather than living an ignominious life.

She turned her steps towards the railway lines.

On the way, she had some hallucinations, as if Kamal was following her. He was calling her from behind, she felt. Every time she looked back, she found nobody there.

“Dhritrashtra was blind. Blindness was his compulsion. But what compelled Gandhari to blindfold her eyes without anything being wrong with her vision?” Once Kamal had asked this pertinent question to Neha.

Then he himself had answered this question saying that this was Gandhari’s escape from her duties. Had she kept her eyes open, there would have been no Mahabharata.

It seemed as if once again Kamal was posing a similar question to Neha.

Kamal was murdered. It was his helplessness.

But why Neha was out to kill herself without any compulsive circumstances? If she died, there would be one more Mahabharata. Her parents would die miserably wailing and lamenting. Kamal’s murderers would be acquitted.

Neha contained herself. She *removed* blind folding from her eyes of sanity. In her heart of hearts she promised to Kamal that she would definitely do her duties at every cost.

Neha turned back and steered her steps towards Dayanand Hospital.

29

Ved was unconscious for seven days. For the last three days, he was in his senses. But despite having regained his senses, Ved was no better than he was during unconsciousness. His hands, arms, feet and legs were plastered. The wires would not let the jaw open. He could neither speak nor could communicate anything in writing.

He had been crying most of the time after regaining consciousness. During these three days nobody had come to enquire about his well-being, neither Kamal, nor Neelam nor Neha. The fact, that Kamal was murdered was concealed from him. In spite of Ramnath’s repeated consolations that everything was alright, Ved understood that nothing was alright.

When Neha appeared before him for the first time, tears streamed from both of his eyes. He was too helpless, to bless Neha by patting gently on her head, nor could he embrace her with paternal love. What he could do was to shed tears and this he was doing the same.

Ignoring medical advice and bothering little about his own pain, Ved opened his mouth to enquire about Kamal.

The very mention of Kamal's name made it impossible for Neha to contain herself and she burst into tears.

Ved understood everything and he too started crying bitterly. As a result, his jaw started bleeding. The possibility of disjuncting the bone, the parts of which had hardly been joined with the help of wires, increased considerably. But without caring about his wounds, Ved kept wailing for the loss of his only son.

Crying aloud seemed to have benumbed his blood vessels. He was not aware of his bleeding wounds, nor was he feeling any pain.

Seeing Ved's condition, a nurse came and returned after giving him anesthetic injection.

After writhing for some time, his mind and body both were intoxicated to stillness.

The wails of Ved made a wreck of his health. The wounds caught infection. The wires got stuck in the flesh. The joined bones were disjuncted again.

The possibility of discharge was extended for two weeks at least

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Police had assured that Pankaj and Neeraj would not be arrested till the decision on the application for anticipatory bail. So far the police was so far true to its word.

But the accused were not taking any risk. They were changing their places every hour to keep away from the eye of the police.

Nand Lal had also assured them. He would definitely arrange anticipatory bail for four-five days by his legal tactics. He would get them an order to join police investigation and dispel the misgivings of police. Once they joined investigation, nobody could stop their regular bail.

The accused were not paupers to leave the city in panic. They were millionaires. When the Police did not need them, what was the point in keeping them in jail? For ensuring

presence in the court during trial, they were ready to pay the heaviest security. Whatever is the decision, it would be acceptable to them. If they were sentenced to imprisonment, they were ready to go to jail. But the men of repute could not be jailed without a substantial logic. This was very much provided by law.

In view of this encouraging assurance given by Nand Lal the accused were planning to join the investigation. Police had readily agreed to let them join investigation. The suggestion had come from police, so that nobody could raise a finger at investigation. As per law, during investigation the accused could have with him a lawyer and a doctor. The police had nothing against the compliance of this law. But feeling the pulse of time, it would be proper to get new orders passed by the court. The journalists were roaming about nearby. Who knows they appear with their cameras during interrogation. In their presence they might have to enact with harshness also. In the presence of lawyer and doctor, the police would be bound to be soft. The orders of court cannot be defied even by the journalists. The interrogation would be completely uninterrupted.

Pankaj was trying to take the Civil Surgeon into confidence. He was suggesting the name of the doctor to be appointed for this purpose.

But the news about application being sent to Sadhu Singh and postponement of anticipatory bail for a day foiled the whole scheme.

Plans were made anew.

Ajay was rushed to Nand Lal and Vijay to Singla. Nand Lal conveyed his suggestions to Ajay. Singla was busy at that time. He would be reaching them within an hour or so.

Before Singla arrived, the friends started discussing the whole affair among them.

Except Nand Lal, everybody was of the opinion that Sadhu Singh did not listen to anybody at all. But Nand Lal was stressing that Sadhu Singh should be approached. He also suggested some relatives who could influence him.

One of them was Sadhu Singh's *kuram* based at Patiala.

Another was his brother-in-law at Bathinda.

Nand Lal had claimed that these were no hearsay names; he had tested these people's influence. How could the people know the secret deals? A wise judge accepted monetary obligation only in one or two cases and earned enough for a year from them. Pankaj's case fell into that category.

Nand Lal was pressing hard that one of the two relations should be approached.

Whether to approach Sadhu Singh's relatives or not, was the puzzle. They were waiting for Singla in the hope that he would solve it.

So far Singla's advice had proved reliable. Whatever he said had come true. Nand Lal, on the other hand, was getting money without yielding any tangible result.

The date was closer and they were running short of time. They had to visit several places.

They fired a volley of questions on Singla as soon as he arrived.

Singla had to answer each and every question after a good deal of contemplation. On one hand he had to expose the cunningness of Nand Lal and on the other to save his own skin also.

Singla understood well why Nand Lal was emphatic on approaching Sadhu Singh. Sandhu Singh being inaccessible, the party would exhaust all its energy in the process. After rejection of bail application, he would easily say that he was helpless. Such things are impossible without solid approach. If the party surrendered to Nand Lal, he would be the happiest man on earth. He would then find an excuse to demand a fat amount in the name of approaching the judge through his own man.

It was not only Nand Lal who was resorting to such like tricks of the trade. Every lawyer had to do so for keeping up his reputation. Singla himself was a rodent user of such stratagems.

But to promote his own business he was forced to expose a very important trick of his own profession.

Thus, Singla disclosed the machinations of Nand Lal without any scruples.

However, on the nick of the moment some apprehensions were aroused in his mind. Maybe the contact persons suggested

by Nand Lal are solid enough and at my words they do not approach them. It will cause harm to the party and responsibility is likely to fall on me in that case," he thought.

After thinking about a little, Singla chose the middle path.

"There is no need of going to Patiala or Bathinda. I have a few lawyer friends at both the places. I can get the required information through them without going anywhere. You too have some relatives there. Ask them to find a link to reach the judges relative. If we see a ray of hope anywhere, we'll as well go personally."

"This is right. My *maasi* lives in Punjabi Bagh area of Patiala. Sadhu Singh's *kuram* lives in Kothi No.77 and Mausi in 70. They must know each other," said Ajay.

"I have my uncle there in Bathinda. He has his cloth show room outside the power colony. The residents of the entire colony are his customers. He will provide us the required information," said Vinay.

"You ring up your respective relatives and ask them to tell us after an hour. By that time we'll think of our next line of action."

Singla was feeling happy at the success of his plan.

"Tell me to whom else we're to approach," Pankaj asked after getting the relatives phone.

"After the judge, comes the Government pleader. Police, we have already won over. These are the only big expenses. All others are to be satisfied in hundred or fifty rupees each. There is nothing to worry about."

"Who will talk to the government pleader?"

"I'll do. He is my friend. I'll make you sit face to face with him."

"What shall we give him?"

"We'll pay him somewhat between two thousand and three thousand for the time being. Otherwise we'll see according to the situation."

Singla was deliberately quoting less amount of expenditure. He knew it for certain that Babu Nand Lal must have demanded ten thousand for the government pleader. Out of this he would give the pleader only one thousand or at the most one and a

half thousand. The remaining amount, he would digest himself. He might have demanded money for the government pleader by now. Singla had not asked anything in this regard knowing. Now the time had come to ask about it.

“Did Babuji talk anything about the government pleader?”

“Yes. He said, ten thousand would have to be given to the government pleader, five hundred each for court clerks and one thousand each for the *thanedar* and the Munshi.

The alarming gap; between the rates of Nand Lal and Singla irritated Ajay.

“Babuji is my mentor. To utter a word against his honour would be bad on my part. But you are my clients. It is my legal duty to safeguard your interests. So I ask you once again to avoid being looted at the hands of Babuji. He will get ten thousand in the name of Public Prosecutor and give him only one thousand. The government pleader knows fully the level of each party. But he will not argue with Nand Lal out of fear, but will cause us a great harm by pleading unfavourably. Give money yourself. Don’t trust anybody,” Singla projected himself as a benefactor of the accused.

“You’re right Singla Sahib. We’ve already experienced it. Now we’ll act upon your advice. If Babuji demands any money in the name of an officer, we’ll say, Mr. Singla had already talked to the officer concerned in this regard.

“He is very sensible otherwise. Effused once or twice he will not even look towards you for money under a sense of shame,” said Singla feeling elated over his success.

Discussion was going on some important points when outstation calls started pouring in.

First call was from Patiala. Kothi number 77 was inhabited by a *tehsildar*. Nand Lal was wrong. The 75 year old *tehsildar* was a teetotaler and vegetarian. He was a very contented person and spent whole day in remembrance of God. He had never accepted graft during his service career. His doctor son ran private practice worth more than one lac rupees a month, daughter-in-law was college-lecturer. They had no lust for money.

Still, to be true to her sister’s son, Ajay’s *maasi* had called at Kothi No 77. Her family had twenty years long intimacy with

the *tehsildar's* family. But the *tehsildar* had humbly folded his hands and said that he could not interfere with Sadhu Singh's mode of functioning as he was committed to his principles.

After a while, the report from Bathinda too poured in.

Sadhu Singh's brother-in-law was one of their customers and well known to them. They already knew his relation to the judge. The relatives had talked to him by visiting his house. He neither said no nor did he agree to go to *Mayanagar*. He asked for time to think over till evening.

But they had got to know about the antecedents of the man from his neighbourhood.

"Some people had come here earlier also. He is a very greedy type of person. He takes money or presents from the party and then goes to *Mayanagar* only to come back unheard. The judge gives him no importance at all. There is no use talking to him," said the neighbours.

These reports made Singla happier than before.

Finally, it was decided that the very idea of approaching Sadhu Singh would be given up altogether but no stone will be left unturned to approach others.

From now onwards, Singla would decide what was to be given to whom.

31

Meeting with the government pleader was arranged in the hotel City Heart. Pankaj got a room booked for them.

Early in the morning, a vehicle was sent to Singla's residence to fetch him. Then they took Satinder Singh along.

On the way Singla briefed the government pleader. It was a rich party. A handsome fee was expected. Earlier Singla used to get one third as his share. Today he wanted to take fifty percent of the amount that would be given to the government pleader.

Government pleader had a condition. Nand Lal had promised him ten thousand. Singla will get half of whatever extra he manages to get for the pleader.

Singla was as astonished at Nand Lal's cleverness. The

master had taken an edge over the disciple. He had incited the Public Prosecutor as he saw the game slipping out of his hands.

"Babu has told a lie. He was demanding ten thousand from the party. One of your colleagues has advised the party not to shell out more than one thousand. The party is under my influence. I chided them saying that one thousand is not accepted even by the court clerk. And you are talking of one thousand for the Public Prosecutor, the class one officer. The judge delivers judgements only on the basis of his arguments, I said. I told that the government pleader is a defence counsel for the plaintiffs. The government pleader prefers the plaintiff party even after getting a pittance from them. Here the plaintiff side is also after the government pleader. But he has to take money from one side only, not from both the sides. It is only after so much persuasion that the accused side has come on the track. We don't demand our share for nothing, we have to do a lot of mental exercise for that," said Singla.

The accused party was asked to arrive an hour later. They need not wait for anybody else.

Offering the first peg to Satinder, Singla started pleading for himself.

"You lawyers are very clever. I can't understand your schemes. You do whatever you like, dear."

Gulping down the second peg, Satinder surrendered.

"You start with demanding ten thousand. I'll say five. Then we'll see where the party settles down. Let's enjoy the deal together. It's a goose laying golden eggs. We'll take eggs one by one. We can get more at the next hearing," saying this Singla started preparing second peg to equalize himself with his partner.

"Okay. I'll do as you wish."

"Find some way out that the party does not feel betrayed. Will the application be accepted? What do you feel?"

"The matter is serious and moreover this judge is pro-plaintiff. No chance of success."

"Then on what grounds can we demand ten thousand?"

"We have to take fees for our side of the job, to keep silent. What else can I do, tell me.

“Keep your silence for the court only. Here tell me frankly some method of getting bail-application accepted.”

“There is only one way out. Sadhu Singh has said that he would decide after the perusal of file. If file does not reach tomorrow he will decide the case. He may say what he likes by word of mouth but he cannot go beyond the file while announcing the judgement. Their names do not figure in the FIR. Application can't be rejected on the basis of newspaper reports. What else will we do if he does not accept the application?”

Singla blossomed at his heart as Satinder offered this suggestion. “Really, fees given to the government pleader was worthwhile”, he felt.

“Once the anticipatory bail is granted for a few days, we'll handle the situation ourselves. We'll not produce the file until they make the police surrender by voluntarily joining the investigation. When police says that investigation is complete, then on what grounds the judge can reject bail. ?”

“How the file can be stopped? For the other side, a lawyer is pursuing the case. This is his personal case. He knows all the tricks of the trade. I've heard that he has managed to send notice issued by the court to the police station”.

“Manage with the police station. Had you told earlier, I would have held back the notice. That lawyer kept sitting throughout the day in my office and kept crying. I pitied on him and delivered the notice to him by hand. Nothing has gone wrong so far. Stop the file. This is the only way of getting bail granted,” said the government pleader.

“Do this for us. I'll get the investigation officer his fees. Stop the file. Ring up the police station, please.”

“Do not drag me in such trivial matters. The I.O. takes one thousand rupees. If you give it, the file will not come. If the other party takes the lead, it will come. If there is any problem, then I'll certainly put in a word on phone.

“Right. We are lawyers. Our job is confined to the courts only. Party has direct dealing with the police. We'll advise them. Let them manage the police themselves.”

All aspects of bail acceptance had been discussed at large.

The liquor had started kicking from within.

There was no point in sitting here anymore.

The government pleader started feeling restless and delay in the arrival of the party was exasperating him.

Pankaj had got busy somewhere. He was replaced and represented by Neeraj and Vinay.

Plan made by Satinder and Singla was repeated before Neeraj.

Neeraj himself put money into the pocket of the government pleader. Both the sides accepted what Singla said to them.

There was no need to waste time in the hotel now. Neeraj should immediately rush to Melu Ram and scuttle the production of file in the court.

32

Stopping the production of file was no tough job for Melu Ram. He talked to the SSP straight way. The SSP directed the SHO accordingly.

Tip-off that one of the accused is hiding in Chandigarh, should be recorded in the file. A police party led by *Hawaladar* Narinder Nath should be dispatched to Chandigarh ostensibly for conducting a raid.

An application should be filed in the court that the court notice had reached late and before that the *Hawaladar* had left with the file. Another date should be solicited.

After calling the SSP. Melu rang up the SHO that he should send the *Hawaladar* to his dairy office.

Melu had got one thousand rupees for Narinder Nath and arranged two bottles of whisky. He would intoxicate the *Hawaladar* by serving him an overdose of whisky. It would make Narinder Nath incapable of going anywhere for two days at least.

The application must not reach in time. In case it reached the court well in time, Sadhu Singh would entertain it and give next date without pronouncing any judgement.

This problem was also solved by Melu.

An application was received from the *munshi* and handed it over to the reader of the SHO. He was guided properly when to give it to the judge.

Melu invited the reader also to his dairy and handed him his fees. For hospitality he was made to join Narinder Nath.

Reader had to use a little alacrity, stroll here and there for some time and after the hearing of the case was over, give this application to the government pleader like a simpleton. He should apologise for getting late due to the closed railway crossing. He would have to face admonition from the pleader, which he should tolerate and even put up with insult from the judge for which he should get his fees.

Police department was thus handled by Melu Ram. And these were not his directions. He was simply getting the instructions of the SSP complied with.

33

The application of Pankaj and Neeraj was the first to come up for hearing.

This case had become the focus of attention and discussion in the courts today.

The friends and relatives of Pankaj and Neeraj had started reaching the court premises since nine in the morning. About thirty-forty hefty businessmen were moving hither and thither in a flurry with mobile phone instruments in their hands. Sometimes they chartered around Nand Lal and sometimes around Singla. Pankaj's brother-in-law was serving coke to the guests. Ajay's servant was moving with a kettle of tea and biscuits. There was no trace of tension on the faces of the supporters. They were having fun and frolic, eating and drinking at the same time as if they had come for a picnic.

The people of other side were assembled in front of the office of government pleader.

Sitting in the office of the Public Prosecutor, Ramnath was waiting for the case file.

Some of the youths standing outside were journalists while some of them were Kamal's friend. Besides, there were some relatives from the side of Neelam's parents. The supporters of this side looked tired and exhausted.

The *thanedar* should have reached the government pleader's office along with the file by nine thirty. When the file did not

reach the court till quarter to ten, Satinder Singh alerted Ramnath. He should ring up the police station and ascertain the cause of delay.

The police station personnel were not telling anything. There was nobody except *munshi* in the police-station and he knew nothing about the whereabouts of the file.

Proceedings of the court started at 10 a.m. sharp.

The government pleader expressed his helplessness. Case file had not arrived from the police station. The proceedings should wait for some time.

But waiting was not in keeping with the principles of Sadhu Singh. File must reach in time; otherwise the government pleader should be ready to hear *suo motto* decision.

But this case was serious. He doubted that the accused party was taking undue advantage of his strictness and was purposely delaying the file.

In the larger interest of justice he violated his own principle. The government pleader was strictly warned and asked to ring up himself the police station and find out why the file had not reached. Hearing was postponed up to eleven.

When the file did not reach even at eleven, Sadhu Singh had no alternative but to hear the arguments. By adjourning the hearing, he could not ally himself with the plaintiff side.

Nand Lal repeated the same arguments as he had made yesterday.

As per the court practice, the government was given chance to put forward its arguments. But he had not received the requisite file, without which argumentation was not possible. He wanted a new date.

Ramnath wanted to argue the case himself. He was the Mama of the deceased and lawyer of the plaintiff side. Both the reasons entitled him to plead the case.

At this the defence counsel voiced their strong protest on the plea that it was for the state to plead on behalf of the plaintiff. Government pleader was there for this purpose. The lawyer of the plaintiff side had no right to interfere.

They quoted a number of judgements in support of their case. Sadhu Singh was ready to listen to Ramnath. But he himself

had nothing but the first information report which had already been read out by Nand Lal. Besides, what Ramnath wanted to tell the court could not be made the basis of judgement by Sadhu Singh. His speaking or not speaking would be of no use at all.

The judge took strong exception to this negligence of police. To express his resentment, he wrote a demi-official letter to the DIG and recommended action against the SHO. He ordered that either the case file be produced at the next hearing or the SSP should ensure his personal appearance.

Next hearing was to be taken after three days. Till then the accused were granted anticipatory bail.

"Lo, I have won the first stake. Now use your good office and join investigation. Tell the police whatever it wants to know from you. Provide whatever record is demanded. Then see, how I get you a regular bail at the next hearing," Nand Lal started putting on airs while addressing the people gathered outside, as he came out of the court.

"Take your lawyers along at the time of joining the investigation. One accused can take one lawyer. You are two, so take two lawyers. The police will remain under pressure. Singla is conversant with the whole case. Take him definitely. Going to the police station entails separate fees. Give it to him."

As Nand Lal was issuing instructions to the accused, the court orderlies, gunmen, readers and stenos also reached there. They started saluting and congratulating them in all humility.

"Give fifty rupees to each to them."

Ajay immediately distributed fifty-rupee notes to them."

"One more thing. Contact some newsmen and ask them to cover this development. It will be an answer to the newspapers spewing venom every other day." Nand Lal had received a message from the other court, but he kept issuing directions even while taking leave of them.

"The press has a soft corner for the other side. Who will publish our news," Ajay gave vent to his apprehension.

"Go to Shinde of Punjab Rattan. Give my reference and a five hundred rupee note to him. Then see how this news becomes a bold headline."

Nand Lal was more eager for press coverage than his clients.

The newspapers of Hind Samachar group have a readership among the urbanites. Shinde would eulogies Nand Lal's professional acumen more than dwell upon the facts. This eulogy would allure the people of Mayanagar to Nand Lal.

After thanking Nand Lal, Ajay broke this news first of all to Pankaj. Now there was no need to remain in hiding. Pankaj was sitting in a Dhaba in front of the courts. As he came to know about this pleasant development, he came to the court.

Putting the orders of anticipatory bail in the pocket, Neeraj and Vinay set out towards Melu Ram's dairy to say that he should talk to the SSP and make them join police investigation, so that they may be able to get a regular bail and free themselves from all anxiety.

Pankaj took his friends to his factory. They had been under mental tension for several days. Today they must celebrate.

34

Melu Ram was all joy at the news of anticipatory bail. He immediately took out a bottle from the fridge.

Pankaj and Neeraj had to abstain from a drink as they were to go to police station and join investigation. They had to have their statements recorded.

Party was being arranged in the factory. They invited Melu also to join them.

But before that they must unburden their minds of the tension regarding joining the investigation.

This was the order of the court. Police was bound to abide by it. The entire police was at the side of the accused. Then what was there to worry about?

Melu rang up the SSP asking him to direct the investigation officer for completing the file favourably. He should prepare the report in such a way that the judge is compelled to grant regular bail to the accused.

The SSP had nothing against doing so, except a particular problem.

The D.O. letter written by the judge had reached the DIG. He was irritated as to why the file did not reach the court. He had himself taken possession of the file. The SSP had been

reprimanded. The DIG must be taken into confidence.

Melu apprised Neeraj with the embarrassing position of the SSP.

“If DIG has to be obliged, then talk to him. Give him whatever you like, but help us get rid of the whole mess.”

Neeraj was not in favour of losing any more time.

Melu Ram contacted the DIG. Meeting was fixed.

His help was evaluated for two lacs.

The accused should sit silently for the time being. One day before the hearing, the DIG, would call the I.O. and the accused to his residence and get the investigation report prepared in his presence. Then he would verify the report. This is how the needful would be done.

Thus encouraged by the DIG, all of them reached the factory. The latest assurance infused a new life in the celebration.

The party continued till late night.

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After an exile of several days, Neeraj and Pankaj had the luxury of sleeping at home. Before going to bed they had strictly warned the members of their family not to disturb their sleep.

But those involved in criminal cases cannot have a comfortable sleep at all.

They had hardly slept for three hours when their phones started ringing constantly. This was Singla, desperately trying to contact them.

Every newspaper had carried news stories regarding their case. Both Singla and the government pleader had been made the butt of their criticism. Almost every newspaper had carried the photograph of Singla, Satinder and Neeraj standing together outside the City Heart hotel. The details of Singla's picking up the government pleader from his house and dropping him back there were published in the newspapers. Singla has nothing to worry about. He was a private person. But it could jeopardize Satinder's job if a hobnobbing between him and the accused was proved. He was ringing up again and again.

In addition to this, the news about nexus between Melu Ram and *Hawaladar* Narinder Nath was also published spicily.

He was portrayed as lying in an inebriated condition in Melu Ram's dairy farm. Quoting the police station record it was proved that the *Hawaladar* had not gone anywhere. He was very much in Mayanagar. His going to Chandigarh for conducting a raid was only stage managed to benefit the accused.

Messages were coming from Narinder Nath also. He had stopped the file only at the directives of the SSP. He should be saved from suspension.

A call for demonstrations, *dharnas* and strike to protest against this high handedness of police, was given.

The whole city had awakened but Pankaj and Neeraj were still sleeping. They should wake up.

When nobody picked up the receiver even after repeated calls, Singla had to go to their Kothi.

Beside the two newspapers which Singla read regularly at his house he purchased some more from the market on his way. It seemed as if the newspapers had nothing else to carry today. All the newspapers had published this controversial issue with a tongue-in-cheek style.

The brothers had succeeded in easing their tension after many days. They had been drinking till late last night. Now they were not getting up so easily.

They lost their wits at the sudden apparition of Singla at their house. They started sweating. There was a lot of fluctuation in their blood pressure and palpitation accelerated.

Bewildered, they sat in the bed room itself for thinking over the issue.

Singla showed them all the newspapers one by one and made them familiar with the probable impact of each and every news item. He also mentioned the possibility of harm to the government pleader and the *Hawaladar*.

Pankaj and Neeraj were least bothered about the government pleader and *Hawaladar* Narinder Nath. They were paid price for what they did and they were responsible for their benefit or loss themselves.

Singla did not agree to this logic. The loss of the government pleader was their own loss. If the interests of both the officials were protected now, their credibility among the officers would

remain intact. If it is eroded once, the officers would cease to cooperate in future. An officer is an officer after all. Once they lost their faith, nobody would care a fig for their affluence. Every officer would be out to damage them.

Narinder Nath would not have to suffer much. He was to be punished by the SSP who would himself tackle the whole situation. Singla was worried about Satinder only.

A brother-in-law of Ajay was an IAS officer. Satinder Singh's department was under the home secretary and the brother-in-law had earlier been Home Secretary. He must be having a very good influence in the department.

Ajay was awakened and assigned the job.

After sometime he rang up to tell them that Satinder should not worry at all. There would be no harm to his career but a little reprimanding.

Thus shedding their anxiety about the government pleader they started planning for their own defence.

36

Nobody bothered about the strikes and Dharnas. They are regular and unfailing feature of all such cases. First day there used to be five hundred to seven hundred people in the *dharna*. On the second day the number would come down to somewhere between two hundred and three hundred. After a week only fifty-sixty people would be seen on the site of *dharna*. After a month almost all of them would disperse and only a handful of persons would be left behind to pursue the issue. In this case the same history was being repeated. The number of onlookers was dwindling day by day.

Whatever gloss of the case survived, was due to its media coverage only. The news of strikes and Dharnas were being published in a very well-planned manner. The photograph of every slogan raising demonstrator was being published in one or the other newspaper. Even the name of the Mohalla Pradhan was being published by one or the other newspaper. Just to see their photograph in the newspapers, the people were vigorously participating in the strikes.

Singla was of the opinion that if the media kept silent, everything would be set right.

And it was the press which was drifting out of their control. The secretary of the press club was the paramour of Neha. They were about to be betrothed. He was personally linked to this issue. His sentiments were hurt. Only an impeccable justice could assuage his wounded psyche. All the journalists were expressing an unflinching solidarity with him. It was as difficult to tame a hurt paramour as steering the direction of a river.

Sagar must get disillusioned with Neha. Of course, the FIR had no mention of rape. This fact was concealed in a well conceived manner but it had become a talk of the town. Some newspapers had mentioned commitment of rape in their maiden reports on the incident. Sagar's mind must be poisoned against Neha's loss of virginity. He must be egged on to sever his relations from deflowered Neha.

So long as this plan does not fictify the editors of newspapers should be contacted. Some advertisements should be released to them immediately and some more expensive advertisements should be promised.

But the number of newspapers was not small. About thirty-fourty newspapers found their entry into *Mayanagar* daily. The advertisement rates were very costly. In the English newspapers it was even more difficult. Release of big ads was not feasible at all.

All the industrialists should join hands to tackle this situation. There were thousands of industries in *Mayanagar* who got their advertisements published in the newspapers. They must exert pressure on the newspapers through their publicity agencies. At least the ads of Pankaj's establishment and those of their relatives should be issued to the newspapers under this scheme. Advertisements are the life-line of all the newspapers, big or small. The newspapers would definitely have to compromise with them.

This was really a very valuable suggestion given by Singla. Pankaj would talk to his friends over this issue. At least the papers would tone down the news and at times their version would also be published.

All the journalists could not be in perfect conformity with Sagar. In every institution there is an opposition party also. The opposition group should be identified. Their antagonism should be utilized by inviting them to cocktail parties and obliging them with the presents.

The unity of students should be torn apart. This is a very impressionable stage of life, when swayed by impulse, the boys behave like monkeys. They can be made to tread the path of your choice as they bother little about the consequences. Since their exams were fast approaching, the parents were worried. In case the strike was stretched any longer, many of them would lose one academic year. The parents of striking students were pressing hard on the police to arrest the culprits as early as possible in the larger interests of the future of their wards.

The university authorities must be taken into confidence. The date sheet of terminal tests should be displayed on the notice board. Not less than fifty percent of the strikers would confine themselves to their study rooms when they saw their exams ahead. The rest of them would disperse simply by following suit. The parents would motivate them to concentrate their energy on their studies rather than frittering it away on strikes. The known parents should be contacted for putting the children on the right track through them.

All of the suggestions given by Singla were very valuable. These tactics were indispensable for lessening the pressure being exerted on the police. But it would take a long time in giving the suggestions a practical shape. The immediate problem which stared them in the face was that of getting anticipatory bail and relief from police harassment.

The anticipatory bail could be granted only by joining the police investigation. Once they joined investigation, there would be nothing to worry about then. Even Sadhu Singh was likely to grant them bail on this basis. If at all, he refused, it was sure to be obtained from the High Court.

But Pankaj's mind was not at ease. The police would not allow them to join investigation in changed circumstances, he thought.

"Why shall they not allow us? We have the court order. If

the SSP or the DIG cooperates with us, then there is no hitch in our joining the investigation," Singla tried to console Pankaj.

As suggested by Singla, it was decided to contact Melu Ram. It should be ascertained as to how seriously this news was being taken by the police rank and file.

The SSP had come in the good books of the Chief Minister by apprehending the culprits within twenty four hours. In some of his speeches he had lauded this grand performance of the district police chief. He was satisfied with the ongoing investigation. The SSP need not worry from any quarters.

The Police officers need not bother much about these news stories. They remain unruffled with the support of their seniors on their side.

Melu's mobile phone was switched off. His residential phone was tried. The call matured and someone from there told that he had gone to *Akhara*. From the *Akhara*, they told that he had gone to his dairy. When enquired from the dairy, someone on the other end said, "Wait please." Then he asked, "Who is on the line?" The listener then said it was Pankaj, to somebody. Then it was heard in whisper, "Say, he is out of station."

This attitude of Melu Ram had very clear indications. The officers were annoyed at these news reports. For the time being no help could be expected from anybody.

There was nothing to worry about. They still had two days. They could not do any damn thing in two days. This was no big problem.

Singla tried to boost the morale of Pankaj and his brother. It was dawn as yet. All the officers must be sleeping. Efforts would be made at day break.

Come what may, they must obtain anticipatory bail.

37

It was the last hearing on application for anticipatory bail today.

Once again it was the first to be heard. But this time the scenario was changed.

The former SHO had been transferred to police lines. The new SHO had appeared with the case file one hour before it was actually required. He had memorized the basic facts of the

case. For the convenience of the government pleader, he had prepared a written note as well. Also he had pinned flags on the important documents and statements.

The former government pleader was transferred to the lower court. The new pleader had come well prepared. Ramnath had met him yesterday. He had given him a patient hearing for half an hour and listened to each and every point suggested by Ramnath very attentively. He had brought copies of some important decisions on the basis of which he had to try that the bail-application was rejected.

This time hope glowed on the faces of those assembled outside the office of the government pleader.

Singla was very impatiently trying to contact the government pleader. Till nine nobody knew which pleader had to plead this case. It was only when Sudershan Kumar started jotting down the facts of this case file that he came to know that it was his turn today.

This pleader was no doubt, junior to others but he was more efficient than his senior colleagues. He was not very greedy and accepted whatever was delightfully offered. Once he accepted the money, he would do his best to oblige the party. He was an expert hand at work. He would get the need fully done by wriggling out of one or the other loophole. It was due to these qualities of head and heart that he was held in esteem equally by the lawyers and clients.

Singla had committed a blunder by moving about openly with the government pleader. He did not want to repeat his folly. After racking his brains seriously he hit upon a scheme. He made a tie up with the Naib Court, handed him a packet of ten thousand rupees saying that he should disengage Sudershan from the plaintiff party and convey his message to him.

Leaving everything aside, the Naib Court reached near the office of the government pleader. His normal fees were one hundred rupees only. Now he was given one thousand. He was anxious to convey to the pleader about his ten thousand and digest his own one thousand. Rest everything would be settled between Sudershan and Singla.

Under one pretext or the other, the Naib Court went to the

government pleader several times, tried to talk to him and signalled to him furtively. But Ramnath would not leave him alone even for a minute.

In the process, the clock hands showed that it was only five minutes to ten.

"Let's go sir? It's about ten," reminded the Naib Court when he saw that Ramnath was not ready to leave the pleader alone.

"Oh, yes! Take these files...and these books also." Handing over his paraphernalia to the Naib Court Sudershan got up from his seat.

Sudershan was a fast walker and Naib Court knew this.

The Naib Court started keeping pace with the government pleader with the same speed.

Ramnath had lagged far behind.

Looking around carefully, the Naib Court whispered in the ear of the government pleader.

"Sir, Singla has sent ten thousand. It's in my pocket right now. He was asking for your help."

"You'll get me suspended. Who knows what will be the fate of Satinder Singh now. The espionage of plaintiffs is no less than CIA. We'll get trapped and come in the news tomorrow."

Sudershan was not ready to take any risk.

"Don't worry sir. I'll manage everything."

"You do one thing. Settle it frankly with them that we'll have to plead the case to some extent. Secondly whether the needful is done or not, the fees will not be refunded."

"I've already told this to them. They are afraid of your arguments. They request you not to be aggressive intone and make only unavoidable argumentation. Quote less number of cases."

"Okay then. We'll see to it."

The Naib Court and the accused side *heaved* a sigh of relief after receiving an assenting nod from Sudershan.

A whispering started in the court with the entry of the Public Prosecutor.

The prosecution side arrayed itself on the right side of the judge while the accused were standing on his left side.

There were about fifteen chairs exactly in front of the judge. They were occupied by other lawyers who had come for pleading some other cases. Behind the chairs were the rows of benches meant for common people. These benches were occupied by the supporters of the accused side. The sympathizers of the plaintiffs stood in the vacant space behind the government pleader.

Some journalists had also arrived. They were struggling hard to position themselves at a point from where they could hear the argumentation of both the sides and take notes.

The schools were closed today due to some holiday. For many days, this case had been adorning the front pages of newspapers. The news regarding today's argument had also appeared in bold headlines. Some children had also accompanied their parents to the court just out of curiosity. They were bewitched by the court scenes they watched usually in TV serials and feature films. Within minutes the lawyers took the case to its logical conclusion. Today they had come to have a live and firsthand experience of court proceedings.

The elders allowed the children to see the wordy duel of the lawyers.

An eerie silence prevailed all over the atmosphere in the court as the government pleader started his arguments. All present there held their breaths as if he was going to unveil some great mystery of the world.

First of all the government pleader described the background of the families of Ved and Mohan Lal: their native place; when and why they came to settle here in Mayanagar; what was common in them and now what was the cause of so fatal an acrimony which had poisoned their fraternal bonds to this formidable extent.

Then he narrated the whole incident in detail as to who were present in the Kothi at that time; which accused hit whom at which place and with what weapon; what was looted; who from among the accused was or were nabbed and when and what was recovered from their possession.

The government pleader was reading out all these facts from the case file. His occasional stammering was irritating everybody.

After five minutes people got restless. The most restless were the children. They started whispering to each other. This was all they had already read from the newspapers. What was new in it? They thought and shared their irritation with each other.

"Papa is this called argumentation?" A child who could not contain his restlessness to himself asked his father.

"Be silent! Sh....," the father silenced the child by rebuking him. The child was child after all. Out of innocence he did not know that raising a finger of suspicion at the proceedings could mount to the contempt of court and it was a cognizable offence.

The child was scared. He tried to understand the next portion of the argumentation.

The government pleader heightened his tone which was blended with fury.

He started castigating Pankaj and Neeraj. He also described in detail the contract of murder called *supari*, given to the contractor Ram Lubhaya by the rich brothers as also the details of conspiracy hatched by them on mobile phone. He also showed the registration of their names in the factory registers. Then he read out the confessional statements of the contractor and his nephew.

He told the court that the investigation was incomplete as yet and that the accused had not co-operated the police during investigation. Without intensive interrogation, the conspiracy hatched by them could not be unveiled.

The accused were very rich. Left outside they would pressurise the witnesses with the influence of their affluence or get those, who did not oblige them, eliminated. They must remain in custody till the witnesses had appeared in the court.

After his argumentation was over, the government pleader allowed Ramnath to put his version. He could make the position more clear if he so desired.

Ramnath had nothing to say beyond what Sudershan had already said. His presentation of the case was quite comprehensive. Ramnath nodded his head in the negative.

"There are no interesting questions and answers that we see in the films," a child asked another. Another put this innocent question further to his father.

The father who was afraid of being rebuked by any of the court orderlies, rebuked the child saying,

“It goes like this only in the real courts. Films do not show reality. But do not make a noise. Listen silently to everything that is going on or go outside if you can’t keep quiet.”

The children became silent.

Babu Nand Lal also started his argumentation with the background of both the families. But his purport behind the description of their background was different from that of the Public Prosecutor.

It was Mohan Lal’s love for his brother that he helped him become a millionaire from his humble position of a clerk. Had there been any foul intention in his mind, he would have thrown him out of his life as Vibhishan was thrown out of Lanka by Ravana. Litigation between the uncle and his nephews was of a routine nature only. There was hardly any family in Mayanagar which was not involved in any property dispute. A plot of land worth ten lacs did not mean much to Pankaj and Neeraj. In spite of the ongoing civil litigation, both the families had good relations. They still shared joys and sorrows of each other and exchanged pleasantries on festive occasions. Had Ved been in a position to speak, he would never have dragged his nephews to the court. It was only his relative who was dragging them on the thorny ground due to his ulterior motives. The motive was very clear – he wants to mint money.

The proofs concocted by the police to fleece my millionaire clients, too carried no weight at all. Not two or four, but thousands of rods were manufactured daily in the factory of the accused. A rod could be obtained for just fifty rupees. And the market was flooded with such rods. One could purchase such a rod from anywhere in the market. Where is the proof, that the rod used in the incident was given to the Thekedar by Pankaj? Not even a fool would use the weapon of his own trademark for committing a crime. These boys are well-educated and not the ones to commit such a folly. Thousands of bags, resembling those recovered from the site, were distributed by Pankaj to his workers. Some of these might have reached Ved’s house also. How could it be said that the recovered bags were

given to the contractor by Neeraj? The contractor was in police custody. He could be made to make any entries in his diary by the police. Mobile phone did not belong to Pankaj. It was a phone set with a prepaid cash-card. Anybody could purchase such a phone from the open market. On what ground it was being said that mobile phone belonged to Neeraj? It was gross lie. A conspiracy was hatched against his clients.

Both the accused had joined the investigation and answered each and every query of the police. They had told whatever they knew. The hearing of the case would spread over the years. The educated boys could not be made to languish in jail merely on the basis of suspicion. The law favoured bail more than jail.

Nand Lal's harangue had substance in it. The people gathered in the court room were listening to him with rapt attention. Most of them agreed to him at heart. If the accused were sent to jail, it would be damaging to their business and prestige. They would not be able to show their face to anybody. Moreover, accustomed to sleeping in air-conditioned rooms they would not be able to spend a single night in the mosquito-infested jails. They would go sick or even mad. Of what use would it be if they were acquitted after keeping them jailed for a year? Nand Lal's arguments were convincing. They should be kept free till the final judgement was made.

"Babuji what is your view about the entry made by the gatekeeper of the factory," interrupting the argumentation, Sadhu Singh asked.

This was the only point to which Nand Lal had no answer. In his heart of hearts he was thankful to the government pleader who had not brought this point to the notice of the judge. Now that the judge had himself touched the weak nerve, he had to say something.

"The gate-keeper was kept in the unlawful custody of police for two days. He was forced to make an entry into the register by the police," he said.

"Why should police have bothered to do all this? Anyway, leave it. Do you have anything else to say?" the judge rejected Nand Lal's plea with a sarcastic smile.

This smile stung Nand Lal deeply. He grasped the attitude of the judge. To divert his attention from the real issue, he changed the topic.

“On the day of incident the accused were there in Delhi. The sitting MP of the city was accompanying them. Their attendance was marked at the residence of the Union Minister. Their clinical tests were conducted at the hospital of international repute. All the documents were attached with the application. Had the accused hatched the conspiracy, their heart beat would have become fast. Blood pressure would have gone high. But they were quite normal. It was only because of a clear conscience,” the defence counsel said.

“Why did they go to hospital if they were normal? The test-reports do not indicate any ailment worth the name. Then why did they go in for tests? Just to prepare solid proofs of their absence from the city? They seem to be properly tutored by some seasoned lawyer,” once again Sadhu Singh pooh-pooed the arguments of Nand Lal and in lighter vein hinted at the complicity of senior lawyer in the conspiracy. Obviously he hinted at Nand Lal.

It brought a smile on the faces of other lawyers. But Nand Lal’s face started looking lack luster.

“I don’t say they were directly involved in the incident. They are accused of conspiracy only. One can go anywhere after hatching the conspiracy. The medical tests and MP’s company are not going to help you at all. Rather these things may go against you,” said Sadhu Singh.

Sadhu Singh was coming up with the arguments which should otherwise be coming from the government pleader.

The Public Prosecutor was feeling abashed at the points raised by the judge. The judge doubted his integrity. However, he was happy as he had become silent after narrating the story of the case. In fact, the arguments made by the judge should have been made by him. But he had failed to perform his genuine duty. By doing so, he had digested ten thousand and the party could not blame him in any way now.

The judge had solved his predicament by raising the required points himself. The decision of the judge seemed very

clear. The government pleader saw his victory in the cancellation of bail application. Cancellation or no cancellation, he would benefit in both the cases.

"I've brought along some judgements with me. Should I quote, if your Honour permits me?" As Nand Lal said so, the junior lawyers started handing him books from the table.

"No, no. Leave it. Sorry. In my opinion this case does not deserve anticipatory bail. Let the police complete its investigation," the judge pronounced his decision immediately.

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"It's foolish to expect justice from such a coward judge. Thinks that he is very honest! Afraid of his own disrepute he would deprive a rich party of its right to justice. This is injustice altogether." Thus mumbling Nand Lal started attributing the adverse decision to the honesty of the judge.

"Don't worry boys. There are many courts above this one. They are not afraid of newspaper headlines. We'll appeal at the higher level," he said.

Without taking anybody into confidence, Nand Lal fished out his mobile phone from his pocket and started dialing the number of Sunder Singh, Senior Advocate of the High Court.

"I'm contacting Sunder Singh. He's a top lawyer of criminal cases. On half of the judgements in our law books, we find his name. If he accepts your case, take it as done. We should engage him well before the other party hires him," said Nand Lal.

Bell was heard ringing on the other end but nobody was coming to the line. Meanwhile, Nand Lal started enumerating the qualities of Sunder Singh once again.

"He was Advocate General in the former government. Many of the High Court Judges have been recruited at his recommendation. He will himself become a judge in the High Court after the change of government. There the judges and lawyers have their own respective cliques. Some lawyer is nephew to a judge; some other is a co-disciple of the same religious master; sometimes the lawyer and judge have been class mates. Judges behavior varies according to their

relationship with the lawyer. If the lawyer belongs to the judge's own clique, his client is saved even from the noose. But if he belongs to the other group, his client, acquitted even ten years back is thrown back into the dungeon. The lawyer, I am trying to contact has a knack of maintaining cordiality with all the groups. He accepts only solid cases and gets his work done by using all kinds of ways and means from any kind of judges."

The hearts of Ajay and his friends started beating faster at what Nand Lal said about the charismatic lawyer lest they should miss his services. They became eager to hire this lawyer as early as possible.

At last the call matured and Sunder Singh picked up the receiver at the other end.

"Oh, *yaar*, we have a judge here.... Sadhu Singh. He's Sadhu only by name, otherwise he is a big hypocrite. He has rejected my application for anticipatory bail only because my client is quite rich.....They are my own men. We have to get their work done. They will be reaching you by evening. Take them as accompanied by me. Do not keep them waiting for long and free them at the earliest possible. Charge reasonably. Work has to be done by all means. Use your good offices if need be. The party is quite reliable. There is no possibility of any leakage. This is my guarantee," recommending thus his clients to Sunder Singh, Nand Lal took out a visiting card from his pocket and giving it to Ajay said,

"Sunder Singh has told that the division bench of judges which is hearing the applications now-a-days consists of his very intimate friends. These judges have to be transferred after two days. The judges, who would replace them, are very fussy. This is the most suitable time. So push off right today."

Nand Lal was eager to ensure that the party should reach Sunder Singh as early as possible. Sunder Singh would take fifty five thousand as his fees. Half of it would reach Nand Lal while sitting at home. He earned as much overhead income as commission from High Court lawyers, as he earned from his own practice. Here, he had to bother his brains a lot as the cases continued for years together before being finally decided. But

the commission was an easy and comfortable income without doing anything.

"I'll send my junior with you. It will facilitate your job in every way."

Nand Lal wanted to rule out every possibility of his clients moving this or that way.

"I'm with them, Babuji. I'm getting the copy of orders prepared. As soon as the copy is ready, we'll set out for Chandigarh".

Singla, who was busy explaining the implications of the order to Pankaj and two of his supporters, had been listening to Nand Lal simultaneously. He understood well the inherent message of Nand Lal's advice. Very cleverly he had informed Sunder Lal that the party was rich. He could also decode his words "charge reasonably" which meant the other way round. He had also thrown a hint that the party could be charged in the name of judges as well. But sending a junior with the party was tantamount to harming Singla's own bread and butter.

Singla, too, was second to none in these things. After all, he was the pupil of Nand Lal. He made his timely intrusion as he saw the game slipping from his own hands.

"All right. In case there is any problem, just give me a ring. I'll make him charge reasonably."

Before leaving for the other court, Nand Lal patted Singla's back. Singla could not understand the mystery of this pat.

The copy of the judgement had to pass through so many hands. The steno had to type it. The judge had to check and rectify it. The steno had to type it again. Then it was to be signed by the judge. Thereafter it was to reach the reader who had to send it to the court clerk after recording it in his register. The court clerk would then send it to the copy clerk. The copy clerk had to prepare the copy which was to be signed by the reader. Then the orderly had to stamp it. Then again it would come to the copy-clerk to be recorded in the register. Then it would be ready for handing over to the lawyer.

If this process were allowed to be completed in due course of time, it would take at least one month. But Singla wanted it within one hour. The apprehension of the party's falling into

the hands of some other intermediary troubled Singla more than even Nand Lal. Singla wanted to set out for Chandigarh as early as possible.

All the officials involved in preparing the copy, before serving it to the lawyer, had a fixed fees of fifty rupees each. If the copy was to be acquired by Nand Lal, these rates would have gone double or even triple. He had to keep the lion's share to himself and pay the officials their fixed due only.

Singla's gaze was fixed on fifty thousand instead of five hundred at present.

"It's two as yet. We cannot move out before four. Nor will it be of any good to go early. The lawyers can be contacted only after seven. They take rest for about two hours after returning from the court. Then they sit in the office. We'll start from here at four or four thirty. You can do something else during these two hours and pick me up at four from here. By that time I'll get the copy prepared."

Singla was ready to accompany Pankaj and others even without having been asked to go with them.

'There is no use talking to the party about the lawyer to be hired at Chandigarh. I'm going with them and during the two-hour journey the party has to be steered from Sunder Singh to any other lawyer. If I succeed in coaxing the party, twenty thousands are sure. If not, let it be a fun-trip only.'

Singla drifted into reverie. He called Sadhu Singh's orderly to himself and said to him in most pleasing words by patting him on the shoulder. "Look dear brother, with you in the saddle, I should not be let down. I want to get the copy by four." "I will do it earlier *Janab!* Don't worry," said the orderly in a bid to bow towards Singla's knees as a mark of respect.

Singla called Ajay to himself and said, "Listen.....steno, reader..., *ahelmad*, they all are five in total. Give him five, nay, six hundred rupees...He himself will distribute each one's share to him."

"Well, now you have to get it done yourself. The order must reach my cabin in time," Singla warned the orderly and then started explaining an orderly's power to Ajay.

"Now you see how fast he does everything. He would not

move an inch from near the seat of the concerned official until he does the needful. Moreover, he goes to the judge very frequently. He will get our order signed first of all. It can reach us any time."

They decided to meet at four and dispersed.

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During journey, they kept talking about miscellaneous issues. But as they came half way through, Singla touched the topic of his interest.

"Are we going straightway to Sunder Singh or any other name could also be considered?"

"As you deem fit. We should be concerned only with our work."

So far, Ajay, Pankaj and Satish had a mind to act upon Nand Lal's advice only. If Singla wanted to go somewhere else, then it could also be considered.

Ajay knew many senior advocates. One of Satish's relatives was a magistrate. His father-in-law was a renowned advocate. His name was seen in print media every other day. Both of them wanted to go to their known lawyers but feared from within lest they should earn a bad name like in the lower court. This case was a serious one. Let Pankaj go as advised by Babuji.

"Hiring a well-known lawyer doesn't mean that the work will be done by all means. It depends on so many factors. If the case is strong enough, then even a raw-hand like me also wins it. Otherwise, the most expensive lawyers like Nand Lal also fail. Sunder Singh is experienced and seasoned enough. There is no doubt about it. He has intimate relations with the judges. That is also right. But due to the mind-boggling number of cases that he has to deal with, he has no time to attend each and every case properly. There are thirty courts in the High Court and he has two to three cases to look after in each court. Since he is the most wanted advocate, every client draws him towards his court. Once struck in a court, it is very difficult to pull him out from there. All other cases are dealt with by juniors like me.

Of course, Babuji has asked him to give us a patient hearing

but you'll see he won't have time to talk to us. He will hardly spare two minutes for us and that too till the fees is settled. Then he will ask us to tell the whole case to his junior. And junior is a junior after all. In High Court, the drafting of application is most important. The judges form their opinions by reading the application only. It becomes very difficult to change the opinion once formed. Sunder Singh has no time to dictate the matter of application. He only tells some important points to his juniors. Rest is done by them. They might miss many a point. If everything has to be done by the juniors, why pay for the senior advocate?"

Singla confined his discourse on the shortcomings of Sunder Singh.

"Did you hear Babuji talking over the phone? He gave many obnoxious hints that the party is rich." Now Sunder Singh will demand one lac as fees. He is a very obstinate type of a person. He won't get down a bit once he tells his fees. Then Babuji said, "Talk to the judge" Having taken his own fees Sunder Singh will come out with the fees of the judge. And we shall be bound to pay whatever he demands in the name of the judge.

After talking at length about Sunder Singh, Singla started slinging mud at Nand Lal.

"Nothing is lost yet, I say. Let's hire some other advocate of his caliber."

Ajay expressed his agreement to Singla's proposal. Earlier, he had made Panakaj hire Nand Lal whose performance had been far from being satisfactory. Through undue expenditure, he had simply brought a bad name to Ajay. If Sunder Singh, too, behaved like Nand Lal, Ajay would become more open to disfavor. He did not like to earn himself a bad name.

"Our case is not that much complicated. At lower level print media became the biggest hurdle in our way. Such pressures do not work at High Court level. At the very first hearing bail for one and a half month will be granted. By that time we shall see that some compromise is made with the involvement of some common relatives. After making some expenditure, we shall make the police investigate the case in our favour. Thus we shall be proved innocent. What has a senior lawyer to do in it?" said Singla.

“To which advocate we should go now according to your view?” Satish knew some lawyers. If Singla named any one of them, they had nothing against it.

“I have tested my mentor Jagjit Singh several times. He has been a professor in Law College and has a great command on law. He is an adept hand at analysing each and every point related to the case. He shot into prominence soon after he started practice after leaving professorship. Moreover, he is very close to the Chief Minister. The Chief Minister wanted to appoint him as Advocate General. But he refused, saying that he would not join government service. Almost fifty percent of High Court lawyers have been his students. Their voices get choked while speaking before him. I have full access to him. He will dictate the application himself; not much problem in fees. I think we should at least consult him before going anywhere else. If he does not suit us, we’ll go to Sunder Singh.

Singla wanted to win over the party before entering Chandigarh.

“Well, should we turn the vehicle towards the professor’s residence?” Singla asked Pankaj.

During this one and a half hour journey Pankaj had been sitting silently. He did not know what the friends, sitting close by, were talking about. He was lost in his own world of disturbing thoughts. Sometimes he visualized himself being arrested by the police; sometimes, he had the vision of being taken round the city bazaars in handcuffed position. The scenes of Hindi films flashed on the screen of his mind and he saw himself operating a stone mill or breaking stone in *chequered* white clothes like a cine hero.

“Which Professor? “As if awakened from a deep slumber, Pankaj asked.

“Which lawyer shall we hire Sunder Singh or Jagjit Singh?” briefing about the merits and demerits of both the legal luminaries, Satish had left the decision of choice making on Pankaj.

“First of all we shall go to Partap Singh uncle. Before leaving for Chandigarh, I had talked to him. He has advised me to consult him before proceeding further in this case. He must be

waiting for us. First we'll go to him and then decide further," Pankaj replied.

Ajay and Satish felt relieved at this reply while Singla felt dispirited. The whole citadel of his plan had collapsed.

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On the way they received a phone call from Partap Singh. He was waiting for them at the residence of advocate Vasudeva.

Vasudeva gave them a warm reception.

Partap Singh was waiting for them in the guest house on the second floor. Pankaj was sent to him. Rest of them was seated in Vasudeva's office. By the time Partap Singh and Pankaj have tete-a-tete, Singla was supposed to apprise Vasudeva of the case and assist him in dictating the application.

The room where Partap Singh was sitting had a capacity to accommodate six persons only. Two two-seater sofas were arrayed opposite to each other with a central table between them. On both the sides were lying old fashioned chairs made of rosewood . The room was so faintly lighted that they could hardly recognize each other's face. The remnants of snacks on the table indicated some bacchanalian party was held a little before in the room.

Partap Singh welcomed Pankaj by getting up from his seat. He made him sit on the chair adjacent to his and prepared a peg for him.

"I'm sorry we could not succeed at the Sessions court. I tried my best but nobody could accommodate us," Partap Singh regretted his failure at the lower level.

"Now we look upon you only, Sir," Pankaj cringed before Partap Singh by touching his knees.

"Don't worry, my son. Now you see how I trigger the whole course of events. The judges of the bench, hearing bail applications, are good friends of mine. We can call both of them here. Let's finish with this job first. Then I'll make you sit with them over a goblet of whisky."

"We are dependent only on you."

"Tell me if you haven't hired any lawyer so far."

"No sir, how could we do so without taking you into confidence?"

“Good! We’ll engage Vasudeva. He is the real nephew of the Law Minister. The brother-in-law of his paternal aunt is a judge in the Supreme Court. Both of them pay a visit here every one or two months. The judges follow the hint. Nobody dares go against him. He is my confident. I am going to become High Court Judge within a year. We cannot open up with every lawyer; otherwise they tend to blackmail you later on. This lawyer will suit us in every respect.”

“As you like.”

“We can’t sit here for long. Many judges keep coming here to see him. At eight I have to go to the club. I have fixed an appointment with your judges. We should not keep them waiting for long. I’ve familiarized Vasudeva with your case. In fact, the work has to be done with my word of recommendation and your money. Then why should we let the very senior lawyers fleece us?”

“Right Sir.”

“How much amount have you brought along?”

Finishing the first and preparing the second peg, Partap Singh asked Pankaj.

“One lac. Money is no problem sir. I have a number of relatives here.”

“Enough for today. We have to pay fifty five thousand to Vasudeva including his clerk’s fees, typing expenses, everything. If he demands more, say, uncle has ordered us this much only.”

“As you order, Sir.”

“What’s your further programme? Would you talk to the judges?”

“As you deem proper, Sir. We’re concerned only with our work. Get it done the way you like, please.”

“Look! The bench consists of two judges. The junior one is a very good friend of mine. He will gladly accept whatever I give him. We’ll give him one *peti*. He himself will talk to the senior judge. He will take at the most, one *peti*. This is the minimum fees.”

“It does not matter, sir. You are not going to let anybody overcharge us, I know. But, sir, is there a surety of success?”

"This is no work at all. I got those works done which one can't even imagine. In your own city, you know, there are about one dozen marriage palaces on Ferozepur Road. They are in the vicinity of military cantonment. There is an ordnance depot in the cantonment area. It's worth millions. Just one lighted match stick, and the whole Mayanagar city will turn into a heap of ash, the loss of millions' worth property apart. The civil authorities got the palaces built by accepting bribes. The journalists raked this issue in the press for furthering their own vested interests. They described it as a violation of military rules as the palaces were built within a radius of one kilometer from the ordnance depot. The owners were at their wit's end to think of their colossal loss if the government took cudgels against them. They approached the civil authorities and reminded them of the bribe given to them. But what could the authorities do? It was a question of country's defence. They could not help them out. As ill luck would have it, such an ordnance depot in Rajasthan caught fire. This issue of the security of Mayanagar depot escalated still further. The officers started trying to demolish the palaces. Someone referred my name to the palace-owners. I hobnobbed in my own way and got them stay orders from the judges. Till date the government has not been able to do any harm to the palace-owners. For two-three years I will see that no hearing is made on this case. By that time the issue will cool down. I didn't let military or government do anything against my wishes. What is your work before such cases?"

"Nothing, Sir. I agree to what you say."

"When will two *petis* reach?"

"Whenever you wish, Sir."

"Send by tomorrow evening. Hearing will be made a day after. You will see how your anticipatory bail is granted. And that too, without hearing the other side."

"*Petis* will certainly reach you, sir....Now which club are you going to?"

"Let's first get our work done by the judges. Then I'll introduce them to you. Don't be in so much haste."

"No Sir, I don't mean this. I was asking, so that I could pay the bill."

"Why are you putting me to shame? Can't your uncle pay even the club-bill?"

"You have to spend a lot. Keep it please," To express his indebtedness to Partap Singh, Pankaj placed a packet of currency notes worth fifty thousand before him.

"Doesn't matter.....leave it," Saying so Partap Singh first placed the money under the table and then slipped it into his pocket.

Then Partap Singh prepared an extra-large peg.

"Well, are you getting some help from the police or not?" said Partap Singh after a brief silence.

"Not much."

"You first get bailed out. Then I'll arrange this also for you. IG crime branch is my friend. I'll get the application typed from the advocate and get it marked by the police chief to him. By getting the case investigated from him I'll get you excluded from it."

"Is this also possible?" Pankaj could not believe the words of the drunken officer.

"Everything is possible. Money is a very powerful force, you know. Law is a slave unto it. Go on watching what comes ahead," under the influence of liquor, Partap Singh was promising moon to Pankaj.

"Who is the IG crime?"

"He is my friend. When I was posted as Magistrate in Amritsar, he had joined there as newly recruited A.S.P. Both of us were bachelors and used to live in the officers Hostel. Then we were again together at Patiala. He was SSP there and I was the Sessions Judge. Again, together we enjoyed our life. did all fair or foul. I acquitted several persons at his bidding and he too booked many persons or released some on a word from my side. Our friendship still persists. He is a bit greedy, but sincere by pen. If he makes a commitment, he would definitely fulfill it, come what may."

Pankaj felt relieved at the comforting words of the judicial officer. In Partap Singh, he seemed to have got a magic wand which would dispel all his crises like mist before the sun.

As he finished the third peg a call came from Vasudeva's office. He wanted to say that the papers were ready. Pankaj

should come, put his signatures on them and be free.

“When are you meeting me then with the remaining part of payment? In this bloody graft business there is no credit. Everybody demands in advance,” Pankaj had got up to go downstairs. To make doubly sure, Partap Singh asked him once again.

“Tomorrow morning. Before ten a.m.”

“Very Good! We’ll give them their fees tomorrow and get the orders a day after.”

Partap Singh’s words were not only soothing but intoxicating as well for Pankaj, as he was coming downstairs.

41

Ramnath’s problems multiplied manifold immediately after the *Bhog ceremony* was over.

Kamal’s friends, Neha’s chums, their parents, everybody was alienated from the bereaved family. Earlier, the friends of both the children would flock to the hospital and consoled the patients, sitting by their sides for hours together. The parents supported Ramnath in the hectic outdoor activity. Someone had access to the doctor and some other knew the SSP. There was no need to wander from pillar to post. They would get the required information just by making a telephone call from their respective homes.

The last prayers put an end to these facilities as well.

Now very rarely anybody would come to enquire about their well-being in the hospital. Most of the people come on holidays only. The near and dear ones from Mayanagar visited at night. It served two purposes-their evening stroll and good will visit to the hospital.

In fact, *Bhog* implies snapping all links with the deceased. That is why perhaps, Kamal’s friends had severed all relations with his surviving relatives. Neha’s friends had busied themselves in preparing for their house tests. They fulfilled their duties by enquiring about her well-being over telephone only. It was natural for the outstation relatives to resume their daily routine. The condition of patients was getting stable day by day. These were long-term treatments. Their daily visits did no good

to the patients, but caused a lot of botheration to the others attending upon them. They had to extend all hospitality by serving tea or coffee for the elders and cold drinks, chips or chocolates for the children. Every time a hundred rupee note would vanish like anything. With this logic, they had stopped coming to Mayanagar.

The locals of Mayanagar, too, thought on similar lines. By giving their respective phone numbers and with a promise to reach at once when needed, they sat comfortably at their homes.

As the days rolled by, the close relatives also started feeling restless. Sitting idle at Pallavi's house for the last five days Sushma felt ill at ease.

Pallavi and her parents were doing all their best for Neha. The arguments given by them to console Neha were quite alien to Sushma. She had never read or even heard such things. Feeling distressed at the loss of virginity was described as a conservative and feudal thinking of medieval times, when woman was no better than a slave. If Sagar was deserting her in spite of her innocence and helplessness, then he was a man with a rusted mind. In such a case Neha herself should reject him as he did not deserve her. Even the practice of remaining tethered to one man and being loyal to him throughout life had also become out dated. The modern girls loved one person, married another and produced children from some third person. Neha was an educated girl and capable enough to have her own footing in life. There was no shortage of good matches for her.

Kamal's family had suffered an irreparable loss due to his death. But nobody can die with the dead. Neha must gather courage now and help her parents in bearing the loss with fortitude. She should understand her new responsibilities and be prepared to discharge them.

She need not rise up in arms against the killers. The courts were there to punish the guilty. The success of the case depends entirely on Neha. She should fight a legal battle and pave the path of the accused to the gallows.

These were the persuasive arguments made by Pallavi's parents and Neha was receiving their impact as well. She was

getting stable day by day at the psychological level.

With a professor and engineer already playing the parental role for Neha, a primary school teacher, like Sushma, was not needed at all.

There were two servants in the house for the household work. There was nothing that could justify Sushma's stay there any longer. Moreover, Pallavi did not allow a guest to do any work. These thoughts made Sushma feel that she was simply a burden on this family.

Tired and exhausted, one day she sought permission for paying a visit to her in-laws. She had come to know about the incident all of a sudden and rushed off to Mayanagar leaving her house as it was. Her husband, she thought, was a carefree type of man who least bothered about the house. Due to his carefree attitude, the condition of her household must have worsened. At least she would set her house in order and get her leave sanctioned with retrospective effect and extend her leave up to the *Bhog* ceremony.

When Sushma did not turn up even after several days, Seema and Sujata also became anxious to get rid of the unpleasant situation. They were looking after Neelam. Normally nobody was allowed to enter ICU, but whenever Neelam had fits at odd nocturnal hours, she became uncontrollable for the nurses on duty. Then two-three women were required to assist the staff. With a little bit of negligence, the tubes connected to her body would get displaced and it could prove fatal.

Thus, keeping in view the condition of the patient the doctor had allowed the entry of two women in the unit. So long as Neelam was kept in ICU, she needed the services of Seema and Sujata. Now that she had been shifted to the General ward, she did not have any fits. She neither heard any voice nor followed any signal. She was just like a living corpse only.

For the last ten years, Seema had been sleeping on the hospital floors. The lavatories of General ward were stinking. She had not, since, been able to clear her bowels. She had never missed her bath, but here she had to skip it even for two days at stretch. She found her clothes and body exuding foul smell. Seema had a routine of cleaning her teeth with a *Neem datun*.

With irregularity in this habit of personal hygiene a bitter taste always lingered in her mouth. As a result she did not feel like eating anything. Her breath emitted foul smell. She could sleep hardly for an hour or two at night. She had lost her appetite and the market food was slowly turning her into a gastric patient. Insomnia was causing permanent headache to her. Her aching body required rest now failing which she, too, was likely to get bed-ridden.

In view of the inconvenience being faced by the attendants, Ramnath made up his mind to book a special room for Neelam in the hospital. It would be comforting to all including the patient. The special rooms had the facility of attached bath-room and toilet. But he was taken aback as the cashier handed him the list of expenses for special room. Its daily rent was five hundred rupees i.e. five times that of the general ward. A single round of the doctor to the special room cost twelve hundred while it was one hundred in the general ward. Some altruist had got local telephone installed in the ward for the facility of patient's attendants who could make a phone call free of charge from there. But a single phone call cost five rupees in the special room.

At that time Seema had dissuaded Ramnath from hiring special room. Heat or cold meant nothing to Neelam, whether in general ward or special room. The attendants could pass their time this way or that way. There was no need to make so much extra expenditure. But now she was feeling it most difficult to spend time in the General ward. To avoid any other calamity in the guise of a disease, Seema was advised to go to Neelam's house where Sangeeta spent most of her time. She would not have to do anything there as a maidservant was already working there. Seema and Sangeeta would only sit with the people coming for condolence or cater to the needs of the Pandit delivering his sermon in the house.

The very mention of Neelam's house made Seema shudder to the spine. The very thought of going there conjured in her mind the macabre spectacle of rape and murder. She recalled her last visit to this house when all the members of the family had given her an over whelming welcome. She had seen

Neelam's family making fun and frolic in this very house. But in the changed scenario, she would not be able to spend even a minute in that house. She would better stay in the hospital than go there.

For Neelam, it was all the same. Whether someone stayed near her or not mattered nothing to her. She was put on glucose which was also a means of feeding and administering medicine to her. This was for the nurse to see that the emptied glucose bottle was replaced with the new one. There was no point in detaining ailing Seema in the hospital.

She left for her place that day and came only on the day of *Bhog* ceremony. Even on that day nobody offered to stay for a few days in Mayanagar. Like remote relatives they came and returned in the evening.

Ramnath had nothing against his sisters having gone back to their respective families. Despite being educated they were puppets in the hands of their in-laws. They must be having the pressure of their in-laws on them. They could not afford to help others by spoiling their own family life. However, they had devoted as much time, as they easily could. There was no grouse against them.

But Ramnath felt deeply anguished when his real brothers started turning their face away.

After immersion of Kamal's ashes in the holy Ganges, Ashwini was sent home. His wife Anita was in the family way and running eighth month. She was feeling a lot of difficulty in moving about. The mental tension resulting from loneliness at this stage was likely to have an adverse effect on the mental health of the yet unborn child. Ramnath and Mangat Rai were staying in Mayanagar. Someone must be there to look after the home. Anita was taking care of all domestic responsibilities. Ashwini used to go home every alternative day and fulfilled the needs of all the three families. But after the *Bhog* day, Ashwini also stopped coming to Mayanagar.

Mangat Rai did come once or twice but thereafter he, too, started making excuses. His department, he said, was working on war-footing to supply new power line to the village of the Chief Minister's sister-in-law under the pretext of illuminating

the village by the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev. The anniversary was approaching fast but the poles had not been installed so far. The department had disallowed leave to all the employees. Those, already on leave had been called on duty. Mangat was not asked to give any explanation for the long leave availed by him but a lot of bickering had taken place of course. Sometimes, he had to attend night duty. The children felt scared in his absence. Under this plea he called back Sujata also.

Ashwini had no such excuse to rely on. He was a stenotypist. There were many other clerks who could operate a typewriter in his office. He had never before availed a long leave. No officer would refuse leave on such a grim occasion. Ramnath was a lawyer for many Panchayat disputes. He knew Ashwini's boss, the Block Development Officer, very well. He could easily make him sanction Ashwini's leave.

When Ramnath showed the audacity of asking Ashwini to stay at Mayanagar, he plainly said, "You are very much here already. What has the entire family to do in Mayanagar? When you feel like taking a respite, tell me. Then I'll come."

42

How should Ramnath tell his well-educated brothers that he, too, had a family to care for? This was his dilemma at present.

Ashwini and his wife were government officials. They had a steady salary to depend on. Anita had got a maternity leave for six months which could be extended for a year. They were to get full salary and reimbursement of maternity expenditure, just sitting at home, without doing anything.

But Ramnath's legal practice was a sort of private business only. There was a cut-throat competition in this field. A day's absence of the lawyer could fall heavy on him. And Ramnath had been away from his practice for the last twenty days.

It was tolerable up to the *Bhog* ceremony. He had got everybody's cooperation till that day.

The clients waited for him patiently, thinking that he was passing through a very crucial phase. Three-four days this way or that way did not matter much.

But when he did not turn up even a week after the *Bhog* ceremony, the clients raised a hue and cry.

Someone's relative was languishing in jail. Bail was not being granted due to the absence of lawyer. Someone rued over the return of his hardly managed witnesses without deposition. The client-least bothered about the expenditure made on the witnesses. What they apprehended most was that till next hearing, the other side could lure the witnesses away from them.

Some accused were being severely castigated by the judge. The case had come up for arguments. If the lawyer did not appear at the next date, the judge was likely to decide the case on the basis of arguments of other side. The client had come to ask Ramnath categorically whether he would come for argument or not.

The client's grudges were genuine on their own side.

During the last twenty days, Ramnath had visited the courts only once. He had expressed his compulsiveness by going to the chamber of each judge. Every judge had shared his sympathy with Ramnath and assured fullest cooperation to him.

Kehar Singh had taken upon himself the responsibility of settling Ramnath's cases. Wherever possible, bail would be obtained and where it was inevitable important witnesses would be made to appear. A little bit of argument would be made and to avert elaborate argumentation some application would be lodged. Thus Ramnath's clients would have nothing to complain of. This is what Kehar Singh had assured Ramnath.

In lieu of this magnanimous cooperation, Ramnath had given a free hand to Kehar Singh and promised him fifty percent of what any of his clients would pay in his absence. Kehar Singh would start the initial proceedings, while Ramnath would take over the case later on.

Each and every advocate of his city had come to share his grief with him. The Bar Association has officially passed a condolence motion in a specially convened meeting. A copy of the motion was sent to him at Mayanagar. Through another motion it was demanded from the government that the real accused should be apprehended as early as possible. One day strike was held in support of their demand. The Bar Association

had assured Ramnath that every member was ready to pursue the case by going to Mayanagar.

It seemed that these assurances had died with an end to the last rites of Kamal.

The judges had started intimidating the clients and they demanded the presence of their lawyer at the next hearing.

Kehar Singh had started demanding fees for pleading his cases and making the witness depose in the court.

The advocates of opposition side had started demanding compensation for the expenses incurred on their witnesses without deposition.

Even Ramnath's own Munshi had started betraying him. He had started taking the new clients of Ramnath to Surinder Mohan rather than to Kehar Singh. Kehar Singh gave him only the fees of a clerk while he got one third of share from Surinder Mohan's fees.

This unhappiness was expressed by Kehar Singh, as well as the clients caught in Surinder Mohan's trap.

But Ramnath could do nothing but put up with the ways of the world with a sense of surrender.

The Munshi had been working under him for ten years. He was familiar with all the clients and was conversant with the weak points of every case. If chastised, he would take the whole business to some other lawyer.

Due to his being away from his base, his business had come down at least by fifty percent.

What to speak of new, even the old cases were slipping out. This business required the personal presence of the lawyer most urgently.

Some advocates started spreading rumours to allure his clients to their cabins. Someone would say that Ramnath had given up practicing law as he had to look after the property of his sister in Mayanagar and manage the business of his brother-in-law. Ramnath was sure that some of them must have declared him as dead.

Along with his professional decline, it was also foreboding for Sanjeeta. She was receiving phone calls from her school, time and again. She was a mathematics teacher and her subject

was very important. The syllabus of her classes had lagged far behind. Some educated parents were coming with complaints against her. What would be the future of their children? A prolonged absence could even get her transferred from the city.

Sangeeta had got a city posting after a great deal of struggle. The teachers posted in villages were always on the lookout for such an opportunity. Some teachers had even approached the principle. If the principal gave a positive nod to them, they would get themselves transferred on Sangeeta's vacant' post. The principal had been kind enough to keep tackling the situation so far. A longer absence would force the things out of her hands. Sangeeta was advised to resume her duties and proceed on leave as the matter subsided a little.

Ramnath's children were sore over the loss of their studies as most of their time was spent in household chores.

But how could Ramnath do anything without any cooperation from his brothers?

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On one hand, Ramnath was worried by his family problems and on the other the police was tightening its noose on him.

For several days, the reader of the SHO was pressing hard for the payment of the photographer's bill. He had detained the photographs due to non-payment. He was also asked to arrange a draftsman for drawing a map of the site of incident.

This was, in fact, the responsibility of police. There were photographers and draftsmen posted especially for this purpose in the police lines. But they could not spare time from drawing the maps of their officers Kothis or taking snaps of their wives.

The private draftsmen and lens men were the minions of police and charged exorbitant rates. The people in distress were forced to pay what they demanded. Ramnath too did not want to displease the police just for a paltry sum of four hundred or five hundred. He paid off the bills as required by the police.

The SHO's reader was followed by the reader of Deputy Superintendent of Police. The DSP had called Ramnath to his office. He visited the office twice only to find the officer away

from his seat under the pretext of an important work.

Then the DSP himself came to the hospital.

"We have got a tip off that some of the accused have boarded the train for going to their native places. We have to capture them before the stolen material is disposed of," the DSP came to the real point after fulfilling the formality of enquiring about the well-being of the injured.

Ramnath took no time in understanding the purpose of the visit of DSP. Being a lawyer of criminal cases himself he was well conversant with the ways of police functioning.

He knew that the DSP would now ask him to accompany the police party to Bihar and if he himself could not go, he should send any other person. The ostensible purpose was to get the accused identified as also to identify the stolen property. The actual purpose was to enjoy the hospitality of the party en route to Bihar.

Ramnath had read in some newspaper recently that an industrialist of Mayanagar had financed air-travel for the police party for the recovery of his daughter's dowry articles from Bombay.

"What can I do for you?" asked Ramnath in spite of knowing what would be the answer.

"Accompany us to Bihar. You are a lawyer. Guide us in investigation and deal with the lawyers and magistrates in Bihar," the DSP said.

"I would like to be excused. Both the patients are in a critical condition. The girl too is not well."

"Send someone else if you can't go yourself"

"I'll try to convince somebody".

"If you can't do anything, arrange a vehicle for us. The SSP is pressing hard to send a police party as early as possible. There will be no use of going anywhere once the stolen material is distributed here and there."

Ramnath could read the message underlying his words. In the name of the recovery of stolen property he wanted to get expenses for the vehicle.

The accused were not foolish enough to rush to their villages after committing such a crime. Even the most stupid accused

would know that the police would first of all, swoop down on their houses.

The accused were residents of Bihar and there was no possibility of their running to that state. Moreover, they were not expected to have very good houses there. Who knows whether they had even muddy huts there or not?

No accused was expected to be apprehended from Bihar. How could one who accompanied the police know whether the captured person was the real culprit or he was just being implicated in the case? Even if someone was arrested, there was no chance of any recovery from him. If at all, the recovery was made, the valuables were likely to be dissipated by the police. Till the final decision of the case, property would keep lying in the store of the police station or the courts. The clothes would turn into shreds while passing through several hands; the gold would turn into brass.

Even if the real culprits were caught, it would not serve as a healing touch for Ramnath and his aggrieved relatives. The criminals were the hired goons. The real accused were Pankaj and Neeraj. And the police was reluctant to lay hands upon them.

Beside thinking of pros and cons of going to Bihar, Ramnath was also trying to find a way of getting rid of the police.

“Which vehicle would suit you?”

“Tata Sumo would do. It is a sturdy vehicle and being diesel driven, is economical also. Delicate vehicles like Maruti cannot travel that far.”

The DSP started enumerating the advantages of Tata Sumo vehicle.

At the rate of one thousand rupees daily it would amount to seven-eight thousands in a week or so. At least four to five thousands will be the expenditure for fuel. Adding to it the expenditure on the hospitality to be extended to the police party, the total expenditure would not be less than twenty thousand. Ramnath calculated in his mind.

“Okay I’ll come to your office in the evening after talking to other relatives,” saying this Ramnath shook hand with the DSP.

“Vakil Sahib! Don’t think too much. Arrange the vehicle and some person to accompany us. The accused cannot be nabbed by traveling in a passenger train,” piqued at the dilly dallying attitude of Ramnath, the DSP said.

This was new problem created by the police for Ved’s family. There was no spare person to be sent to Bihar. What to speak of sending to Bihar, there was none who could replace Ramnath to provide him a brief respite and stay in the hospital. He had been yearning to visit his family for the last five days.

So far as money was concerned, they were already hard up. The whole deposit lying in Neha’s bank account had been devoured by this expensive hospital. He was in no position to arrange for the recreation of cops by sending them to Bihar in a Tata Sumo.

Ramnath followed the middle path. He would neither send a man nor provide any vehicle. He would give only a certain amount to the police.

When Ramnath did not reach DSP’s office in the evening as promised, his reader came at night. Ramnath gave two thousand rupees to him.

The reader was angered at such a meager amount. He put the money back into Ramnath’s pocket in protest.

Before going back, the reader talked to the DSP over telephone. The officer asked his reader to accept whatever was being offered. It was an order from above. The police party will have to go to Bihar.

Since the reader had returned the money he found it hard to beg it again. The DSP however solved this issue. He talked to Ramnath on phone and said that he had rebuked the reader for his impudence. Since he understood Ramnath’s position, Ramnath should also try to understand the compulsions of police; and added that the police would accept what he would give willingly.

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Ramnath had hardly got rid of the DSP that messages from the SHO started reaching him.

He had not got the accused Thekedar and his nephew Pandit

identified by the witnesses even after more than twenty days since they were arrested. As per law they had to be identified immediately after having been arrested. Delay in identification was weakening the case for which the investigation officer was being held responsible. The SSP had issued him show cause notices thrice in this connection. He was not ready to spoil his record for nothing.

He was saying that since Neha was quite well now she should accompany the police to the jail and identify the accused standing in the midst of ten-fifteen other persons. If they were the actual culprits apprehended by the police she should tell who had killed Kamal, who had injured Ved and who had hit Neelam on the head?

The investigation officer and his colleagues were right from a legal perspective. The identification parade must be held as early as possible. But Ramnath had his own reservations regarding Neha's participation in the parade. He did not want to sprinkle salt on her wounds.

Though Neha looked apparently alright but she was very depressed. Ramnath had suggested her several times to visit her house which was quite cleaned now and purged of evil influences by holy recitations from scriptures. There was no point in sitting at the hospital indefinitely. After all, she would have to go home sooner or later.

But the very mention of that house shook her from within. The tears welled up in her eyes and then streamed down her cheeks.

For the last ten days she had been lying in the hospital inn like a sick dog. Sometimes Pallavi or her mother would take her to their home where she would feel relieved for a while. But in the hospital she would again be the same traumatised girl, staring at the walls with blank eyes.

How can a girl, who dreaded looking at her house could be made to stand before the murderers and rapists? Hell with such a law and justice! He could not fiddle with the sentiments of an emotionally devastated girl just for catering to the whims of a heartless law.

After a long deliberation, he unequivocally refused the

investigation officer on the plea that Neha was not in a position to participate in the parade.

Had some ordinary citizen refused participation in the parade, the investigation officer would well understand. But the very idea, that a criminal-lawyer should try to weaken the case by such a clear cut refusal, was beyond his comprehension.

"I'm going to put up a note in the police file that the eye-witness has refused to participate in the identification parade. Do you know what will be its consequences? Do not blame me later," the exasperated officer gave vent to his anger.

"Your identification parade is going to do no good at all. It can't help in punishing the accused. The whole case is sieved with loopholes. The law favours the accused. I can't sacrifice the poor girl over the dead legal formalities," Ramnath paid back the police officer in the same coin.

An irritated investigation officer felt offended and he was never again normal with Ramnath.

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Partap Singh's good offices worked wonders and the brothers got a stay on their arrest for fifteen days. The police chief marked their application to the IG crime, directing him to investigate the case personally.

Partap Singh made Pankaj sit with the IG and he himself gave him his fees. The IG gave him solid assurance that the investigation would not move further from where it was. Any further investigation will move in their favour. They will be declared innocent before the next hearing takes place. On the basis of this very report their interim bail will get regularized.

In compliance with the orders of the police chief, he got the file to his office from the district police.

On the first day of investigation, all the witnesses who had joined earlier were called again. The IG himself asked them to give an account of the incident.

On the second day, the investigation officer and *Munshi* verified the recovered property.

Next week, the statements of the witnesses produced by the accused in their defence were to be recorded.

During the intervening days the IG announced his personal visit to the site. It aimed at assessing the mood of the plaintiff side and their supporters in Mayanagar. He had to throw a hint of innocence of the accused by calling a press-conference. Next day he would assess the reaction of people over his statement to this effect based on reports published in the newspapers. The next course of action would depend on that reaction. But the excitement over the stay on the arrest of the conspirators and inquiry held by the IG was spoiled when the SSP and DIG started indicating their displeasure over this. They told Pankaj and Neeraj that they were being unduly hasty in managing a high level probe. It could be harmful to them as well as to the officers who had helped them. The cooled members could get enkindled once again.

Pankaj talked to Partap Singh about the apprehensions of the SSP and DIG

"You don't worry at all and rest assured. Let the IG submit his report. I will get the sanction from the police chief myself. Then I will get the report submitted in the High Court and get it stamped from there. What will anybody do then?" said Partap Singh.

They could not go against Paertap Singh's advice. So for, Partap Singh had done what he had promised. His approach had no bounds. He talked to the police chief and IG as if they were clerks under him. It encouraged them a lot. They felt convinced that he would do only the right thing.

After sometime, the IG slowed down his activities.

First, he postponed his visit by three days and then cancelled it. The recording of defence witnesses too was suspended sine die.

After a week the case file came back to the police station under the plea that the local police impeded the investigation; some of the accused were yet to be apprehended and some burgled material was yet to be recovered; the police remand of the accused arrested had got to be extended etc. The file could not remain in Chandigarh for long.

The return of the file aroused suspicions in the minds of Pankaj and Neeraj.

Pankaj contacted the IG to ascertain the truth. Though the IG did not rebuke them, but he did not show the earlier affinity either.

A vexed Pankaj contacted Partap Singh. A lot of money had been spent but there seemed to be no ray of hope. At least they should know what had gone wrong with the IG now.

Partap Singh talked to the IG He asked him where lay the hitch lay and added that he was ready to ring up anybody if that was required.

When the IG started demystifying the mystery, Partap Singh was completely nonplussed.

The IG had been reprimanded by the Chief Minister. It was the doing of some insider. The Chief Minister had come to know everything about the graft money taken by the senior police officers like the SSP, the DIG and the IG. The Chief Minister had threatened handing over the inquiry to CBI if justice was not done. The nexus between the police and the accused would also be probed by the CBI, the Chief Minister had said.

“Did my name also figures in this game?” asked Partap Singh. He apprehended that if the bribe accepted by the IG could come to light, his name was also likely to come up as the manipulator.

“No, I think nobody doubts you so far. But be careful in future, please,” the IG replied.

Partap Singh heaved a sigh of relief at this assurance. But to be doubly sure he wanted to know the whole truth.

“Did the CM phone you or it was some secretary?” He asked.

“First the CM himself wanted to talk to me. But as I came on the line, he had moved out for a meeting. I had a conversation with his Principal Secretary only. He is a friend of mine otherwise. We have been together twice. Once I was SSP at Patiala and he was as Additional Deputy Commissioner. Second time I was DIG, Ferozepur-range, and he was Deputy Commissioner there.”

“May be the Principal Secretary himself wanted to throw you off your feet. He may have heard from someone that the

party is rich enough and may be tempted to have his share as well," Partap Singh had his own opinion.

"No, he can't do that to me. I'm poised on this seat thanks to him. Many others have tried to be posted here but he always came to my rescue. Had he had any pecuniary considerations, he would have told me clearly. There is definitely something wrong at the bottom."

"Then, what are you doing now?"

"What is there to do? I am keeping mum. I'm sitting in a good position. There are eighteen IG's in this small state. Except three or four, all others are sidelined. Everybody wants to come into the field. They are always on the lookout for an opportunity to grab this seat; waiting for the moment when a blunder is committed. Brother, I won't take any risk knowingly. If they are your friends, I will return their money, but I cannot afford to displease the Chief Minister," the IG said.

"No, no. what is there to be so afraid of? And why return money? They are no kin to me. They are business people and are buying our services. They have approached us for their own interest. I'll silence them myself. You don't take any risk," said Partap Singh.

"I have an advice for you. Get away from this case and don't come so much in the limelight. We, police people, are accustomed to these kinds of things. You may have to suffer more as you are about to be promoted as High Court Judge," the IG gave Partap Singh, a friendly advice.

This suggestion made Partap Singh think that his name figured in the complaint and the IG was intentionally concealing this fact from him.

"Just check whether intelligence department didn't poison the ears of the chief minister," Partap Singh wanted to delve deep into the whole thing without showing a sign of weakness.

"I've checked all that. No branch of police department has done so. The information has reached from a personal source."

"Anyway, I will investigate the whole thing. You just take care and inform me if there is any indication of my name being involved into this thing. I'll preempt the move....I will ask the party to placate the Chief Minister".

Both the friends assured to defend each other.

Partap Singh conveyed to Pankaj what the IG had told him, in a very suggestive language.

“Some insider has leaked the whole scheme. Now only political approach can be of any help. The Chief Minister is being pressurised by the centre. In turn he is pressing hard on the IG to do justice. How can the IG turn injustice into justice? It’s due to our relations that he has postponed the probe for some time. You approach the CM and cool him down. Then the IG will call the file again and do the needful.”

Apprising him with the compulsiveness of IG, Partap Singh started alerting him about himself.

“Both the sides belong to the same family, you know. The IG is of the view that someone masquerading as your well-wisher is supplying information to the other side. Just think how did the Chief Minister come to know what transpired only between you and me? Take care lest my prestige is also ruined. Who knows when someone records our conversation? Keep in least touch with me over telephone. In case of necessity, talk to Vasudeva. He himself will inform me. If my name is dragged, the whole work in the High Court will remain undone....Try to identify the insider.”

“Sir, you are a very influential man. Please suggest us some substantial man of the Chief Minister.”

Pankaj wanted to take the best advantage of Partap Singh’s influence.

“I know the only the officers. I can get anything done from them. The officers are loyal that way. But these politicians are not reliable at all. They are the turncoats indeed. They take money from both the sides. Whenever some accusing finger is raised at them, they direct it to the officers. After losing their power they are involved in a number of scandals. The politicians always wriggle out of the situation but the officers have to undergo hard times facing departmental inquiries. Yours is a complicated case. Use political persons through politicians only. If I find some way out, I’ll tell you on phone.”

Partap Singh could easily make the party meet the chief minister but he was under the psychological impact of the fresh

complaint. He was praying for coming out unscathed from this situation and swore that he would not take any risk till his promotion was announced. There was no question of his inviting any new trouble now.

Moreover, Pankaj was no better than a sucked mango seed for him. He had already done maximum for him that he could do by keeping his honour intact. He had already shorn them well. This was the only plus point of mediating for the officers. Take whatever party pays you and give further what suits you. Nobody questions you in these things. Work done entitles you to digest the forbidden fruit.

Partap Singh had his access up to High Court or police. He had tried both. There was no scope of any mediation now. Even if there was, he would not do that. Avarice could be a hidden trap in the long run.

Impelled by his inner voice, Partap Singh shook hands with Pankaj for the last time.

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Approaching the chief minister was no problem at all. What irked Pankaj most was the leakage of information by someone from the inner circle. There was nothing new about this problem. They had been facing it since beginning. First, the contact with the SSP through Melu Ram was published. Now hobnobbing with the IG was exposed by the press. If it went on like this, their expenditure would amount to crores and they might go behind the bars also.

First of all they must find out the infiltrator in their circle.

Pankaj was getting help neither from a common friend nor from a common relative. All the time, he had been assisted either by Ajay or Vinay. They were his intimate friends. They had not even heard of Ved or Kamal before this case. Satish was the real brother of this wife. Why would he betray his own brother in law and favour the adversaries.

All of Pankaj's friends were businessmen. In business field, trade worth crores was carried out by unlawful means. A successful businessman would rather bear the loss of crores than disclosing the tricks of the trade.

Now the needle of suspicion pointed towards Singla. He was not from his business circle, nor was he a businessman who could digest all profits and losses.

But he was an advocate. The lawyers are conversant with all pros and cons of their clients. As such, a lawyer is supposed to bury in his bosom all the secrets of his clients. A lawyer cannot afford to be so indigestive.

Then who could be the traitor?

The problem must be solved once for all. If Singla came under suspicion, they must be clear about it. They had to consult him at every step. No case could be won without revealing each and every fact to the lawyer.

"In case, he turns out to be guilty of this disclosure, he will dissociate himself from the case, if not then he will come out with an explanation," thought Pankaj.

"Neither law nor morality allows an advocate to divulge the secrets of his clients to anybody. The audacity of hobnobbing with the other side can be displayed only by that lawyer, who has made up his mind to give up his practice. Every wrong done by an advocate can be condoned but the stigma of joining hands with the other side goes till death with him. I have a future before me," replied Singla when asked and gave a suggestion at the same time.

"Beware of the drivers. They keep listening to everything on the way and spill the beans in drunkenness. I myself have drawn out many such secrets from the drivers."

Once again Singla won over their confidence. His doubts were not misplaced.

Pankaj and Neeraj decided that from now on they would drive their vehicle themselves when they go somewhere regarding the case.

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Singla saved his skin by throwing the whole responsibility for the divulgence of clandestine deals on the drivers. But as a matter of fact, this time, the mischief had started from Singla. That he had not done so deliberately, was a separate issue.

When some advocates sit together, they usually discuss the

new cases. Which advocate bungled how much in which case; which judge accepted how much from which party and through whom; at whose behest the police altered the daily investigation reports; how much was taken for making the witnesses retract etc. are the topics which come up for discussion in their leisure meetings.

It was during such a gossip session that someone touched the topic of the honesty of the SSP. A pro-police lawyer started singing panegyric about the SSP's honesty. Another one started giving proofs of graft amounts accepted by the SSP for registering the cases and getting the registered cases cancelled.

To give a befitting reply to the argument of the pro-SSP colleague, Singla produced substantial proofs from this case.

The pro-SSP advocate walked away in embarrassment. But a pro-Baghel Singh advocate recorded this revelation in the computer of his mind.

The advocate and the MLA Baghel Singh had been on the lookout for a solid proof for several days. The Chief Minister was not ready to listen anything against the SSP in the absence of a solid proof. Now the SSP would be trapped.

The advocate at once rushed to the residence of the MLA. This was the best opportunity to take revenge on the SSP. One of the relatives of the advocate had been falsely implicated by the police. His only crime was to become a witness to a sale deed of a *be-nami* plot. From his point of view, he was right. The seller was one of his friends. He had identified his friend who was in possession of the power of attorney in his favour. A copy of the same was attached with the deed. Later on, the power of attorney turned out to be bogus. What had the witness to do in such case? He was neither a criminal by law, nor did he know about the fraudulence. The advocate was pressing the MLA to acquit his relative by putting in a word to the SSP. The MLA had approached the SSP several times but he was dilly-dallying.

The advocate was irritated with the SSP because he had given a clean chit to the other witness of the same deed and had not even bothered to call the witnesses of the 'power of attorney', despite their involvement in getting bogus document prepared

by testifying the impersonator.

The lawyer was also annoyed with Beghel Singh for not exercising his power. In turn the MLA was angry with the SSP as he was not doing even a genuine work at his request.

This was therefore, the best opportunity to settle scores with the SSP.

Moreover this party was rich. The officers were fattening their purses at its cost. He must have his share of the loot.

The advocate and the MLA set out for Chandigarh without losing any further time. They also took with them the newspaper clippings which unraveled the connivance of the Public Prosecutor and the police inspector with the accused.

The Chief Minister had left his residence a few minutes before they reached there. Therefore they could not see him.

The Political Secretary of the Chief Minister was Baghel Singh's friend. He apprised the secretary with the whole story, telling that the news about the SSP's having accepted a fat bribe was authentic and that the DIG too had taken ten lacs. This was the talk of the town. He added that a little jerk by the Secretary would make the party shell out a hefty sum.

The secretary asked the SSP about the latest position of the case in MLA's presence. He also told him about the controversy going on regarding this case.

The SSP told from the other end that the case file had been called by the IG He also told that the accused had pleaded their innocence by filing an application and the IG was probing on that very basis also.

Probe by the IG clearly indicated that attempts were being made to declare the accused innocent. The Secretary was familiar with the activities of the IG He was amassing money like anything. Earlier he was never intimidated by the Secretary. Now he could be given jerk.

The Political Secretary had a very good equation with the Principal Secretary. The IG, being a high ranking officer, was reprimanded by the Principal Secretary. A story was cooked that he had taken a bribe of Rs two lacs. So that the IG does not clarify his position directly to the Chief Minister, the Principal Secretary informed the CM about the complaint made by the

MLA Beghel Singh.

Baghel Singh belonged to the dissident group of the party. This group was getting stronger day by day. The political sagacity demanded that the group should be dented.

To please the MLA the Chief Minister, immediately ordered prompt action in the case. The Principal Secretary was directed to keep vigil on the situation and inform him daily about the latest development in this case.

The arrow released by the MLA hit the right target. The IG broke-down. He visited the CM's house and beseeched the secretaries. He promised to do their bidding in future without even the slightest hitch.

A little bragging by Singla made mountain of a molehill.

The case slipped out of the police confinement and entered the Chief Minister's residence.

48

Pankaj's father used to say aptly that the officers and leaders stand by you in good times and they desert you in difficult times like the rats who are the first to run out of a sinking ship. This was exactly what he was experiencing these days. The officers whom they had given very expensive presents with all generosity had refused to recognize them now. The leaders whom they had donated liberal funds and with whom they had stood by through thick and thin were not ready to talk to them even on telephone.

Through whom should the Chief Minister be approached? The relatives had gathered to think over this issue. The MP had already betrayed them. He had not even entered Mayanagar for the last twenty days lest he should be asked to help. Three legislators had been elected from Mayanagar. Two belonged to the opposition party. One who belonged to the party in power, had no equation with the Chief Minister. He belonged to the dissident group of the ruling party.

A distant relative of Pankaj had great influence in the Chief Minister's constituency. He had his hereditary business of commission agent in the grain market, besides being the owner of two rice-shellors and three brick-kilns. He had been rolling

in wealth since the very beginning. He had a penchant for being called a social worker. He donated generously for eye-camps held in his area or towards the marriages of poor girls. That was why many voluntary organizations had awarded him one or the other office in their executive bodies. He had no interest in politics. But if any political party approached him for a truck or labour to be used in its rally, he never refused anyone. Whether it was Congress party or Akali Dal, all were equal in his eyes.

It was due to this social service that he was well acquainted with every prominent leader of his area. Sometime he would organize a small function at his sheller premises and gratify his urge to call the leaders.

His family was doing well. He did not have to go to the political persons for his personal gains. But if he ever approached any minister for common cause he never returned empty handed.

This Chief Minister had earlier been the *Sarpanch* of his village. He retained his contacts with the leader when he was elected legislator. Even after getting a ministerial berth, the MLA kept attending marriages in the family of this remote relative of Pankaj. Now that he had become the Chief Minister, he still had not refused to recognize him. He would call him by name in a full blown gathering and did his work first of all.

Satish was of the view that they should approach Chaudhary for help.

The muddy village of Chaudhary was far from the humiliating experience of Mayanagar. The residents were still very innocent and did not look for a political gain in everything that they did.

Whether the needful is done or not, but his visit to the Chief Minister would tell them to what extent the CM was interested in the plaintiffs and what type of influence or how much amount was needed to silence him.

The man was quite elated at the very thought that his services are needed by the relatives. He lost no time in rushing to Mayanagar.

His name was among the chosen few favorites of the Chief

Minister and this fact was well known to his personal staff. After initial formalities, he was sent to the Chief Minister. After finishing with the ministers and the MLA's the Chief Minister asked him the cause of his visit.

Since the Chief Minister was ready for a flight and his helicopter had already reached, he was asked to narrate the purpose of his visit in brief.

When Chaudhary talked about the innocence of Pankaj and his brother, the Chief Minister seethed with rage but kept his cool. Had it been anybody else, the Chief Minister would have insulted him in the midst of all present there and exhibited his love for justice. But this man was quite simpleton and was inveigled by the Mammons of Mayanagar.

The Chief Minister signaled his Political Secretary to take Chaudhary in the next room as it was a confidential matter.

After listening to a couple of visitors, the Chief Minister referred the other visitors to his secretaries and himself accompanied *Chaudhary* to the adjoining room.

"Chaudhary, you have come to me and are most welcome. But your relatives have done a very bad thing. I have got the whole case investigated myself. Secondly, they gratified all the officers concerned by giving them fat sums of money. Our government is earning very bad name. If the boys have come with you, call them in and ask. If they say they are falsely implicated: I'll get them discharged right now."

"If this is the case, then I beg your pardon. They said, "We are innocent." That is why I have come to you. If they are guilty hang them. I won't mind."

The Chaudhary started explaining his own innocence in a way.

"No, no there's nothing for you to feel sorry. Now that you have come to me, I am not going to let you go back empty handed. I'll do something. In fact, it's time for me to go for an important meeting now. You meet my Political Secretary. He will guide you properly. I'll ring up anybody you ask for," said the Chief Minister.

Thus, handing him over to his Political Secretary, the Chief Minister flew in his helicopter.

The whole gathering of visitors dispersed gradually after the departure of the Chief Minister. The relieved Political Secretary took Chaudhary to his office. He knew the facts of the case better than even the Chief Minister. He started narrating the whole incident in detail.

I've not come here to listen to the defects of the case. You simply tell me a way to get rid of it," said the Chaudhary.

As the Political Secretary belonged to Chaudhary's area and was well known to him, he asked him the solution to the problem without any introduction.

"Your work will be done. The Chief Minister has hinted at it. But we shall have to move in a systematic way. The party has evolved a new policy. Every work should be routed through the area MLA. The elections are round the corner. The MLA's complain that the officers do not listen to them. So they find themselves de-linked from the people. 'Don't blame us if the party loses the mandate in election.' They clearly say. So you please meet Baghel Singh. I'll ring him up. He will set everything right and warn all the officers."

Thus advising, the Political Secretary rang up the MLA. He told him that Chaudhary would be visiting him in connection with a case in which the Chief Minister is personally interested. The MLA should do as the Chaudhary wished.

The secretary advised Chaudhary as he came up to the gate to see him off.

"The boys are newly entangled. They are being led astray by bogus type of people. Ask them to stop being fleeced now. The MLA himself will tell them wherever anything is needed."

Under a well-engineered scheme, the Political Secretary referred him to Baghel Singh.

During his return journey Chaudhary failed to understand whether he was obliged or refused by the Chief Minister's office.

The inference of what Chaudhary reported on his return from Chandigarh was that it was Baghel Singh who had spoiled the whole game.

His activities had become suspicious for the last few days.

His sympathy with the aggrieved family was aroused ten days after the gory incident. He had gone to the hospital to enquire about the condition of both the patients in the hospital. He had come to attend the *Bhog* ceremony of Kamal. He was delivering provocative speeches by calling the journalists. He cursed the negligence of the police saying that he would force the Chief Minister to hand over the probe to CBI if the real accused are not arrested. Everywhere he spoke on the issue of the rampant corruption in police department.

The people were surprised. Baghel Singh belonged to the break away group. As such the Chief Minister did not like his supremacy. He had issued oral directions to the officers not to oblige him. Now, God knows how the Chief Minister had developed a soft corner for him. He had handed over this case entirely to Baghel Singh.

The SSP was one of the favourites of the Chief Minister. He had been a class-fellow of his son. Through this relationship, he would pay a visit to Madam Chief Minister as well. Baghel Singh had launched a tirade against him and surprisingly, the Chief Minister was reticent. Pankaj and Neeraj failed to understand this phenomenon called politics.

The Political Secretary of the Chief Minister had ordered them now to contact the same MLA whom he would never like to see eye to eye.

There was nothing difficult for them to silence Baghel Singh. He was known to them. He had visited their office several times for getting party-fund. He could be approached very easily.

But they were wrong. He was highly agitated against them and not talking to them properly.

He was right in a way. He was well aware of his political situation. He was loyal to his political mentor. And the mentor had locked horns with the Chief Minister. Anytime the party could split in twain. The Chief Minister had clipped the wings of the dissident group. Baghel Singh's political worth was at its lowest. He was breaking away from the people and the people were joining the Chief Minister's vanguard.

Baghel Singh's political career was imperiled. If the party did not split apart, the Chief Minister was sure to deprive him

of the party ticket in the ensuing elections. Even if there was no divide in the party and he got ticket as well, there was no likelihood of his winning the election. Just out of a sense of insecurity Baghel Singh concentrated his attention more on minting money rather than increasing his area of influence. Both the situations would need a lot of money. If he got the ticket, he would have to spend abundant money on electioneering due to his being deficient in personal influence. And if he was not given ticket, he would need money to spend the next five years comfortably. Who knows whether he would ever find any chance of coming into power again?

It was under the influence of such an average thinking that Baghel Singh had trapped this shark in his net. Ever since he had started applying his diabolic mind on this case, he found Lady Fortune smiling on him.

This war of attrition waged by Baghel Singh posed the greatest risk to the SSP. He immediately started doing all pending works, he was asked to do by the MLA. His relative was declared innocent and the SHO of his choice was posted in his area.

Baghel Singh did not enter into a direct squabble with the DIG. But in recognition of his own weakness, the DIG had started behaving very respectfully with him.

His relations started improving at the Chief Minister's residence. The Principal Secretary and Political Secretary started giving precedence to his recommendations. He developed a relationship of confidentiality with both the officers. Minor things scurried through with the signatures of the secretaries. Baghel Singh started sending largesse to their houses. The relations thus turned friendly.

Everybody expected a good bounty from this party and this was the *raison d'être* for this new relationship. Baghel Singh was thinking afar. He wanted to please the Chief Minister through this party. What required was a little strictness and a little patience.

It was under this policy that he was spurning the recommendations of Pankaj and his brother.

Baghel Singh gave them time after a good deal of running around and supplication.

In the first meeting many mutual grudges were talked about. Both the parties promised to remove all such grievances.

The actual issue came up for discussion in the third meeting.

“The elections are approaching fast. This dreadful incident has defamed the Chief Minister not only in the state but also abroad. On top of this the police did nothing, but went on fattening its own purses. The Chief Minister feels ashamed to show his face in the city. You see he has not come to Mayanagar since then. He has cancelled all the programmes and pledged not to come here until the real culprits are apprehended. You know very well who are the real accused according to him,” said Baghel Singh.

“Please don’t talk of who the culprits are. You simply tell us how to get rid of the unpleasant situation. How much of party-fund is expected from us?” Asked Ajay who was feeling irritated at the crafty talk of the MLA. Restraining himself from saying thing, he jumped to the real issue.

“You will have to give party fund. How much.... it will be decided by the party president only.”

To settle the amount, another meeting was fixed for the next day.

The MLA was familiar with the financial position of Pankaj and his brother. He wanted to take one crore by way of party fund. They could easily part with this much amount. All of their relatives were millionaires. One million each by ten of them would amount to one crore. After all they were murderers. Jail was certainly in store for them. They had already spent twenty to twenty five lacs, but to no avail at all. This party fund would turn out to be a wholesale bargain for them. Just one jerk by the Chief Minister would shed off all other leeches.

The secretary found this amount very heavy. The people contributed in crores only when they earned manifold with the support of the party, through tax evasion or other such means. But here the case was different. Today they would give the amount and tomorrow they would make it poll-issue by telling the other side during elections. Twenty lacs were sufficient according to the Principal Secretary.

“What shall we get and what shall we give to the Chief Minister from twenty lacs?”

The decision was finally left on the Chief Minister's son. He had been industry minister at the centre. During his tenure he had become familiar with the potential of this city called Mayanagar. About fifty percent tycoons of this city were known to him personally. Whatever he decided would be acceptable to all.

Keeping in view the actual position, the Chief Minister's son popularly known as Kakaji agreed to Baghel Singh. Sometimes, a single plot of Mayanagar would fetch one crore. The income tax of many parties of this city ran into cores. These accused were proprietors of several firms and had developed many colonies. They could raise one crore by selling only one of their plots. There was no harm in giving a test injection. If they bore it, all right: otherwise liberal concession could also be given.

Baghel Singh announced the decision taken by the party to Pankaj and two days' time was given to him to think over and arrange the money.

Demand for one crore fell on Pankaj as a bolt from the blue. They had been involved in this mess for about fifteen days. Entire business had come to a standstill. It was being run by their employees only. They owners did not know whether it was running in profit or deficit. They had given twenty lacs so far. So far, they had given money happily. It seemed they had reached the last state on their voyage to success. The deposits lying here and there in the banks had exhausted. Now they would have to borrow for making any further payment. Moreover, money spent so far, had gone down the drain.

They started discussing this issue once again with their relatives.

Some worldly wise relatives advised, "Look, the calamity has befallen you and it will leave behind a trail of heavy loss. Get rid of it by giving money. God has always been bountiful to you. Money is meant, after all, to shield you in bad times. An imprisonment of even a month or two will ruin the whole business. The mills will be locked. Everything depends on you and both of you are entangled. Imprisonment will destroy your business circle and end all goodwill. The broken circles

sometimes lead the firms to bankruptcy. It will be good to get rid of the case this way or that way.

The radical group did not conform to this view. They were of the view that there was no guarantee of any riddance by paying here. Some other monster might raise its ugly head. They had yet to face the central government and there were other courts also.

The elections were nearing around. The government was likely to change. Then the new Chief Minister would expect them to appear in his court. Thus, the problem was not going to end here.

Some of the relatives objected to the heftiness of the sum demanded. They felt that Baghel Singh himself had decided this amount. If the demand had come from the Chief Minister, then why not contact him straight away. There were many of his agents in Mayanagar. They should contact the Chief Minister through some other persons and pay reasonably. They should approach the centre through some Union minister. Somehow or the other they should get rid of Baghel Singh.

But whatever is to be done should be done within two-three days. Hearing in the High Court was nearing fast. Before that the IG must prepare his report, failing which the stay on their arrest would be vacated and the fear of arrest will hang over them like the sword of Damocles

It was a common knowledge that there were certain families in Mayanagar who had access to the bed-room of the Chief Minister. Whenever he came to Mayanagar, he would stay with any one of them. They must approach one such family.

Ajay was an active member of the Chamber of Commerce. The Chairman of the chamber had direct access to the Chief Minister. Whenever the ruling party ever needed funds, message to this effect reached the Chairman who called his members and asked them to contribute according to their capacity. The amount was sent to the Chief Minister's residence and there was no leakage of information at all.

In lieu of this, the Chief Minister never refused any bidding of the chairman.

When Ajay talked to the Chairman, he assured to get the needful done within no time and rang up the Chief Minister.

“Mr. Chairman, this is no ordinary issue like issuing a license. This is a serious case of murder.”

This was for the first time that the Chief Minister had spoken rudely to the chairman. As a result the latter was taken aback.

“Please give me an appointment. I would like to talk to you at Chandigarh.”

“No discussion can be held on this issue pertaining to law and order. Otherwise you are always welcome here,” said the Chief Minister.

The Chairman conveyed this plain ‘no’ to Ajay saying that the matter being very serious, was beyond the ambit of the Chief Minister.

Then they talked to the proprietor of Dhaliwal Timber Store. He nodded in dissent saying that he used his relations with the Chief Minister only for a good cause, and for misdeeds like murder and dacoity.

Refusal from all sides indicated that Baghel Singh had cast a spell on the Chief Minister, who was speaking under its influence only.

They started making up their mind to shell out one crore, but apprehended simultaneously, lest a demand for five crores should arise after this. What will they do then?

Keeping in view the impending risk, the friends discussed the issue and decided that the deal should start from twenty lacs. With a little endeavor, Pankaj could pay thirty lacs. With the help of close relatives, he could reach forty lacs and by no means beyond fifty lacs.

Baghel Singh was not ready to give a rebate of more than ten lacs. He described Pankaj’s tears as those of a crocodile. They should be aware of the crime committed by them. They should have thought of the consequences earlier. The amount was decided by the high command, he said, and whatever rebate he was allowing them, was without consulting the high command and at his own risk. He might be reprimanded for this. They were showing too much attachment with the money. They were lucky to have an opportunity of getting rid of the

murder case with an amount equal to only one year's profit of their firms.

Baghel Singh was not budging an inch. He knew that the Chief Minister was refusing everybody who recommended in their favour.

The Chief Minister had given full discretion to Baghel Singh. He could decide the amount as he liked. That is why he was using this discretion lavishly.

"Do whatever you like boys! Your freedom depends on Baghel Singh only," he was jeering at Pankaj within his mind.

The boys explored their minds to the best of their ability but they failed to find any solution to the problem.

On the other hand, the High Court hearing was approaching nearer. The lawyer was sending them messages. He wanted to talk to the Advocate General.

Before reaching any conclusion, Pankaj thought it fit to consult advocate Vasudeva. If anticipatory bail seemed possible without much ado, then why pay such a big amount.

Vasudeva was taken aback as he heard about the 'party-fund' amount.

"We have already gratified everybody here. Anticipatory bail will be granted hundred percent. I will save you from jail and police harassment. The prosecution will take many years during which many governments will come and go. Had it been five or ten lacs I would have asked you to go ahead. But I can't advise you to part with such a heavy amount," he said.

"But if anticipatory bail is not granted....?"

"How is it possible? Didn't they take price for that? The judges are with us, Public Prosecutor is with us and the police too is not against us. Then who will stop the anticipatory bail?"

"But still we should be prepared for the worst. If it does not get done then what?"

"Then we'll go to the Supreme Court. We have good deal of influence there, even better than High Court. The apex court throws the Chief Ministers behind the bars and drags even the prime minister over the thorns."

"You give us the final decision. We can't think of anything at this stage. We'll do as you advise us."

“My opinion is very clear. Do not open yourself to such a blatant exploitation. There is no harm in genuine gratification. Anyway, wait till the bail orders. If need be, we’ll think over it later on.”

“May I speak to Partap Singh uncle?”

“He’s out of station. Don’t worry. He will also advise you the same.”

Vasudeva’s advice solaced them. They decided to evade Baghel Singh till a decision on their bail was made by the High Court.

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For the last one week nobody had paid a visit to the hospital. There was only Ramnath, Sangeeta or Neha for looking after the patients.

A full month had elapsed after the incident. Every moment of this agonizing period seemed liked an age in itself. Still, Ramnath was not aware of day or night.

Ramnath considered himself a very lazy type of person. He had a habit of getting up late and taking a bath equally late. He would go late to the court. Going out of station was no less than a torture for him. As far as possible, he tried to avoid going out. He could not have a sound sleep anywhere else, nor could eat well at any place other than his own house. It would cause constipation to him which could be set right after a week long medication.

During the last month, everything had gone against his fundamental nature. He had to roam about day and night. He frequented hospital, police station, courts and the residence every now and then. He cared neither for food nor sleep. He could eat whatever little he got and whenever he got it and had a brief nap as and when he found time.

Barring two, three nights Ramnath had spent most of his nights in the hospital. Both the patients were lying in the General ward. There was no facility for the patients’ attendants to sleep near their patients in these wards. There was only a wooden bench sized about 2.5x1.75 sq ft. near the bed of every patient. During day time it was used by the relatives who came to

enquire about the health of their patient and at night it served as a bed for Ramnath.

When anyone of the relatives came for spending a night in the hospital, Ramnath would spread a carpet near some attendants of patients sleeping in the corridors of the hospital. The lights in the hospital and noise made by the patients would disturb him a lot initially and he would spend the whole night tossing on his carpet. If at all he had a nap for a while, a nurse would come and shake him off: sometimes he had to help Ved in changing his side, and at others he was needed to change the wet clothes of the patient. Once disturbed, he would not be able to sleep again. Tossing and turning, he cursed Pankaj and Neeraj and devised plans to send them behind the bars.

Ramnath had read somewhere that man is a source of inexhaustible energies which lie dormant in him and are activated in times of need. The awakened powers make man do wonders. This theory applied perfectly on Ramnath now-a-days. During the last one month he had neither fallen sick nor suffered from constipation. He had never gasped for breath while climbing the stairs, nor felt any pain in knee joints. He ran about like a young man of half his age.

But after his brothers had left him alone here, the mysterious energies of his body too seemed to have deserted him. Now his loneliness started gnawing at his heart. He was extremely worried about his professional loss. He had worked hard for ten long years at a stretch getting established in the profession. He had hardly managed to set his practice right by pleasing a good variety of people including the trade unionists and political leaders. He did not know how many years he would take to put his business back on the rails.

With great difficulty Ramnath and Sangeeta had prepared the contours of their children's career. His son was in the final year of BA. If he did not get a good score, he would not get admission in any law college of Punjab. Sending him outside the state would only mean extra expenditure. Daughter, younger to the son, hoped to get admission in the MBBS course. Along with college education, she had to go to several coaching

centers to prepare for the competitive entrance test. The youngest daughter was in tenth class. Her career also depended on her score in this class. Their stay in *Mayanagar* was likely to spoil the future of his children.

If due to long leave, Sangeeta was transferred to a far off place, it would also throw their household out of gear.

Feeling lonely thus, Ramnath seemed anxious to go back to his own city. For the last few days, the condition of both the patients had been stable. If it continued like this, they could be discharged.

This ray of hope was a great source of consolation for Ramnath.

Neelam had no longer suffered from any fits, but she still lay unconscious. Her condition was the same as it was fifteen days back. She had reached a saturation point perhaps, beyond which there was no hope of any further recovery. There was no use keeping her in the hospital. The glucose bottle would be changed every eight hours for her. The nurses administered her medicine thrice a day. It could be easily done by calling a nurse at home.

Many such patients had been lying in this ward for the last one year. The doctors would not discharge her unless they were asked to do so. This was a private hospital after all. The doctors and nurses had their share in the fees. Why should they kick out their own gains?

This was what was advised by Ved's well-wishers also. The wire of his jaw had loosened. Pain had subsided and he had started moving about. He had started taking liquid diet. The plaster was to be *removed* after six weeks and would be applied again if needed. After all, what had the doctors done during the last ten-twelve days? The doctors came only once in a day and returned after enquiring about their well being.

"Why are you being harassed in the hospital? Go home. Take care of your household. Get their X-ray reports checked by coming here once in fifteen days or so," the attendants of patients advised Ramnath. And Ramnath agreed to this view. Really, the doctors were befooling them. The patients deserved discharge from here now. Ramnath in fact desperately wanted to get himself relieved from *Mayanagar*.

He talked to the doctors. They said that Neelam's condition was improving fast. They hoped that within three four days she would be able to follow the signals and start opening her mouth at the touch of spoon with her lips. Thereafter she would be discharged. Discharging her at this stage could spoil her condition. A little negligence could benumb her brain forever. The doctors could not discharge her at their own level. However, she could be taken home against medical advice only.

Ved's doctor also gave a similar advice saying that the patient was quite aged and therefore it was taking a longer time in the proper joining of the bone. The joints were raw as yet. In case of any negligence at home, there would be pus formation in the wounds. The plates would get displaced and bones could be joined amiss. The patient was not in a position to be operated upon time and again.

Here in the hospital the doctors would assess each and every-bone by scanning frequently. Everything was fine till now. If it went on like this the patient would be discharged after six weeks. On the other hand there was risk for the patient at every step, in transit from hospital to home, changing of bed, sitting and getting up

The doctors's opinion had dashed Ramnath's plans of going back home into the dust.

He felt dejected.

"Why do you make haste? Let's spend a few days more when we have already spent so much time. Why repent later on? After all Neelam is our own flesh and blood. Sangeeta tried to comfort her husband.

"What else can we do?"

Ramnath could do nothing but have a deep sigh.

And this is what he did.

51

Like chess players, both the sides started making their moves. On one hand there were tricks of trade , while on the other, there were political stratagems.

Pankaj and his associates started evading talks with Baghel Singh. From their own side they had arranged for their

anticipatory bail. The Public Prosecutor had encouraged them. Vasudeva was also fully confident of success in this direction. Nothing could stop their bail now.

Once they were granted bail, they would see how Baghel Singh remained rigid on his mind-boggling demands.

Baghel Singh was a crafty politician. He gauged the intentions of the party. To ensure that he was not let down, the petition for anticipatory bail must be got rejected from the High Court. He started trying to ensure the rejection of bail petition in a secretive manner.

First of all, he talked to the legislator of opposition party. He himself, being from the ruling party could not go against the government. The opposition MLA should call a press conference and castigate the government in the most boisterous manner and unveil the brazen nexus between the police and the accused. He should also demand the arrest of the real accused, failing which he should threaten demonstration and fast unto death. Besides, he should demand handing over the case to CBI. For making the press-conference effective and more sensational, Baghal Singh gave some proofs to him which exposed the police. The opposition MLA was told by Baghel Singh that the former would not have to take recourse to any agitation or fast unto death. He himself would sort out everything through the Chief Minister.

Remaining in print is the life line of a politician. What else could the opposition legislator wish? He at once got ready to call a press-conference to please his ruling party colleague.

The newsmen flocked like insects. They are always on the prowl for catchy and sensational news.

Next day the print media carried news stories along-with the photographs thus enkindling the dying embers once again.

Baghel Singh rang-up the Chief Minister's office; let us take advantage of the threats of the opposition. The discrepancies of the file should be *removed* by pulling up the SSP. He should be entrusted with the responsibility of getting bail petition rejected from the High Court."

His wish was fulfilled.

The *Hawaladar* who had gone to Melu Ram's dairy and got

drunk instead of going to the court was suspended; The SSP was asked to explain why he was reinstated only after four days.

This much jolt activated police administration. The SSP started showing interest in removing the discrepancies of the case file.

First, he sent the file to the District Attorney through his reader. He was asked to peruse the file and get its flaws *removed*.

The District Attorney did as directed and brought whatever he could bring on record against Pankaj and his brother. The statements of witnesses, genuine or fake, were recorded. Someone was shown as witness to the conspiracy hatched by the affluent brothers, while some other was shown as a witness to the cash given to the *Thekedar* by Pankaj.

Keeping in view the gravity of the case, the District Attorney thought it fit to get rid of it. He warned the SSP that the argument had to be made by some Advocate General. AG's satisfaction was a necessary. He advised the SSP to send the file to the Advocate General so that if there was any other lacuna, it could be *removed* from him. A responsible officer should be deputed to carry the file to the Advocate General, he said. Nothing is going to be achieved soon.

The SSP liked this advice of the District Attorney and he followed it immediately.

It was not for the reader to talk to the advocate General. An SP was assigned this job. A District Attorney who was deployed in the SSP's office, was also asked to go with the SP and turn up after understanding important points from him and remove all lacunae. The officers were asked to whisper into the ears of the Advocate General that the Chief Minister was interested in the rejection of bail petition lest he should enter into a deal with the accused. He must be forewarned.

After putting the police on the job, Baghel Singh turned on Advocate General. He was made to be directed by the Chief Minister that he should make personal contact with the judges of the Bench. Senior judge of this bench was appointed by this very government. He was requested, saying that the prestige of the Government was at stake. It was for the judge to protect the government's prestige. In case the judge seemed to be

turning ungrateful, the Advocate General should inform him about the report of the intelligence wing about him. The intelligence department had no proof regarding the agent through whom the amount was given to the judge, nor was there any information about how much was given. But the information was authentic that a fat amount had reached his bungalow. Along with the prestige of the government, the judge should take care of his own honour also.

The remaining aspects were to be taken care of by the police chief.

A day before hearing, he had to call a big press-conference and release a press-note declaring the arrest of the remaining three accused from Bihar. He had to play the confessional statements of the accused on a tape-recorder in the presence of press-reporters. These statements had to throw entire responsibility for the incident on Pankaj and his brother. The press note would also disclose the disproportionate wealth earned by them within a few years. The amassing of so much wealth would be attributed to their connections with the underworld. The press note would also mention the proposal of instituting a commission to probe into this fishy affair.

This information would find its coverage on the front pages of English dailies next day. The judges read English newspapers daily in the morning and this news would definitely catch their eyes.

It would go a long way in affecting the opinion of the judges. Baghel Singh had far sighted designs.

He won't let Pankaj and Neeraj go to the Supreme Court. Immediately after the petition was rejected, the police would arrest them.

At the directions of the police chief a special police party was formed. It was harnessed with modern amenities like a mobile phone car etc. Two days before the hearing, this party started keeping vigil on the movements of the accused brothers and keeping track of them as well.

This party had instructions from the police chief, according to which, it would be informed immediately after the petition

was rejected. Thereafter, the accused would be arrested even if they were hidden in the house of some officer or a political leader. If need be, a bit of manhandling or scuffle could be resorted to at the time of arresting them.

The trade trickery had given way to the political machinations.

The high profile plan to arrest the indicted duo was beyond the imagination of even the perspicacious advocate Vasudeva, what to speak of Pankaj and Neeraj.

Vasudeva had cent percent hope for the acceptance of the petition for anticipatory bail. If God forbid, it was rejected at all, he had made arrangement in advance to file this petition in the supreme-court. The advocates of the apex court had already drafted the petition which would be signed by Pankaj immediately as he reached Delhi and it would be admitted.

Hearing on petition was made in the morning and the judgement was to be delivered in the afternoon.

First, Vasudeva got the news about the rejection of bail petition and then regarding the arrest of Pankaj. The police had arrested him while en route to Delhi.

Vasudeva realized his blunder. He should not have reposed so much confidence in himself. He should not have allowed his clients to move about so openly. They should have been advised to go to Delhi in a disguised manner.

But there was no use crying over the spilt milk now.

Nobody had ever imagined that the police would swoop down on Neeraj like a hawk.

A phone call from Vinay's factory said that the police had arrived in two vehicles and taken away Neeraj in a car with black glasses. The factory manager beseeched a lot to tell him, which staff of the district police was carrying Neeraj. But the police had not told him anything.

Neeraj's wife telephoned all around and requested all relatives and friends to reach her residence.

Pankaj's wife dialled his mobile phone number. Bell was heard, but the call did not mature. The number was dialled once

again only to receive the computer message that the phone was switched off.

Neelu's heart beat increased. Pankaj's phone must have registered on its screen the number of the residential phone. Then why did he switch it off rather than listening to it? It was surely a signal of some crisis.

May be he is also arrested, she thought impulsively.

To clear her doubts she dialled the numbers of the friends accompanying him. But all the phones had the same message. They were out of the coverage area.

After all where have all of them gone? Neelu felt awfully nervous.

On receiving the message regarding the mysterious disappearance of Pankaj and Neeraj, their friends started reaching their residence. There was a huge rush of vehicles there. All the supporters were holding their cell phones in their hands and each of them was trying to ascertain the actual situation by contacting their respective acquaintances.

Dev Raj Dhir, the proprietor of Dhir Construction Company was a very intimate friend of the DIG. He immediately rang up at the DIG's residence only to hear that the officer was out of station. He talked to the reader then and asked which police staff had arrested Neeraj, where he was at present etc.

The reader was well aware of the intimacy of his boss with Dhir. The DIG had never said *no* to him. The reader was asked by his boss to oblige Dhir whenever he asked for something even in his absence.

The reader swore that he did not know anything about the whereabouts of the brothers. There were no instructions from the DIG office to arrest them, nor had his office received any information in this regard.

Dr. Chawla rang up the SSP. He was a friend as well as a family doctor to the SSP. They were confidant to each other. They were aware of the weaknesses of each other. Dr. Chawla was one of those bosom friends of the SSP who knew even his confidential mobile phone number. This phone remained active even in his bedroom, as well as in the bath room.

It was for the first time today that even this phone was giving 'switched off' signal.

This was not a good omen. This mysterious evasiveness of the officers was foreboding. It was very clear now that the case had slipped out of their hands and they were incapable to help and were thus playing evasive.

The number of supporters swelled fast. Every five minutes about ten supporters reached there. The outstation relatives started calling back. Someone had set out for Mayanagar and some other was preparing for the same.

Having heard the news about the arrest of Neeraj, Singla also reached his residence.

As he entered, the supporters surrounded him to know how this had happened. They wanted to know the present legal status of the case.

"It seems that our bail-petition had been rejected by the High Court and the police have arrested Neeraj immediately," said Singla.

"But how shall we know the real situation?"

"Ring up your counsel at Chandigarh."

No member of the family knew either the name, or phone number of the lawyer. They never mentioned at home what they did outside. From where should they get his phone number?

All of a sudden Singla remembered that their lawyer was Vasudeva and he had accompanied Pankaj to Chandigarh when he was engaged. He had his visiting card in his pocket.

Singla rang up Vasudeva. Singla's conjecture was cent percent right. The bail petition had been dismissed. Pankaj was on his way to Delhi for filing appeal in the Supreme Court. The police, already on the chase, had arrested him half way through. Vasudeva had received this information through a telephone call made by one of Pankaj's friends. Before the lawyer could gather comprehensive information, the line was cut. Thereafter, neither there was redialing from that end, nor could his own call mature. Vasudeva was of the view that the police had seized their telephones.

"Now, how can Pankaj be traced?" Dr. Chawla asked Singla.

"There can be two situations. First, Pankaj may be produced before the court, under whose jurisdiction he is arrested and show it as transit arrest. But, police would not do so. May be

they produce Pankaj, after a day or two. Before that they may produce him before a higher authority. However, there was ninety percent possibility that both the brothers will be produced in Mayanagar after completing the necessary formalities in the case file."

Meanwhile, Pankaj's father-in-law, Lala Parmanand reached there with his men. He had brought along two briefcases full of currency notes. First he handed over both the briefcases to his daughter.

"Don't worry my child! I'll spend money like anything and will shake the government. You will see both the brothers returning home by evening," Lala Parmanand consoled his daughter Neelu by patting gently on her head.

One of Parmanand's relatives had recently retired as Sessions Judge. He had settled in Chandigarh. He had telephoned and was about to reach. Legal remedies would start immediately after his arrival.

Neeraj's in-laws were based in Ambala. His father-in-law was Income Tax commissioner and posted in Calcutta. He had also been contacted. He was trying to contact aviation companies for a seat. As soon he gets a seat he would immediately fly to Mayanagar. Mehta, the Income Tax Commissioner of Mayanagar was his batch mate. He had telephoned Mehta who had started making efforts at his own level. Like police, Income Tax people were also a scare for all. He hoped getting a clue very soon.

By the evening, the relatives reached Mayanagar from far and wide but the mystery of the whereabouts of Pankaj and Neeraj could not be solved. Everybody, including the SSP, the doctor, the state police chief and the minister-was approached by the relatives but to no avail at all.

Interestingly enough, the problem was solved through a very common man.

Singla's clerk had gone to the office of the District Attorney in connection with some official work. He came to know from the reader that his boss i.e. District Attorney was getting the file prepared in the Neelon Rest House. The answer to the question 'which file?' was given by the reader even without being asked.

Pankaj and Neeraj had been arrested. The application was being drafted for obtaining their police remand. The SSP was availing the services of the District Attorney, so that no lacuna is left in the case.

Hundreds of people had gathered at Pankaj's residence. There was a great commotion in the house. Everybody seemed to have become a legal consultant and was trying show to his supremacy this way or that way.

With whom should Singla share this much-awaited revelation?

Then the retired Sessions Judge reached there. The whole assemblage surrounded him, putting all kinds of questions.

As Kishorei Lal, the superannuated judge, succeeded in disengaging himself from the crowd a little, Singla lost no time in meeting him. Introducing himself, Singla disclosed the long cherished information to him.

Kishori Lal *heaved* a sigh of relief at the information that the preparation of file was in progress. Obviously they would be produced in the court sooner or later.

For a serious discussion over the matter, Kishori Lal took Singla and Parmanand aside.

"It's getting dark. Will the police produce them before a magistrate now? What's your view?" asked Kishori Lal, who had 35 years of experience in this line to his credit. He had much more experience than Singla, who was a novice in the field. But he failed to make a fair guess in this case.

"Anything is possible. But it doesn't seem likely. Today they will show the arrest of accused and will produce them tomorrow. This is how I feel at least. No magistrate is going to initiate any action at night. You must be familiar with the case of magistrate Arora."

Singla was saying so on the basis of an incident involving a magistrate.

Arora had accepted the bail of a rich party like Pankaj at twelve in the night. The other side complained against him along with substantial proofs, indicating what made the magistrate hear the case in the specially held nocturnal court. The judge did not find a way out to justify his action and was dismissed from service.

“It means they will be produced tomorrow,” Kishori Lal guessed.

Therein lay the interest of the accused.

Kishori Lal and others had to make so many arrangements which required sufficient time.

First of all, they were to approach the magistrate to ask him not to remand the accused to the police custody. They had to contact the Public Prosecutor to request him to keep a low key while pleading the case. They had to talk to the doctors, so that in case police remand was given, they should declare the accused as sick and admit them into the hospital. The jail superintendent was to be approached for getting B-class. The beds were to be reserved for them in the jail hospital by contacting some acquaintance of the jail doctor. They had to work on many fronts.

Kishori Lal was discussing these things with Singla when there was a call from Mehta, the income tax commissioner of Mayanagar. He had talked to the SSP and said that the boys were all right. They were not even touched by anybody. According to the SSP, a special police party had arrested them and left for Chandigarh by handing over the accused to the local police. Interrogation and paper work was almost complete. After an hour or so, the boys would be taken to the CIA staff.

The SSP had assured Mehta that the accused would be kept in the rest house during night and they would have no trouble there. They would be produced in the court tomorrow.

This information made everybody have a sigh of relief.

Baghel Singh was keeping an aquiline eye on the whole situation from his house.

Hundreds of the supporters of Pankaj and Neeraj had reached Mayanagar. They included some politicians, some bureaucrats and some other well-to-do people. Everybody was using his good offices to the best of his capacity.

Baghel Singh came to know that an IAS officer had urged the Home Secretary to ring up the District Attorney to put in a word of recommendation. The District Attorney had honoured

the recommendation whole heartedly. He called the dealing Public Prosecutor to his residence and warned him sternly, "You must plead the case in a way that the judge should take investigation as complete and police remand as most undesirable."

A retired Sessions Judge and two magistrates were sitting in the factory office of Vinay's brother-in-law. They were to meet the magistrate of Mayanagar in the club. Recommendation will be made while eating and drinking. He would emphasize that there is no need for police remand for the accused.

The civil surgeon had received a telephone call from the Director Health Services that he should ensure his personal presence at the time of medical checkup, thereafter declare both the accused as suffering from any serious ailment and recommend immediate admission to the hospital in view of their critical condition.

The heart specialist of Civil Hospital Dr. Mehra was a good friend of Dr. Chawla. Dr. Mehra had assured Dr. Chawla that the needful would be done hundred percent. They made such obligations at the bidding of even the hospital canteen contractor. Dr. Chawla was after all a well-known doctor of the city.

According to the information reaching Baghel Singh, one of the supporters had even paid a visit to the jail. If the accused fail to get admitted to the Civil Hospital, they were to be admitted to the jail hospital. The doctors had got two beds vacated for them by discharging the patients already lying there. The jail hospital was ready to welcome them.

Baghel Singh had also been informed that the recommendations were accompanied with sealed envelopes and gifts, which were sent to the authorities concerned as per their respective positions.

The most unpalatable thing for Baghel Singh was that the accused were being given a VIP treatment. The accused of a heinous crime were made to stay in the rest house rather than police lock-up. The officers had made them share dinner with them and they were provided beds to sleep on.

If the accused were given royal facilities like this, and

everything went on as planned by them, then who was going to pay a bounty to Baghel Singh?

He must turn the wheel the other way round. That Baghel Singh was the mastermind behind the arrest of Pankaj and his brother Neraj was an open secret now. The SSP had received several telephone calls from the Chief Minister's residence to the effect that Baghel Singh's words must be honoured as verdicts issued by the Chief Minister himself. Last time, the Political Secretary had scowled at the SSP., "Why do we have to give you a ring time and again? If there is any negligence now, you will receive transfer order instead of a phone call."

Under the newly obtained powers, Baghel Singh could talk boldly with the SSP. He should be the first to receive a bashing. He kept trying to telephone the SSP for half an hour, but could not get to know where the officer was sitting. From everywhere he received the same reply, "Sahib is busy in some important work."

Fed up with the situation, he had to knock at the Chief Minister's house so that his personal staff should direct the SSP to talk to him.

The CM house's directive was complied with and he received a ring from the SSP.

Baghel Singh snubbed the police officer at the outset, "Where should anybody contact you if there is some mishap. You start drinking at secret places and the accused roam about openly committing crimes."

With a humble 'sorry; the SSP tried to justify his position. He was busy preparing the file of Pankaj and his younger brother. The recommendations were pouring in. That is why he had switched off his phone. It solved Baghel Singh's problem as the SSP himself touched the point of his interest.

"And you have honoured the recommendations. You are sharing a glass of whisky with them in the rest house. Why don't you give them the treatment deserved by an ordinary culprit? Mind it; all are equal in the eyes of law. Moreover, they are not political prisoners. They are accused of murder and dacoity. Keeping them in a lock up will be an eye opener for the other spoilt brats of the rich families. Otherwise it will

give out a wrong signal. Our government is being defamed and getting a stigma of favouring the rich. Cut them down to size."

"Paperwork was in progress and interrogation was also going on. They were brought to the rest house due to security reasons only. We'll definitely put them in the lock up tomorrow morning."

"This is only a lame excuse. They are no hardcore terrorists who might pose a threat to the security or manage an attack on the police station. There is no security risk. They must see the light of the day from the lock up tomorrow morning."

"Right sir. It will be done."

"One more thing. Don't take them to the courts in black glassed big cars tomorrow. I don't say they should be taken there on foot, but bring them in the official vehicles at least in handcuffs. Let the people know about the misdeeds of these princes. Try to have a full-fledged police remand from the court. I've come to know that they are meeting the Public Prosecutors and judges. You are not to bother about anybody. I know how to deal with these officers."

Taking assurance from the SSP. Baghel Singh started thinking how to bridle these officers.

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Baghel Singh had never thought that in litigation, the services of officers like Magistrate, District Attorney or Civil Surgeon are required.

He did not know any one of these officers. In fact, never got a chance to develop relations with the officers.

He had become a legislator for the first time. He was given the party ticket from the quota of Jalthedar i.e. his political master. Five legislators had got ministerial berths at the recommendation of Jalthedar. Three of them were quite novices. He was all agog with the newly acquired power. He seemed to be flying on wings during the first year. He had directed all of his energies on getting favours from the police stations or at the sub-divisional level. By the time he realised that there are officers above this level also, his political master's relations were strained with the Chief Minister.

At the behest of the Chief Minister, not only the deputy commissioner and SSP, but even the *Tehsildar* stopped greeting him. The people of *Mayanagar* are farsighted. They felt the pulse of the time. As a result the house of Baghel Singh wore a deserted look. Only five to six applications would come to him for any recommendation. These were hardly adequate for the face saving purpose.

In such a situation how could he have amiable relations with the officers? He had no force behind him on the basis of which he could show teeth to any officer.

It was just a coincidence that this case fell into his hands and it became instrumental in getting him favour from the Chief Minister. He had stood by him like a rock even against the recommendations from the centre. At times, Baghel Singh would doubt the intentions of the Chief Minister. May be the Chief Minister was entangling him in a maze of illusions; maybe he was out to ruin his political career etc. But the stage where he had reached was the one whence there was no going back. With a view to face any risk that came his way, he was moving ahead unwary of the consequences.

It was not so easy to clip the wings of the scions of affluent families as Baghel Singh had thought.

Pankaj's supporters had fanned out in the entire city and contacted every officer who mattered even a little in the case. But Baghel Singh could not talk to any of these officers straightway. There was no certainty whether they would oblige him or not.

They must be pulled up by the Chief Minister.

Baghel Singh enquired from the police station. He was told that the accused would be produced in the court in the afternoon.

There was fairly enough time till noon. He must reach Chandigarh in one and a half hour or so and after doing everything, should be back till the accused are produced in the court.

Baghel Singh at once met the Political Secretary as he entered the office.

"If the accused succeed in their scheme, my prestige will go

to dogs. Secondly, we won't get even a paisa. They must languish in lock up for a day or two." Baghel Singh tried to convince the Political Secretary. The political secretary went on telephoning every officer that Baghel Singh named.

The response was positive from the other end.

The Civil Surgeon was a very daring officer. He hailed from the Chief Minister's native place and was posted in Mayanagar with his special recommendation. Moreover, he had personal relations with the Political Secretary.

The Civil Surgeon apprised the secretary with the pressure exerted on him, "First, our director had phoned me. It was followed by a call from the health minister. He himself had talked to me saying that the accused were his relatives and added that they must be helped. Now you tell me about your recommendation. If the Chief Minister desires so, I will not bother about the minister. If it is your personal case then let us think from that angle."

"I'm not saying anything from my side. I'm conveying you only the orders of the Chief Minister. Wait a while. I'll make the CM ask the health minister on phone. You will now receive a call from the health minister. He will ask you not to favour any side and act genuinely. Will that be okay?"

"Then I'm at your disposal. I'll show the sick accused healthy enough for a horse ride."

Thus assured by the Civil Surgeon, they started dialing the number of the District Attorney.

The District Attorney was not as dauntless as the Civil Surgeon. He had received a phone from the Home Secretary recommending the case very strongly. He had said that the police remand of the accused would be no less than his own remand. Home Secretary was his ultimate boss and he was supposed to report to him after the needful was done.

The telephone message from the Chief Minister's Political Secretary created a dilemma for him. On one hand, there was the Home Secretary who, if annoyed, would transfer him to a station as far as Gurdaspur. He had secured his posting in Mayanagar with great difficulty. This was a very lucrative station, while Gurdaspur was a very dry place from this angle.

But on the other hand was the Chief Minister, who was above the Home Secretary in rank. This recommendation was also very emphatic. Besides, the Chief Minister was favouring the plaintiffs. Hence it was also his duty to stand by the plaintiff side.

For a while, the District Attorney thought of making the whole position clear to the Political Secretary. "But what will be my fate, if the Chief Minister reprimanded the Home Secretary?", he thought, "In that case, the boss will get more irritated at the very idea that I have complained against him to the Chief Minister, rather than doing him the said favour."

This impelled him to keep mum.

Compliance of the orders was the only solution. And this is what he did.

"The accused will definitely be remanded to police custody. I'll meet the Sessions Judge right now and make him ask the magistrate in this regard."

After this much spade work, Baghel Singh started waiting for the results.

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The District Attorney was worried a lot. He failed to understand how he should wriggle out of the unpleasant situation.

The accused side had approached every concerned officer. The approach was made very tactfully. Only those officers were contacted who had hold over the case. The judges did not bother much about any minister or secretary. They had to obey their own seniors only. If any judge rejected the demand for police remand under the influence of a senior, the District Attorney would have to face the music. He would be shifted from here under the remarks, 'This officer does not have a liaison with the judiciary.'

Then suddenly he hit upon an idea. He must lay bare his mind before the Sessions Judge by going to him. It would stand him in good stead. He would then be in a position to swear that he had approached the Sessions Judge but the accused approached still higher and rendered him helpless. But he apprehended lest the Sessions Judge, just for face-saving,

mentions his visit and its purport to the accused, they would treat him as the vilest and most ungrateful man, playing foul against them even after taking money.

“Sessions Judge is a very senior officer. He cannot leak such petty information,” thus consoling himself the District Attorney went to the residence of the Sessions Judge.

The Sessions Judge too was caught in a quandary. He had received phone calls so far from two judges of the High Court. What was most surprising was that one of these judges had himself rejected the anticipatory bail petition of the accused. When saddled in such an exalted seat, he could not help the accused, what did he expect from a Session Judge of the District.

The area magistrate, too, had called at the residence of Sessions Judge and left just now after sharing his anxieties with him. He was newly recruited. He was being given temptation and sugarcoated threats also. He had come to seek the guidance of the Sessions Judge.

The Sessions Judge himself was perturbed. How should he boost the morale of the District Attorney?

After rummaging his tension charged mind properly, he advised the District Attorney, “You go through the file yourself. If you find any discrepancy in it, get it *removed*. Draft the application for police remand yourself, after forming a sound basis for that. Make arguments yourself. I’ll also try a bit and we shall try to wriggle out of this situation.”

Everything, the Session Judge said was right, except the one related to making arguments. The District Attorney was caught in a fix. By making argumentation himself, he would be a loser on both sides. If police remand was granted, it would incur the anger of the Home Secretary. “Where was the need for so vehement an argumentation?” he would say. If the remand was not granted, it would invite trouble from Baghel Singh. “No, I will not take the risk of augmenting the case myself. I’ll send the concerned PP to the court and make him a scapegoat if anything goes wrong,” he thought.

Having performed his duty of approaching the Sessions Judge, the District Attorney came to his office.

He started preparing himself for the impending trouble at a psychological level.

The spade work done by Baghel Singh fructified.

The very next morning both the brothers were taken away by the police from the rest house to the lock-up.

To make them familiar with the normal conditions of the lock up some thieves and migrant laborers called *Bhayyas* were also put up with them.

The dirty clothes and bodies of the inmates were stinking as if a suppurating dog had been kept in the lock-up. The *Bhayyas* were chewing tobacco and spitting here and there in the lock-up. As they drank water from the pitcher only with cupped palms, the water could be seen spilt everywhere. The swarm of flies on the wet floor was making the place more nauseating.

One of the doors of this lock-up opened towards the main gate of the police station. Everybody walking into or out of the police station would cast a glance at the lockup inmates. They did not have any facility to hide their faces. For how long could one hide his face behind palms.

Both the brothers pined to be freed from the lock up, allowed to make a phone call at their house.

Nobody was ready to listen to them. There were only two officials in the police station-one a Head Constable and another, the Sentry. None of them had the key to the lock up. They could not help them.

A servant who had come to give tea to the sentry took pity on the rich youths. He took their phone number from them covertly and delivered message at their residence from the tea shop where he worked.

Their irate supporters rushed to the police station as they came to know that Pankaj and Neeraj were locked up.

The relatives had made all arrangements last night only. Now what had gone wrong with the police?

The sentry had very strict instructions from the SHO not to let anybody enter the police station without his permission.

For some time; the Sentry kept performing his duty honestly. He was requesting them very politely to wait outside the police station.

Gradually, the sentry found the situation slipping out of

his hands. He could no longer stop the highly reputed people who were coming to see the accused.

The sentry found himself caught between two millstones. If he disallowed any former judge or chairman to enter the police station, he was sure to be suspended. If he allowed them, the officers would punish him.

He had informed the officers several times and asked them to control the violent situation. But every time they had put him off saying, "We're coming right now."

Then he gathered courage and rang up the control room, "A huge crowd has gathered outside the police station. The police station is likely to be attacked any time. I cannot control the situation all alone. Send more force."

The control room informed the concerned officials on wireless.

The SHO arrived at the police station at once. Security was intensified at the gate. Four armed sentries started patrolling outside the police station.

The SHO kept putting off the supporters saying that all were equal in the eyes of law and that he could not free the accused from the lock up.

He gave only one concession and allowed the lawyer to meet the accused.

Singla had nothing new to talk to the accused. He simply came out by asking them to have patience for a few hours. Also he had nothing to tell those waiting outside eagerly.

"The boys are all right so far. No doubt, they are a bit afraid. There will be no problem if they are freed from the lock up somehow or the other," he said.

Some senior police officer chided the SHO on phone "Why are you stopping the visitors? Let them meet the accused one by one."

Contrary to the hopes, the visit of supporters only added more to the embarrassment of Pankaj and Neeraj rather than providing them any sense of relief. Agony was writ large on their faces. They were yawning in utter desperation. Their hearts were beating fast like the bellows of the iron smith. Their legs and arms were aching. A sense of nausea gripped them hard.

Pankaj was feeling giddy while Neeraj was running high temperature.

They were not saying anything at all. But their frightened eyes beseeched everybody present there, "Please, help us get freed from this hell at any cost whatsoever."

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For the first time the parched desert experienced a gust of cool breeze.

Mataji had restored to Neha her earlier position in the *Sehyog* institution.

Yuva Shakti, the youth wing of the institution had made the organisers realise their mistake. The organisers were compelled to bring this issue to the notice of the Divine Mother in America. She had rebuked them and at her orders, the impresario had to go to hospital and apologies to Neha.

A special group prayer had been organized for the well-being of Neha and her family in the last meeting.

Neha was invited by the Mother to attend the next group meeting. The mother was going to talk to Neha over phone in the presence of all the *Sehyogis* and bless her.

It was unprecedented in the history of the institution that *Mataji* should talk to any *Sehyogi* over telephone. This benediction made Neha bloom like a flower. All of her resentment was dispelled at this privilege.

She felt as if her *Kundalini* had started rising once again. Spiritual energy had started flowing in her system once again.

Mataji, during her telephonic sermon, asked Neha to accept the will of the Divine. This was destined to be like this. What is fated cannot be averted even by the gods. She should not shed tears for the loss of her brother Kamal who, she said was safe at her feet. Neha was also advised to meditate and serve her parents. Everything would be okay in future.

Enlivened with a new zeal, Neha went straight to her house.

The very next day, *Mataji's* words had started coming true.

The High Court had rejected the anticipatory bail petition of her cousins Pankaj and Neeraj and they had been immediately arrested by the police.

Now they were languishing in the police lock up.

Generally, the accused were taken out of the lockup at twelve or twelve thirty in the afternoon. But when Pankaj and Neeraj were not taken out till two thirty in the afternoon, their supporters who were waiting outside got worried. This delay augured bad times ahead only.

Last night their supporters were assured by the SSP that the accused would be taken to court respectful.

At half past two, the accused were brought outside the police station. Some cars with back glasses on their windows started advancing towards the main gate of the police station. They were meant to take the accused brothers to the court.

But no vehicle was allowed to stop at the gate. Instead of luxury cars, an official four wheeler was brought. The plaintiff side was pressing hard that they should be taken on foot. But the police was impartial. Neither on foot, nor in cars, but the accused would be taken in the official vehicle, just like any other ordinary accused.

Like a bullet, the vehicle carrying the accused got out of sight within no time.

Police station was at a distance of about two kilometers from the courts. There were no traffic lights in the way, nor was there any congested area. It was past one hour since the police vehicle had left for the courts. Where was it stuck after all? The supporters standing outside the courts were worried lest the police should have taken the accused to the CIA staff for third degree interrogation. The disappointed friends stretched their imagination to the possibility of any untoward occurrence.

They had not yet solved this riddle when Singla made another unpleasant disclosure that the area Magistrate had proceeded on half day leave and the duty magistrate was already on leave. The Sessions Judge would appoint some magistrate as duty magistrate. Only then the accused would be brought to the court.

The efforts of the accused had dashed to the ground. They had approached both the magistrates who had proceeded on leave. Nobody had imagined that they would betray like this.

“Who knows which magistrate is appointed and who will

be the PP? How can we approach them at such a short notice?" These were the anxieties which bothered the mind of advocate Singla at this stage.

It seemed as if the entire drama was being enacted in a well-planned manner. The name of the new duty magistrate was being kept in wraps deliberately. It would be known only when the accused arrived in the court.

The police took advantage of delay caused by the Sessions Judge.

The Supreme Court had issued fresh instructions that immediately after arrest; the accused should be medically examined. In compliance with these instructions, the accused were taken to the Civil Hospital. A medical board was formed under the chairmanship of the Civil Surgeon. The accused were examined thoroughly. The doctors issued a medical certificate to the effect that both of them were perfectly healthy - physically and mentally. There was no mark of any injury on their bodies.

Now there was no hitch in producing the accused in the court.

As the accused reached the court, the Sessions Judge appointed the Chief Judicial Magistrate as Duty Magistrate. He was the senior most among the magistrates and this case called for hearing by some senior judicial officer.

Both sides argued for one hour each and the Magistrate kept listening to them patiently.

Then came the turn of the Magistrate. He pronounced, "It requires a lot of investigation as yet. To reach at the root of the conspiracy, police requires sufficient time. The police is allowed to interrogate the accused for a week."

Medical checkup of the accused had already been gone through. According to the medical report they were hale and hearty.

New medical checkup was not required at all.

The application for getting the accused medically checked up was rejected on this ground.

As even-day police remand meant staying in the police lock up for a full week.

The seven hours that they had spent in the lock up seemed like seven ages to them. They had a ray of hope at that time. The relatives waiting outside could get them released any time. They had put up with the agony very patiently. Now they would not be able to spend even seven minutes in this lock up.

As they came out of the court, they could no longer restrain themselves. They kept meeting their friends with artificial smiles on their lips but as they faced their fathers-in-law they embraced them and burst into tears.

Parmanand and Sardari Lal took some time in containing themselves. Then they steeled themselves realizing that if they too lost courage, who would console their sons-in-law.

Before the photographers could click their cameras at the crying accused, Sardari Lal covered their faces with the towels brought specially for this purpose.

From the other side the slogans like 'Hang the Guilty' were heard.

In view of the deteriorating situation the police extricated them from the crowd of their supporters, made them seated in the official Maruti Gypsy and drove them away in no time.

The Commissioner failed to understand why no officer had obliged them.

The plaintiff party was not that much influential. Ved was lying in the hospital. Ramnath was an outsider. He could not garner so much support from Mayanagar. Some third force was active behind all this. There could be no solution to the problem unless this third force was identified.

The commissioner had reached Mayanagar just today. Parmanand had been here since yesterday. He must be more conversant with the whole situation.

So the Commissioner took Parmanand to the annexe. Parmanand too was as ignorant of the situation as the Commissioner. Throughout his life he had never faced such an embarrassing situation.

Both the relatives had unanimity on one point that some

big power was operating behind this game. It could be some rival businessman or any blackmailer with the sole purpose of minting money. No businessman would weave such plots just to settle scores. It must be some blackmailer.

"Who was this blackmailer?" This vexation disturbed both the relatives but they could not get any clue.

"What is there to feel disappointed in it? Let's ask both the sons-in-law. They must know everything," they said and moved towards the police station.

Pankaj did not know anything except the acrimony developed with Baghel Singh. They had nothing against anybody else and nobody else had ever threatened them.

Commissioner found an answer to the ticklish riddle. This scheme was the brainchild of only Baghel Singh. This was a one crore issue. How to ensure that silencing the MLA would cool-down the issue.

"Let's go to our own recommenders. One of them will definitely tell who stopped him from helping us," said Parmanand.

All of them, when contacted, gave the same reply," The Chief Minister."

"The Chief Minister? But who instigated him against us?"

The SSP came out with the answer, "Manage Baghel Singh. All others will be set right themselves."

The SSP even helped them by arranging their meeting with Baghel Singh.

Both the relatives had got this disturbing news about the arrest of their sons-in-law all of a sudden. They had come along with whatever cash was lying at their respective houses. Still the Commissioner had ten lacs in his brief case while Parmanand had fifteen lacs.

This amount was sufficient to initiate talks and if needed they could collect many a crore within an hour.

Both the relatives joined hands. They could spend any amount for the husbands of their daughters.

Before meeting the MLA they took Kishori Lal along with them. They could need his advice as the matter was related to law.

According to Kishori Lal's opinion, the legal action would have to pass through several stages. The process should be divided into three parts. First installment of thirty lacs could be given today. In lieu of this installment, Baghel Singh would relax a bit and the boys would be shifted from lock up to the hospital.

The second stage would be over after the accused were declared innocent after a high level probe. As the report of their innocence reached the court, second installment would be given to Baghel Singh.

The third installment would be due on the acquittal of the accused as till then; the sword of punishment would keep dangling over their heads.

The first two conditions were acceptable to Baghel Singh. He objected seriously to the third one.

The government of his party was in a count-down stage. Nobody knew which party would come next into power. Nobody would fulfill the promises after that, he knew. Such cases took years to reach a logical end. The Chief Minister would not wait that long.

The conditions were revised a little.

The first installment would be of forty lacs instead of thirty lacs.

The second installment would be payable after the accused were declared innocent.

However, the Chief Minister's role ended at this stage. The accused were supposed to look after the judicial process themselves. The third installment was to be withheld till the release of the accused, so that no Public Prosecutor or police officer created any obstacle;

In duress, the Commissioner accepted all the conditions. Their sons-in-law must be freed. They were ready to pay any price for that.

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With the first installment of forty lacs, Baghel Singh left for Chandigarh.

This was his maiden dealing with the Chief Minister in such affairs. He felt a peculiar type of fragrance exuded by such dealings.

He took some applications regarding some minor works including a couple of transfers; sanction of some loans and some grants for common projects.

Baghel Singh had thought that the gratified Chief Minister would scribble his signatures within no time and it would earn him sufficient for one month.

The Political Secretary had been waiting for him impatiently.

Baghel Singh was taken straight to the personal drawing room of the Chief Minister.

He did not have to wait much. The Chief Minister joined him in the drawing room leaving everything aside.

“What about your case, Baghel?” The Chief Minister knew the purpose of this visit. With the airs of a conqueror he made the MLA realise his political power.

“You have really done wonders. My prestige has increased greatly with your blessings,” said Baghel Singh touching the knees of the Chief Minister as a gesture of respect.

“There were many approaches even from the centre. I didn’t bother. I thought the boy is annoyed with me and he has asked me for a favour for the first time. I must maintain his honour.”

“You have increased my prestige indeed! Please accept the first installment,” said Baghel Singh offering the brief case full of currency notes to the Chief Minister.

This was for the first time when any briefcase had reached the Chief Minister. Otherwise the briefcases were generally deposited with his Political Secretary and it was he who informed the Chief Minister on phone regarding the amount received.

This brief case was allowed inside knowingly.

“What’s this?”

“Forty lacs.”

“Keep it then. What am I to do with it? See your *Bapu’s* grace now.”

The new generation addressed the Chief Minister as *Bapu*. Discharging duties of magnanimous father, the Chief Minister patted Baghel Singh on his back and returned the brief case to him.

"This is your share. I'll take the next installment, please."

"No, no. All installments belong to you. Tell me what else I can do for you."

The Chief Minister was bent on pleasing Baghel Singh.

Overwhelmed with reverence and surprise, Baghel Singh could not think how to thank the Chief Minister.

Then the Chief Minister called his Political Secretary and asked him to place the brief case in Baghel Singh's car.

"Leave your worthless *Jathedar*. You will find nothing by following him. But if you join our group, you will get such a bounty daily."

Shedding a cunning smile, the Chief Minister disclosed the reason of his magnanimity to Baghel Singh.

"Forgive me, please. I'm with you from today onwards."

Once again, Baghel Singh stooped low towards the knees of the Chief Minister. But the Chief Minister held him halfway through and embraced him.

This warm embrace by the Chief Minister gladdened Baghel Singh to his innermost being.

He resolved never to be disloyal to the Chief Minister.

PART-II



Law is the slave of the rich

— an English saying

The local editions of most of the reputed dailies carried the bold headlines on news about the case of Pankaj and Neeraj.

Due to the excesses of police, the blood pressure of the accused had shot up. Pankaj had a pain in the chest with the result that the police had to take him to the Civil Hospital in the midnight. The doctors had described their condition as precarious. Both the brothers were fighting a battle of life and death in the emergency ward of the hospital.

Ramnath was shocked to read this news. He felt enraged at the doctors and gave full vent to his ire against the newspapers as well.

It was a well-known fact that the children of the rich are weak at heart. Rise in blood pressure in strenuous times too was natural. But there was not an iota of truth in the news that the accused duo was fighting a battle of life and death. They had framed this excuse just to avoid the travails of lock up. They were trying to take undue advantage of the liberality of law. They were trying to convert bad times into good with the influence of their wealth.

Ramnath could not understand what lay behind all these happenings. Who would tell him the inside story?

Had he been in his own city, he would have gathered all the requisite information on a single telephone call. But here, in Mayanagar, he was an alien. The doctors of this city would not tell him anything.

High blood-pressure and cardiac troubles were something very common in *Mayanagar*. The people of this industrial city were rich in wealth but had no peace of mind. A little bit of trouble would raise their blood-pressure and arrest their hearts. The police generally refrained from arresting these business people. They started swooning at the very sight of a uniformed policeman at their door. The police too remained on tenterhooks so long as the businessman was in their custody lest he should

succumb to the fright of police and the police should invite on itself the charge of killing the accused in its custody. To save its own skin the police informed the court about the health of the accused at every step.

Ramnath could get authentic information from the court. He started waiting for the opening of the court.

The Public Prosecutor was conversant with the whole situation. The doctors had detected the diseases mentioned in the news.

The doctors had requested the court that the accused be examined by the heart specialists. Since the civil hospital lacked modern facilities, the accused must be sent to the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Science, Chandigarh.

The lawyers of the accused had filed an application. They objected to their clients being sent to the PGI. PGI was a government hospital; only the influential people got proper attention and common man had no say there. Their clients were already under treatment in the Escorts Hospital, Delhi. They must be sent there. They did not need treatment at government's expenses and were ready to bear the expenditure themselves.

Ramnath understood the whole game and decided that the plaintiff side should protest against this application. With this view, Ramnath went to the typist and got a reply to the application typed. The plaintiff's application described the request of the accused as a new trick to avoid jail and take rest in the air-conditioned rooms of the hospital. Just yesterday the very same doctors had examined the accused and declared them as hale and hearty. The heart disease is not caused overnight. Ramnath suggested the court to form a Board of specialist doctors under its supervision, get the accused examined through modern technique and base its decision on their diagnosis.

This reply should be filed by the Public Prosecutor. The plaintiff's lawyer had no right to meddle with the affairs of the court.

He looked out for the Public Prosecutor. He was not found anywhere, neither in court nor in his office, nor in the canteen, nor in the chamber of any advocate. He was seen nowhere.

The lawyers of the accused were in the court. Hearing on

the application could take place any time. Ramnath filed application just to stall court proceedings till the Public Prosecutor arrived. This time, instead of the defence consuls, the magistrate pounced on him, "You have no right at all to file an application."

"What can I do if the Public Prosecutor slips away knowingly?" said Ramnath who was tired and exhausted in the process of looking for the Public Prosecutor.

The magistrate and the Public Prosecutor were confidants of each other. The magistrate had to go against the plaintiff party. If the magistrate pronounced his judgement without hearing the Public Prosecutor, then the latter was likely to be complained against. It was the duty of the magistrate to protect the Public Prosecutor.

Respondents also assessed Ramnath's mood. The Public Prosecutor had gone with their men to the Satluj Club for a glass of beer. The defence side was hardly bothered whether the judgement was announced an hour earlier or later. It was their duty to safeguard the interests of the Public Prosecutor. The decision must be pronounced in his presence only.

"The arguments will be heard in the afternoon. By that time you find out the Public Prosecutor."

The defence side accepted the magistrate's order and came out meekly.

After about two hours of harassment, Ramnath came to know the whereabouts of the Public Prosecutor.

Since it would not have been proper to spoil their orgy, Ramnath started waiting for him at the main gate.

The Public Prosecutor could not be disloyal to the accused with whose men he had been enjoying a few minutes earlier. He said, "this matter is between the accused and the magistrate. The accused are in judicial custody. How does it matter to the government whether they are in the jail or in the hospital? It will not be proper for me to plead in favour of the plaintiff."

"But it does matter to us whether the accused are in the jail or in the hospital. The hardships of a lockup or a jail cell are not without meaning. These are governed by the principle of

teaching a lesson to the present accused and scare the potential criminals. If the accused come back after taking rest in the hospitals, it will only encourage the unscrupulous criminal elements. It will abet crime and sprinkle salt on the wounds of the plaintiffs."

The Public Prosecutor was not affected at all with this jargon of idealism. The government was supposed to treat the plaintiff and the accused with the same eyes. If the accused were sick, they had the right to be treated. The Public Prosecutor was not ready to invite the charge of being pro-plaintiff by opposing the application without any substantial reason.

Ramnath felt that the prosecutor was not going to help him in a fair manner. He said, "Please help me. I'm ready to serve you."

But the PP was not in a mood to accept any obligation.

This case was a bit extra ordinary one. The newspapers had their eyes on it. Information on its progress was furnished not only to senior officers but the Chief Minister also. A Public Prosecutor had already been punished in this case.

There was still another risk in accepting graft. The decision was sure to be pronounced in favour of the accused only. Going against the plaintiffs, even after taking money from them, would tantamount to betrayal only. Adopting a tough posture by rejecting the inflow of money too would not be right.

After a little thinking over the PP started changing his posture and said.

"Please try to understand my position. On one hand, I myself have submitted the application given by the doctors, to the magistrate. Now how can I oppose that very application? Anyway let's find some middle path. We won't oppose in writing. However we'll oppose sending the patients to the heart specialists of their choice."

This in fact, what the PP did.

"The government is ready to send the accused to the specialists. But they will not be of their choice. Today they want to go to Escort Hospital; tomorrow they may wish to go to America. The court is not to go by the wishes of the accused. They must be diagnosed by the government specialists," he pleaded.

The magistrate protected both the sides.

“The antecedents of the government doctors are not beyond suspicion. Yesterday, they said that the accused are all right and today they declare them as seriously sick. There are many hospitals of Escorts Hospital level in Mayanagar. The doctors of this hospital are immune to any temptation or the government. Their report can be trusted easily. Therefore, the accused must be diagnosed by five doctors of Dayanand Hospital.”

Ramnath did not object much to this decision.

He had never heard of the doctors of this hospital having behaved like their civil hospital counterparts.

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All specialist doctors of Dayanand Hospital were unanimous on the point that both the accused were seriously sick and every minute of their life was critical. Any attempt to shift them to civil hospital or anywhere else could prove fatal. The doctors could not afford any dereliction of duty. Without waiting for any court orders, they admitted both the accused to emergency and started their treatment.

Even the magistrate found it difficult to turn down the advice of the specialist doctors. In keeping with the medical opinion, he ordered, “The accused should be kept in Dayanand Hospital till they recover well.”

Ramnath accepted the orders with the belief that the reputed doctors earning lacs per month must have given a true report. One or two doctors could be managed with money power, not all the five.

He started waiting for the ‘recovery’ of Pankaj and Neeraj. But what he thought was far from truth.

This hospital was managed by some industrialists of Mayanagar. The industrialists are generally the puppets in the hands of Income Tax Commissioner. The commissioner made them dance to their tune and the industrialists made the doctors act as directed. The Commissioner could intimidate the doctors also, but he reserved this device of intimidation for some more opportune time.

Under a well contemplated scheme, they were kept for a day in Emergency and for three days in the ICU.

After four days of hard work on the part of doctors, their condition improved a little. Now they could be shifted to the general ward.

But it was not proper for Pankaj and Neeraj to be moved to the general ward. It accommodated thirty to forty patients at a time and almost double or triple in number were their attendants. The ward was no better than a loft that way.

Moreover, they were in police custody. The police had to keep an eye on them by sitting close by. It would spread the news of their arrest very fast throughout the city. They must be admitted in to special rooms which were situated in a corner of the ward. The patients and their attendants were to sit in their separate room. It would keep their identity secret.

Besides, the special rooms were air-conditioned and equipped with amenities like kitchen, refrigerator and television. There was an extra bed provided for the attendants and some chairs for those who came to enquire about their health. Telephone facility was also available in these rooms.

Both the patients; got two adjacent special rooms allotted for themselves.

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First day, two uniformed constables armed with guns were deployed to keep vigil on the accused. They had orders to shoot if one tried to escape from the police custody. They were equipped with a walkie-talkie set also. If need be they could contact the police station.

Both the constables set their chairs before the rooms of the accused and occupied their positions. Every visitor was subjected to a bit of inquiry.

Had it been some ordinary prisoner admitted to the civil hospital, the police would follow the rules with all strictness. One of his legs would have been chained to the bed and every time he would seek policeman's permission for going to lavatory or urinal.

This rule was not applicable to these accused. The lawyers

had got them exemption from handcuffs by quoting a Supreme Court judgement.

A voluntary Human Rights Organisation was of the view that the chains are meant for animals only and that the chain injured the Man in man. The Supreme Court had agreed to this view and banned handcuffing the accused.

If a convict could not be handcuffed then how an ailing accused could be fettered? It would have bruised his psyche which in turn would hamper his treatment.

The fetters were dispensed with. Now the question was how to get rid of the uniformed policemen. Their presence outside the rooms would arouse the curiosity of one and all and they had become the talk of the town.

Pankaj found a solution to this irritant also.

Throughout the day they were like guests. In the evening they were given one bottle of whisky each and five hundred rupees for snacks.

Next day they replaced their uniform. They put on khaki pants, khaki turbans and red boots in such a way that they looked more civilians than employees of police force.

The Investigation officer, who came to interrogate the accused in the hospital, apprised the constables with the new instructions received from above.

“Don’t keep sitting for long before the rooms. Keep vigil on the surroundings also by moving about here and there,” he said.

The constables were sensible enough to decode these instructions in letter and spirit.

One of them started attending duty in the hospital another kept remaining on furlough alternatively.

After the police remand was over, the responsibility of keeping an eye on the accused came from the police on to the jail authorities.

The constables returned and the jail wards occupied their place.

These Home guard sepoy were the loyalists of the jail superintendent. They served their seniors more than doing their official duties. Before being recruited, they served as domestic helps in the houses of their bosses. They still did the same

personal service. They neither knew how to wear uniform nor handling a weapon. On the very first day they mixed up with the patients and started helping them in bringing Tiffin and other things from their house. They even extended a helping hand to the women of the house in spreading washed clothes on clothes-line for drying. At times they would make tea and serve it to the visitors.

As the time rolled by, the restrictions went on decreasing.

First, the accused were allowed to carry mobile phones with them. They did have a telephone each in their rooms but there was a problem in using them. They received hundreds of calls related to business. Every businessman could not be given the hospital phone number. The mobile phone facility *removed* the problem they faced in running their business.

They converted one of the rooms into their office. The chairs and tables of both the rooms were brought into this room. The bed of this room was shifted to the adjacent room. The manager, clerk and other workers started sitting in this room.

The businessmen started coming to the hospital now rather than going to the factory.

The business came back once again on the rails.

The restrictions relaxed still further. Both the brothers started going to their house one by one. Sometimes they visited their factory as well.

There was no longer any strictness during night also. Their wives had been allowed to sleep near them for looking after the patients.

Singla used to visit them every evening and apprise them with the progress of proceedings at the police station or the court.

The plaintiffs and respondents were admitted in the same hospital. The common relatives made them familiar with the condition of each other.

Ramnath objected to every facility being provided to the accused. But in collusion with the Public Prosecutor, Singla did not let any of his efforts bear fruit. Every application he submitted was rejected.

Singla broke one more good news.

It was the responsibility of government to bear expenses of the treatment of the accused in custody. If due to lack of facilities in the civil hospital, they are treated in some private hospital, the government is supposed to bear expenses of the private hospital also. He had dug out a judgement of Supreme Court to this effect.

Singla had lodged an application for reimbursement in the court. He hoped that at the next hearing, the decision would be made in their favour.

Pankaj bothered little for the expenses. They had come to the hospital just to avoid harassment. Their mission was being fulfilled here.

Pleased at Singla's efforts, Pankaj promised him saying, "What you get out of the state exchequer will be yours."

Thus encouraged, Singla started pursuing the case with renewed zeal.

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With the emergence of every new problem, Ramnath thought it was the last one and he could go back to his town after solving it and set right his spoiled business and disheveled household.

But nothing happened as he hoped.

After getting the case registered, he had thought that his responsibility was over. Recording the statements of witnesses, recovery of case property, apprehending the culprits, photography of the site, drawing maps etc. everything formed a part of the responsibilities of police.

For two three days, the police worked with alacrity. Two of the culprits were apprehended. Some stolen material was seized. As the accusing finger was pointed towards Pankaj and Neeraj, the police activity jammed then and there.

Ramnath had to awaken the sleeping police men by going personally. Whatever he got added to the case file was recorded and it was shelved the moment he came out of the police station.

The police was demanding witnesses at every step to plug the loopholes of law. It was the responsibility of the police to find real eye-witness. The police could find them also but they could fall into the hands of the accused side for a few rupees

only. The police should be given witnesses who are solid like rocks; who may dance to the tune of Ramnath. In his own town Ramnath could very easily find such witnesses. Here the witnesses were taking their fees also and it was not sure that they would depose in their favour or not. Even then Ramnath had to keep patience.

All the accused involved in the incident had been apprehended. Every other day, one or the other of accused would create a new problem. Some one would file an application for arrangement of identification parade; some other would apply for a ten days' leave saying that his wife was ill.

Ramnath had to approach the court to oppose each and every application. Nothing moved without his going to the court. At every step he had to gratify the Public Prosecutor and solve some legal issues.

After the arrest of Pankaj and his younger brother, Ramnath had thought that now he would be free. Inquiry was complete. Within four-five days the police had to submit the *challan*. There after the judicial process would take its own time.

Both the patients were about to be discharged. As they reached home, his responsibility would be off and they would convalesce in due course of time.

But the arrival of the accused brothers in the same hospital added to his headache manifold. On one hand, judiciary started lavishing facilities on the accused and on the other, the number of visitors coming to enquire about the health of Ved and Neelam increased.

Neelam was lying on the fifth floor of the hospital and Ved was on the first floor. The rooms of the accused duo were on the third floor. The common relatives found it difficult to be as indifferent as to ignore Ved and Neelam even if they wished it. Just for the sake of formality they met them also.

Maya Devi often came to the hospital to see her sons. But she spent more time on the first floor instead of the third floor. She laid bare her heart to Ved and shared her agony earnestly. She often moistened her eyes by remembering Kamal and caressed Neha time and again by taking her into her arms.

Maya Devi knew that her sons were the masterminds behind

the perpetration of the heart-rending incident. She neither justified her sons, nor ever talked about any compromise with them. She would come to the hospital with a heavy heart and return silently with tears in her eyes.

But all the relatives were not as human and humane as Maya Devi.

Most of them were of the view that the boys were innocent and had been implicated on the basis of suspicion only. It was their wishful thinking that they must be released. Some sensible relatives did not express their pro-accused stance and avoided to mention their name to the victims of the tragedy. But they were outnumbered by those who had a soft corner for Pankaj and his brother Neeraj. They did give vent to their feelings.

Someone would say, "Ved, be generous and forget everything. Pardon the children of your elder brother."

Someone else would come out with a suggestion, "Settle the issue by give and take. We'll ask the boys to withdraw all cases against you. Also we'll make them give you what else you want. Why do you fritter away your money on police and lawyers? It's a family affair; settle it in the family only."

Suchlike suggestions added only insult to the injury rather than assuaging Ved's feelings.

Speaking was prohibited to Ved. His eyes were all tears as he heard such words of worldly wisdom from the common relatives. And these tears engendered many questions as they rolled down his cheeks.

"Can anybody evaluate the murder of a young son? Can the lost chastity of your young unmarried girl be compensated in terms of money? Of what use is money or plots to me now?"

Receiving no response from Ved these self-styled consultants turned to Ramnath.

Ramnath, too, would repeat these very questions. His refusal piqued these advisors. "Ved is a thoroughly gentle person. He would never say 'no' to us. This bloody lawyer is the root cause of all the trouble. He doesn't let him come on the right track," They would say.

Earlier, they cursed Ramnath at his back but now started saying these things on his face also.

When the relatives failed to affect a compromise, this responsibility was taken up by the social functionaries. Some organisations, which in the beginning were at the forefront in staging demonstrations and taking out processions, started talking of compromise. Some journalists started reminding them of their all-out co-operation in this connection. The parents of the friends of Kamal and Neha also discerned good in burying the hatchet.

Moreover, the real brothers of Ramnath were also fed up with the prolongation of this family strife, while sitting comfortably in their respective houses. Covertly they advised him to get rid of the imbroglio and come back.

Ashwini said, "Pankaj and Neeraj are very rich. We can't resist them for long."

Mangat would say, "They will get acquitted with their money-power. Saving grace lies in withdrawing now rather than feeling defeated later on."

The family found itself in a dilemma under pressure exerted from all sides for a compromise.

For Neelam nothing mattered much. She had become almost a stoic. Ved had developed a capacity of digesting the bitterness of situation, but he was disturbed at the sensitivity of Neha's age. He was filled with rage.

Everybody was getting disillusioned with Ramnath.

The presence of the accused in the hospital made it difficult for Ved and Neelam to keep staying in the hospital. While their physical wounds had not healed yet properly, the wounds of their psyche had become deeper.

Hospital was no longer a place of treatment for them.

Before any one of them reaches a stage of getting admitted to the psychiatry ward, they should go home by getting discharged from the hospital.

The doctors were not in favour of discharging them. But Ramnath got them discharged against medical advice.

Full recovery would take place in due course of time.

After all, they had passed through a great tragedy. It was bound to have its impact, whatever little, on them throughout life.

Although Pankaj and Neeraj were enjoying homelike facilities in the hospital yet they started feeling ill at ease after twenty days. They started pressurising their relatives for getting them released whether by talking to the police, ringing up a judge or giving what they demand otherwise they would really fall sick.

Nand Lal was called to the hospital by giving him special fees. He was beseeched for liberation from the judicial custody. He was requested to lodge an application in the court quoting a plethora of cases in their favour. Track was clear now from the government's side. There was no pressure on any judge, what was the problem after all in the acceptance of regular bail.

Nand Lal was not in favour of making undue haste in this case. The law was not to go by the wishes of the accused. The IG had completed his probe; the statements of the witnesses had been recorded. The site had been visited. Only the preparation of report was pending. Nand Lal wanted that application should be lodged by the police rather than the accused for the release of the accused. They should get released on the basis of the application.

God forbid, if the application was again sent to a whimsical judge like Sadhu Singh and turned down, it would put a seal of the court on their being accused. This seal would cost them dear in the long run. Moreover, bail petition was not going to be accepted on the very first day. It would take at least ten or fifteen days. These days should be utilized for getting the report prepared from the IG and get the needful done in a solid way.

Nand Lal had another view also i.e. before getting the bail for Pankaj and Neeraj accepted, the bail of one of the *Bhayyas* should be managed somehow.

The prime accused in the case were the *Bhayyas*, because of their direct involvement in the crime. The looted property had been recovered from their possession. Pankaj and Neeraj were accused of only abetting the crime. They came only next to the main accused according to law. If one of the prime accused was released on bail, then those next to him, were sure to be bailed out.

Of the five main accused, the possibility of granting bail to Pancham was much more. Although he described his age as somewhere between twenty three and twenty four, but as he had no beard as yet, he looked no older than just eighteen. This feature of his physique could be utilized properly. Law provided special concessions to the juvenile delinquents. This very concession was sufficient for getting him bail. Such criminals were sure to be granted bail irrespective of the gravity of their crime. This concession was based on the plea that the adolescents could not be allowed to become hardcore criminals by keeping them in the company of the professional ruffians. Secondly, such accused could not be sentenced to imprisonment even if convicted. At the most they could be kept in Juvenile Reformatories for a maximum period of three years so as to provide them a chance of getting reformed. After three years they were bound to be released without ascertaining whether they were really reformed as desired or not.

There was still another basis on which Pancham could be granted bail. He had been given a severe thrashing in police custody. His right leg had broken and was plastered now. Nand Lal had come to know that due to improper treatment, his broken bone had got infected. As a result, his leg could be amputated any time. Under the pretext of jail doctors' negligence and saving the leg from amputation, he could be got released on bail.

There was no difficulty in concealing the age of Pancham, Nobody knew where and to whom he was born. Being totally illiterate, there was no question of availability of any birth-certificate. Neither the plaintiffs nor the respondents would find any testimony to certify his birth. In such a confused state of affairs, the court would seek a doctor's help that would assess his age by examining his bones. This would not be a foolproof test. Difference of two-three years could easily be shown this way or that way. Even if the doctor described him as between seventeen and nineteen, it would go in favour of the accused. The law was supposed to accept the age which benefited the accused.

The doctors were under the influence of Pankaj. They could

be made to write a desirable report. Thus the court would be compelled to sanction bail.

Pancham had on him, the charge of dacoity, as well as that of murdering Kamal. He was the prime accused in the case. His bail would pave way clearly to the bail of other accused also.

Singla conformed to the opinion of his mentor.

“May be the IG’s report comes even before the bail is granted to Pancham and you’re released immediately on the basis of this report,” he said.

Still farsightedness demanded that preparations must be made to face any kind of un-favourable situation. Nobody knew when the tables would be turned on them. There is many a slip between the cup and the lip. Pankaj and Neeraj had experienced the veracity of this axiom several times in this very case. For the time being they should go by admitting that the report was not being prepared in their favour. They should prepare themselves as per the normal circumstances.

Except Ram Lubhaya, none of the accused had any guardian or protector in the city. They had not hired any lawyer. There was no chance of their release till the final decision.

Imprisonment of all the five accused was alarming for Pankaj and Neeraj.

In case the accused were in the jail, the court had to expedite the proceedings of the case. The higher courts did not like the accused to remain in jail indefinitely. They kept reprimanding the lower courts to settle the case as early as possible. If the accused was innocent he should be released without any delay, they said.

If a judge like Sadhu Singh, just by way of habit, started expediting the case, it would be very difficult to stop him. If a fresh case reaches its logical conclusion, the accused are convicted in most of the cases. The witnesses’ minds are changed with anger and their memory is fresh. If the case lingers on for a long time, on the other hand, the witnesses and supporters tire themselves out by frequently visiting courts for evidence, listening to the admonitions of the judges and lawyers and lightening their purses to the court officials. Taking it as an exercise in futility they give up pursuing the case. As a last resort

they make a compromise by accepting what is offered to them as peacekeeping amount.

Therefore, Singla should start his endeavours right now for elongating the case as much as possible.

More the number of accused on bail, longer will the case go.

Pankaj and Neeraj had experienced that if the officers take a stand firmly, then no amount of money or recommendatory words can deviate them from their path.

On such occasions only legal trickery helps out.

There was no possibility of the release of the other accused. The legal strategy demanded that at least Pancham should be taken into confidence.

Before getting the bail, terms should be settled with him. The most important condition was that till the judgement he would act according to their wish. He should be mentally prepared to go to jail or come out of it, if needed.

For further deliberations, Pancham was contacted. He readily agreed to all conditions.

He found himself benefiting in both the cases. If he was declared a juvenile, it will be just wonderful. If not, by coming out of jail, his leg will be saved from amputation. In the jail, his leg could be chopped off any time.

Preparations for Pancham's bail out started.

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Flouting all the rules and regulations of natural justice, more and more facilities were being lavished on the affluent accused-duo, while every application lodged by Ramnath to protest against these facilities was being out rightly rejected.

In his first representation, Ramnath had challenged the diagnosis of the doctors of Dayanand Hospital, which declared the accused as heart patients.

The magistrate had dismissed his representation on the plea that there was no solid reason to doubt the opinion of five cardiologists.

Ramnath appealed against this decision in the Sessions Court. The Sessions Judge issued notice to the other side and fixed hearing after a month. Many such monthly hearings were

held even thereafter. Till the decision is made, they would be released. Of what significance will the decision be to the complainant after their release?

Through his second representation, Ramnath had objected to the facilities given to the accused including those like setting up their office in the hospital, keeping mobile phones, unrestricted meetings, and visits to their house and allowing their wives to sleep in their rooms. Rather than putting any restriction on these facilities, the judge had asked the Deputy Superintendent of Police to probe the issue and gave him one month's time to complete probe and submit his report.

Ramnath could not dare to make any appeal against this decision lest it should meet the fate of his earlier appeals. The tension caused by the unilateral decisions of the court had not eased when the application filed by the lawyers of the accused for getting Pancham declared a juvenile delinquent added only insult to the injuries of Ramnath.

Pancham was unbearded not because he was adolescent but because he belonged to Mongoloid race. The Mongoloids normally do not grow beards or mustaches at all. Even if they do, they do it at a very later stage of life.

Pancham's stature, his complexion and features proved him to be a Nepalese. During police interrogation he had told his age as somewhere between twenty four and twenty five years. In fact, he was this much of age.

Pancham had attached an affidavit with his application in which he had mentioned his age as seventeen. There was an affidavit attached with this application, which was given by some bogus head of his village, certifying his age as correct.

The government had taken notice of Pancham's bail petition.

The Government did not feel any need for assistance from the complainants' side. P.P. did not bother to inform them at all.

Ramnath had come to know about this development through his own sources.

Ramnath could smell the change in the attitude of the government machinery. The hobnobbing of the accused with Baghet Singh could not remain hidden for long.

The people also knew about the findings of investigation being made by the crime branch. That the IG had proved them innocent, had become an open secret. At first, Ramnath viewed all this as rumours, but now he could see that what he treated as rumours was nothing but truth.

Earlier, Ramnath was informed regarding any submissions made in the court through a special messenger but now it was tried to conceal facts from him even when he asked about them.

He started feeling disheartened. He was sure that there was no hope of any help from the government. He decided that from now onwards he would rely on his own efforts only. In his town there were three magistrates and one Sessions Judge. There were four Public Prosecutors and about fifteen other officials. He had very good relations with all of them.

Mayanagar had a number of judicial officers, including one Sessions Judge, five Additional Sessions Judges, eighteen magistrates and an equal number of government pleaders. Besides, there were one thousand advocates and hundreds of court officials. Nobody had any personal attachment with the other. And it was not even possible. Here money was the only potent factor which governed their relations. The deals were made very much on official seats. The bribe was accepted overtly in the name of convenience fees. The graft money was pocketed after counting the currency notes very carefully. If there was some mutilated note, the officer was particular enough to get it replaced.

But the situation was entirely different in Ramnath's town. Had this incident taken place in that city, no advocate would have taken the case of the murderers of the nephew of one of their colleagues. The whole Bar would have come at the back of Ramnath, by treating it as its own case. Not to speak of getting any fees from them, rather every document pertaining to the case would have reached his house on its own.

Here, in *Mayanagar*, hundred rupees were being charged for what could be done for ten rupees only and that too after a lot of harassment.

So far, Ramnath had felt no need of hiring a private lawyer. The government pleaders were doing their duties diligently.

But now the non-cooperation movement launched by the government pleaders had made him feel the necessity of a private lawyer's services.

Ramnath had graduated in law twenty six years back by attending evening classes. During day time he did some job. Most of his class fellows had not dared to leave their jobs in spite of having passed their law course. As a result, he could not find even a single one of his class fellows practicing law in the courts of *Mayanagar*.

The boys who passed their LL.B. Degree by attending morning classes had an advantage of finding some or other of their classmates practicing law in almost every city. Some of them had risen to the status of magistrate or even Sessions Judge. The old chums do not ignore their friendship bonds. They meet each other with utmost warmth and oblige whole heartedly.

Ramnath had brought some letters from his colleagues at his place in the name of some lawyers of *Mayanagar*. He contacted some lawyers on the basis of these letters but except some formal welcome gesture nobody had valued these letters worth a farthing. Someone asked his junior advocate and some other his clerk to help Ramnath. It was only Raj Kumar who had cooperated with him a little. Raj Kumar took note of every judicial action initiated by the accused respondents and informed Ramnath accordingly. Then Ramnath tried to find out a way to scuttle their move.

It was he who introduced Ramnath to the government pleaders and got the copies of orders prepared from the concerned officials. Also it was he who decided the gratification fees for each one of the court officials. Ramnath felt that Raj Kumar was his only benefactor in this city of heartless people.

During the vehement run-around of last one month and a half, Ramnath had come to know that the charges of lawyers in *Mayanagar* were extra ordinarily high. In his city, the senior most advocates would charge ten thousand. Here it was the fees of a senior advocate's clerk only. Before reaching an advocate of Ramnath's caliber, a client would visit atleast twenty advocates and would pay hardly two three thousand and that too in installments.

Here, no advocate would call back a client once he left and no clerk followed him. What to talk of seniors even the junior advocates roomed about in the latest model cars. One or two of them had even Mercedes cars.

The way, this case was taking the turn, made Ramnath feel a dire necessity for hiring the services of a senior advocate. The accused brothers had hired top lawyers who could be countered only by an equally expert lawyer.

Ramnath made up his mind to contact a senior advocate through Raj Kumar.

Raj Kumar agreed with him on this issue.

Ramnath and Raj Kumar, both together too, could not face the big sharks. A capable lawyer was needed urgently to stop the judges from behaving in an arbitrary manner.

The senior advocates were adept at law. Undoubtedly, they had their access to the upper courts. They flattered the judges of course, but did not hesitate in quarrelling with them if needed. Had there been any senior lawyer on their side, the magistrate would not have dared to provide facilities to the accused deserved by ministers only.

"But I've heard the senior advocates charge very heavily," said Ramnath who was aware of his limits.

"Yes, of course they charge very heavily."

"Don't they have any soft corner for their own fraternity?"

"They do have it to a certain extent."

"Whom should we contact?"

"Let's go to Nemi Nath. His fees are high but no bungling thereafter, neither in the name of a Public Prosecutor nor a judge, If need be, he will ensure your direct contact with them. But he won't let his client be fleeced. He will be the best person to contact, I think."

"How much will be charge?"

"Let's talk to him. He's not greedy at all. He's the one to call a spade, a spade. We'll ask him to give us concession."

"Okay then. Let's contact him."

"We'll go to his residence in the evening. I'll take appointment from him."

Nemi Nath could be contacted in the evening only.

They parted with each other with the promise to meet again in the evening.

At appointed time, Raj Kumar himself went to Ramnath. Sitting on the pillion of his scooter, Ramnath was all admiration for Raj Kumar thinking that even in this city of dust and iron, human sentiment is not destroyed altogether.

Nemi Nath was waiting for them.

A small group of clients was waiting outside his residence. Nemi Nath had not so far started meeting them. Priority was to be given to the lawyers.

Nemi Nath was very punctual and cared for every single minute. Without any superfluity of words, Nemi Nath said, "Brother, I' am very sorry to know about the injustice being meted out to you. I want to plead your case. But I am facing a problem for the time being. First let me remove it. I will inform you about my decision tomorrow morning. Please tell me have your phone number. I will ring you up myself."

Being an alien in this city, Ramnath had no contact number. He was always on his toes, sometimes at the police station and sometimes in the courts.

"You give me the time. I will telephone you myself."

Nemi Nath gave his visiting card to Ramnath and asked him to fix time by telephoning at seven in the morning.

"You tell me. I' ll bring him along," interrupted Raj Kumar.

"No I can't say anything for the time being. I can tell you my decision only at seven in the morning tomorrow."

When Ramnath rang him up early in the morning next day, he was asked to come alone to his residence.

"Brother, I'm a very plain speaking man with full transparency in my work. I charge fifty five thousand as fees but in case the client belongs to our lawyer community, it comes to almost fifty percent. As per my rule in your case my fees amounts to twenty five thousand. I can't defy my own rule by demanding fifty five thousand. But i can't afford to part with one third of this fifty per cent fees to Raj Kumar who brought you here. And moreover, I can't be deceitful enough to leave him out. I can't annoy a new advocate. These people bring a lot of work. Therefore, I can't take your case. But I promise you that if you need consultancy at any time or you want me to

plead for you, I'll do that without any fees. Now I have a suggestion to offer. If you have to talk to any lawyer, go straightway. You, yourself, are a lawyer. What hesitation do you have in talking to a lawyer? Even if you made someone telephone a senior lawyer, the caller will become entitled to his share in the fees and the lawyer will be compelled to increase his rate."

Ramnath was taken aback at Nemi Nath's words. Raj Kumar had demanded commission even in such a case like cow-slaughter. He was simply not ready to believe that the people can go to such a dismal extent out of avarice.

He started feeling a sort of dizziness as he came out of Nemi Nath's residence. His morale started dithering at the very thought that he was not going to receive justice from *Mayanagar*. His illusions were fast turning into concrete reality.

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Torn with an inner strife, Ramnath gathered some courage after all. He could ill-afford to get disheartened like this.

Udham Singh was a very renowned name among the lawyers of Mayanagar. In the evening he reached his residence.

"You must have come to know about my fees from the courts. If I have to plead for the complainant, I charge one lac. This is my net fees. If you have to get your commission, then it comes to one lac fifty thousand. One lac mine and fifty thousand yours," the lawyer said.

"Sir, my sister's life is ruined. Do you think I will take commission from you?" tears welled up in the eyes of Ramnath who had come here already with a heavy heart. They streamed down his cheeks spontaneously.

The wails and tears of Ramnath melted Udham Singh's heart for a while. He felt sorry for his relentless attitude and thought that he should not have talked of commission in this case.

But Udham Singh was not to blame. He had to deal with such people in routine. People look for commission even if they have to manage a lawyer for their real father.

Just yesterday, he had to deal with one such case. A father of a four sons was involved in a murder case. One of the sons

who had approached him said, "*Vakil Sahib*, take your full charges. Your fee has to be contributed equally by all the four of us. You keep the contribution of three brothers and exempt my contribution as commission for bringing you the case". That worldly-wise son was a common citizen but Ramnath was a lawyer. He might demand his commission at a later stage. Why demand, it was the duty of the senior lawyer himself to give the share of the junior who brought the case. Sometimes one who brought the case did not find proper time to settle his commission; thus the liability kept haunting the senior lawyer.

Such bitter experiences had made Udham Singh outrageously outspoken. However, he apologized for his harshness which he said was quite unintentional. He patted the back of Ramnath and pacified him by serving a glass of water.

"Now I tell you why I said so. A lawyer came to me with a case related to the elder brother of his father. With the belief that he won't demand any commission due to his personal case, I demanded less fees. In the evening he came to me for claiming his share. When I objected to it he said, "How can a lion become vegetarian? Uncle has committed the crime, let him suffer for that." I was very much pleased at his reply. I blessed him saying, 'My son, you are an adept hand at using logic. You will become a very successful lawyer.'

"Sir, they have ransacked our house. I can't withdraw any amount from the account of my nephew without succession certificate. My sister is still lying unconscious. The hands of my brother-in-law are plastered. His accounts are also lying redundant. I am an ordinary lawyer of a small town. I have spent all I had on the treatment of my relatives. Please believe me now a stage has come for taking loan only. I can't pay this much fees."

"I can understand your position. I have never charged less than one lac. Anyway I'll accept half of it from you. Pay twenty thousand in advance and the rest later on." Udham Singh had given such a concession for the first time.

Ramnath did want to hire Udham Singh but he could not take decision regarding payment of so big fees on his own. He must consult Ved.

"Thank you, Sir, I'll tell you after consulting my brother-in-law."

"Okay, you can have another cut of ten thousand."

Udham Singh was being more and more merciful on Ramnath under a spirit of compassion.

This was for the first time that such a heart rending incident had taken place in *Mayanagar*. He was being shaken at heart. Under an altruistic pressure that he must help the complainant side, he was cutting down his fees.

"Thank you very much, Sir. I'll come tomorrow evening. Till then, please don't make any commitment with the accused party and wait for me."

"Promise! Even if you don't hire me, I won't plead the case of the accused party."

"Thank you, indeed!"

"You do one thing. Meet the Victim Welfare Society people. This case seems to be coming under the purview of their rules. I'm also one of their members. If they agree to take up the case, many of your problems will be solved," advised Udham Singh. Perhaps, he did not want to send Ramnath empty-handed.

"Right, Sir."

Seeing Ramnath returning disappointed, Udham Singh felt something nibbling at his entrails.

"If they agree, all right, otherwise come to me. We'll find some way out." Some inner voice from within made Udham Singh realise that he had everything one could aspire for i.e. monthly practice worth fifteen to twenty lacs, landed property, cars, and what not. Then why was he showing greed? He must plead this case free of cost.

Udham Singh bowed before the Divine voice and decided to plead this case without charging any fees.

But in spite of all this, he could not announce this decision to Ramnath.

It was so perhaps because he was not used to fight a case free of charge.

Society. It had been set up by a young thinker advocate Harish Rai about six years back; It had its units everywhere from the subdivision level to the High Court. Ramnath had met the president of this society when he had once come to his city for this very purpose.

Some so called voluntary organizations used to raise hue and cry in favour of human rights just to find their names in the newspaper headlines. Their demands were: Make jails comfortable; serve quality food to jail inmates; provide them enough water, soap, oil etc. for a bath; arrange sports and recreation for them; provide medical facilities to them; give them leave to go home; arrange free legal aid for the poor under trials; ensure solid proofs on case file before pronouncing any punishment etc.

Under the pressure of these groups, the government and court were allowing numerous concessions to the accused. Tube wells were installed for their bathing; Television sets were fitted for recreation and a separate fund was raised for providing legal aid to the needy. Law was enacted in favour of the juvenile culprits. The women accused were given enough concessions. The courts started framing rules in favour of the accused. In case there was a little bit of doubt about the charges against the accused, other proofs were brushed aside to acquit them. As a result, ninety per cent of the accused would be released.

In these pro-accused circumstances, nobody would listen to the agonies of the victims of the accused. They were suffering in two or three ways. First, the accused hurt them physically and psychologically, then the courts scratched their wounds by acquitting the accused.

Harish Rai had taken upon him the responsibility of giving a healing touch to these anguished people.

At that time Harish Rai had evoked an enormous response from the lawyers of Ramnath's city. Along with his colleagues, Ramnath had also volunteered his services to the society.

A unit of the society was set up in Ramnath's city and the unit had disseminated its aims and objectives in the whole area. But the society could not gain much popularity among the people.

The reason was that in his city injustice did not reign supreme as it did in Mayanagar. The police was quick enough to register the case immediately after the incident and swung into action at once. Anticipatory bail was granted hardly to anyone in a year, while in other cases, the accused were arrested. Police filed *challans* in time. The courts delivered justice and the arrested accused was bailed out after teaching him a severe lesson. The lawyers charged reasonably and the complainant did not have to face much problem in hiring his own advocate.

But it was the other way round in *Mayanagar*. Here the aggrieved man always felt himself on gallows. Such a Society was needed most in this city. Therefore the Society was working very successfully in *Mayanagar*.

Ramnath used to read the news about the pursuance of different cases by the society in the newspapers. Once a case fell into the hands of the Society, the aggrieved party felt relieved of a good deal of suffering.

All the way Ramnath prayed for the acceptance of his case by the Society. He was welcomed warmly by the president of the Society who was ready to extend an all-out help to Ramnath. He had his access from the S.H.O. to the Chief Minister. He was listened to attentively everywhere and his advice was acted upon. Ramnath could take him anywhere.

Ramnath had a grouse against the government machinery as a whole. Till the arrest of Pankaj and Neeraj, everything was going on well, but now both the government and the judiciary seemed to have tilted in favour of the accused. Entire responsibility lay on Ramnath's shoulders. Now his shoulders were feeling tired and he wanted Society to offer its shoulders to him.

"The Society has its own rules for taking up a case. This case does not fulfill our pre-requisite conditions. All the accused have been apprehended. All are in the jail. Tell me what kind of injustice is being meted out to the aggrieved party?" asked Harish Rai, the President of the Society".

"Big injustice, brother. Very big injustice, indeed! So far Pankaj and Neeraj have not spent, a single day in the jail. From the day one they have been lying comfortably in the hospital.

Booking private rooms there, they are enjoying five star facilities and running their business from the hospital itself. They visit their house at will and their wives sleep in their rooms. Is this a police-custody?" replied Ramnath in irritating disappointment.

"You are right that way. But the fact remains that they are in custody. In my opinion, the law is treading the right course. A few discrepancies are bound to be there in all the cases."

He had heard a lot about the President. He was famous for his dauntlessness, impartiality and commitment to truth. Then why was he being evasive in this case?

Ramnath observed that Harish Rai's attitude was negative. He started feeling disheartened. A doubt flashed across his mind that Pankaj might have approached the President. The rich accused knew how to plug every hole.

"I admit that the law was treading the right track in the beginning, but not now. That's why I've come to you. The IG is giving a clean chit to the accused. If they are exonerated then what type of justice we can hope for?"

"Well, if they wriggle out of the case, the case will come within the jurisdiction of the society. Then we'll fight your case."

Ramnath felt ashamed from within his heart at this response of the president. He had doubted the integrity of the President. Harish Rai was right. Injustice was not yet done to them; it was only apprehended.

"But what shall we do when it gets too late. If the Society cooperates with us, the move to declare the accused innocent can be scuttled."

"Okay, tell me under what law shall we stop this proceeding? The court cannot meddle with the investigation. If you have some points in mind tell us. You're also a lawyer, well conversant with law."

Ramnath activated his brains to find an answer to this question like a computer. He invoked all laws, rules and decisions of the higher courts, but all in vain. Really, there was no such point.

"Let them try their best. Then we shall summon them."

"As you like."

Ramnath had no alternative but to agree to the President.

One of the accused has filed an application. Lawyer has been hired for him by Pankaj. He is out to prove himself as an adolescent. The Public Prosecutor doesn't listens to me properly. Please help me in stopping him from getting bailed out."

"I'm ready. Tell me, how can I help you?"

"Let it not be on behalf of the Society, you become our lawyer at a personal level."

"I agree."

The President's consent provided Ramnath a great sense of relief. The shadow of stress and strain vanished at once from his face.

"Please tell me your fees now," hesitatingly Ramnath asked the President. He had already heard the rates of two senior advocates. May be, Harish Rai, too, has the same staggering rate of fees to quote, he thought.

"No fees. Your work is my work."

"No, I'll definitely pay the fees, howsoever less it is. Quote it please."

"Okay, I'll tell you when the work is accomplished."

"Even then it's always good to be clear beforehand."

"Set up a unit of the Society in your city and bear its expenditure for one year from your pocket. This will be my only fees."

"Not only for one year, I'll serve the Society throughout my life. I have come to understand the real objective of the Society only after experiencing distress myself."

"Well, I have got my fees," said Harish Rai and shook hands with Ramnath.

This handshake indicated fulfillment of common objectives and promotion of mutual friendship.

As Harish Rai submitted his *vaqalatnama*, the government started waking up from its slumber.

The investigating officer completed the file and attached the pending investigation reports to it.

The Public Prosecutor perused the file once again by calling it to his office and *removed* the discrepancies wherever he found in it.

During the last hearing, there was a little argumentation over the age of Pancham.

He hailed from Bihar. People over there take birth like insects and die unnoticed very much like them. Nobody keeps any record of their birth and death. The police knew nothing about his actual date of birth and had evinced no interest in ascertaining it by going to Bihar. The government had trusted only an affidavit given by him to this effect.

The prospective decision about the age of this accused was an important proceeding. But the Public Prosecutor had not taken it seriously and had indirectly expressed his assent by just saying to the judge, "It's up to you."

Had the judge used his discretion, he would have accepted the bail petition of Pancham by treating him as below eighteen. But he had ignored the assenting gesture of the Public Prosecutor. He had to deliver his judgement on the basis of his own observation. His decision could be challenged in the High Court.

For his own satisfaction he had ordered the medical checkup of the accused.

The doctors had assessed Pancham's age as between seventeen and nineteen.

Today's argumentation would be based on the medical report.

The defence counsel had come fully prepared and brought along a long list of Supreme Court judgements for quoting the same. The decisions of the apex court provided that in such a dilemmatic situation the court should go by the facts favouring the accused and acquit him under benefit of doubt.

The Public Prosecutor had nothing to say against this ruling, nor did he try to find any point to counter it. His seniors had directed him not to be very vocal in the court. He had thought that this time, too, he would evade the issue by leaving it on the discretion of the judge. He would let the judge decide what he liked.

But now, with Harish Rai standing as a lawyer to the complainant, he was caught in a fix.

Harish Rai was a man of very tough posture. Nobody knew

whom he would castigate. In ordinary cases, the Public Prosecutors did not allow the lawyers of the complainant side to cross-examine the witnesses in the court. But nobody could stop Harish Rai. Even if someone tried, the judge invariably allowed him to speak.

When all the points to be concealed were liable to be exposed by the private lawyer, why should the Public Prosecutor show his incompetence? This is what compelled the Public Prosecutor to make proper argumentation.

“Start your argumentation, Mr. President.”

The Public Prosecutor vested all his rights in Harish Rai at the very outset.

By getting the case pleaded by Harish Rai, the Public Prosecutor wanted to kill two birds with one stone. When a private lawyer pleads for the complainant side, the latter does not have anything against the Public Prosecutor. Moreover in such a situation nothing is left for the Public Prosecutor to speak. Silence is always more convenient. This silence is helpful in making the accused feel satisfied. The Public Prosecutor can say without any burden on his conscience,

“I didn’t speak even a single word. But how can I stop the other lawyer. Doesn’t worry, the judge has to take notice of the Public Prosecutor’s argumentation. Who bothers for the private lawyer?”

But the President of Victim Welfare Society was mature enough to read between the lines.

“You do your duty first. If need be, I will also do my duties.”

Harish Rai challenged the Public Prosecutor to expose himself openly.

The Public Prosecutor found himself caught in a quandary. Tables were turned on him.

Hell with the accused! I can’t open myself to departmental inquiry; he thought and started his argumentation.

He referred to the police file to prove that Pancham was more than eighteen. During interrogation, he had told his age as twenty four. For ready reference he quoted an excerpt from the police file.

The doctor’s report was not credible as he had not submitted

the X-ray reports with his report. Without x-ray reports how could it be accepted that his age was between seventeen and nineteen. The medical report must be got completed by the doctor.

The judge agreed to both the arguments made by the Public Prosecutor.

The judge started giving furtive smiles at the sight of Public Prosecutor changing colours like a chameleon.

“Do you have to say anything, Mr. Rai?” The judge wanted to give Mr. Harish Rai a chance after the Public Prosecutor.

The background of Pancham as recorded by the police indicated that he was born in a very big family. Most of his family members still lived in Bihar. Bihar was no North Pole where police could not go. The doubt must be cleared. Some police inspector must be sent to Bihar to get his birth certificate. This was the best argument. The defendants had no objection against this suggestion. “Mr. PP what’s your view? If we get his birth certificate what are we to do with the medical report?” asked the judge. “Right, sir. Kindly fix the case after a fortnight or so. We’ll send a sub-inspector to Bihar today and he’ll be back by then.” The case was fixed for hearing after twenty days, with the consent of all parties.

A sub-inspector was asked to go to Bihar and come back with Pancham’s date of birth certificate, while the doctor was directed to submit his X-ray reports with the idea that if no birth certificate was available decision could be taken on the basis of medical report.

They had come home against medical advice but felt very comfortable in their own house.

Neealm’s condition improved immediately after home-coming. She started taking medicine with the help of spoon. Drip was *removed*. There was no need for Neha to keep watch on the glucose-drip stand any longer. Neha felt at ease now.

The relatives also felt a bit comfortable. Their shuttling between the house and hospital ceased. The problem of carrying food-tiffin to the hospital was also over.

Ved wanted to send Ramnath and Sangeeta back home.

But for Ramnath, no solution to the problem was in sight.

After arrest of Pankaj and Neeraj, the whole judicial machinery had started rolling in their favour. They were getting orders of their own sweet choice one after the other. Rather than going to the jail, they had got themselves admitted to the hospital and were running their business from the special air conditioned rooms of the hospital.

Ramnath was striving hard to put an end to these facilities. He would spend his whole day in the court in lodging applications in this regard.

Neha would spend her day somehow or the other but as the night descended, the apparitions of monstrous *Bhayyas* seemed to be preparing to disrobe her. Sometimes these apparitions would turn into Pankaj and Neeraj and tried to break open the skull of Neelam or stab into Kamal's chest. As she closed her eyes a little, horrible dreams frightened her. She would get up in fear and could not sleep for hours together.

She could sleep only by embracing Sangeeta who consoled and encouraged her throughout the night.

No other woman relative was free enough to replace her or relieve her from Mayanagar. She had to stay there along with her husband.

The joy of home coming started disappearing gradually. After a week's stay at home, Neelam sometimes had infections, sometimes constipation and at times blockage in urinary passage, it was due to the alarming difference of conditions between the hospital and the house.

The doctor who paid home-visit to examine her would charge five hundred rupees while the compounder who came to collect blood sample for test, charged three hundred.

If Neelam recovered a little, then Ved's rods would get displaced and cause excruciating pain throughout his body. He would have to be taken to hospital in an ambulance, got X-rayed and test-scanned.

Due to undesirable movement, the bones which were expected to get joined within a week would stretch up to a fortnight.

The doctors advised them get admitted into the hospital. But their adversaries were also therein the hospital. They preferred death to being near them.

In the hope of better times they were putting up with all kinds of inconvenience.

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First Ved and Neelam were kept in the same room. Neelam was not aware either about herself, or about her surroundings. Ved's limbs were not functional but he was conscious. Neelam had lost all control on her bowels and urinary passage. Ved kept his eye on her. Whenever she felt a call of nature from within, she simply answered to it. Then Ved would call out Neha or Sangeeta and got Neelam cleaned up in time.

Due to prolonged confinement to bed, Neelam had developed bedsores. The doctors had directed that she should not be made to lie on wet place. Ved's presence on the bed next to Neelam's was helpful in solving this problem. Moreover, it facilitated one to attend both the patients at the same time without losing much time.

For the last few days, Neelam had been shifted to another room. Perhaps, some medicine had miss-reacted or some nerve of the brain had stopped functioning. She was suffering from incessant diarrhea. She passed urine drop by drop.

The scavenger had hardly finished cleaning when, Neelam again soiled herself. Her body had in a way become a store house of filth. Her excreta and urine emitted such foul smell that it polluted the atmosphere of the whole house. It was difficult to stay not only in her room; the nearby rooms were also equally repulsive.

It was due to this very problem that Neelam was shifted to another room. The doctor was trying his best to control her loose motions, changing medicine every day. But all medicines had lost their efficacy, it seemed.

Neelam was immune to all medicines but her diarrhea was contaminating the whole environment. The repulsive smell made the washing woman leave the house. She was there to wash routine clothes, not nauseating filth.

Then the cook, who was a Brahmin woman, was compelled to say good bye to the ill-fated house. She complained that she was haunted day and night by a stench from herself and her apparel. She felt like vomiting at the very sight of Ved's residence. She would come back after the lady of the house recovered; she assured and proceeded on long leave.

The compounder, who came for dressing, laid down a condition that the bed, body and clothes of the patient should be clean before he was supposed to enter her room. He clearly said that he would neither enter the stinking room nor dress the soiled body.

The scavenger woman was discharging her duties very faithfully. But she had restricted her duties to morning and evening only. For the remaining part of the day many sweeper women were being arranged at double or triple the usual remuneration. But as soon as they would enter the room they would at once feel repulsion and would leave the site even without taking any wages.

As a result, most of the time, Neelam had to lie in filth.

Sometimes Sangeeta would muster courage to enter her room. But often, Neha had to attend on her mother. With a mask on her face and gloves on her hands, she would keep sobbing and cleaning her mother. Neha just could not believe this fist like bundle of bones lying spattered in filth was the same Neelam who was fond of adorning herself tastefully and spread fragrance all around as she moved with perfumed dresses on her slim-trim body.

Her expensive saris, suits of latest fashion, nighties, gowns etc. were lying unused in her almirah now.

Earlier she used to wear *kameez* and *salwar* but ever since she had bed sores, the *kameez*, was replaced with vest while the *salwar* gave way to underwear. Even after coming to a hi-fi city like *Mayanagar*, Neelam had not abandoned her family dress. She had never put on jeans or T-shirts. She was averse to exhibition of body. She dissuaded even Neha from wearing skirt and shorts. It was her firm belief that veil is the only ornament of a woman.

But the loss of health had divested her of all her cultural attributes.

In spite of every care and precaution, her clothes would get wet. The wet clothes created new bedsores and worsened the old ones. The clothes on her body were harming the bed sores. The doctor directed the attendants to keep her covered with a sheet. Sometimes the cloth sheet would slip aside and expose her nakedness.

However, now the fact, whether she was covered or uncovered had lost all meaning. The flesh of her body had become saggy and her breasts were no better than lumps of dead flesh. The marks of bandages made her arms and thighs look very ugly. Dark circles had appeared below her eyes and the face had become speckled with dark spots. This living corpse could no longer satisfy anybody's lust.

Neelam, the heart-throb of her relatives and neighbours had lost all her lustre. The amorous relatives who pined to see her sunshine smile and hear her beautiful voice would do with only asking about her health on telephone or just entered her room and came out immediately after casting a cursory glance at her.

As per the doctors, Neelam's condition was improving, but Neha could not see any trace of improvement in her. Neither was there any movement in her limbs, nor had she even opened her eyes. She had never expressed any hunger or thirst either. Neha thought that some part of her brain which controlled her consciousness had become dead. She had seen such living corpses in many houses. This was a head injury. It could have a damaging impact on any other part of the body even if she recovered. She could lose her memory. "What will she do in such a situation? Who will support her in that state of disability," Neha started worrying at these disappointing thoughts. Sometimes she wished that rather than living such a pitiable life, she should fall into eternal sleep. And now it actually seemed that Neelam was preparing to depart for her heavenly abode. If the diarrhoea persisted unabatedly like this for another two-three days, she would die of dehydration.

Neha had no alternative but to see her mother dying gradually.

When the allopathic doctors exhausted themselves out, Ramnath rushed to his town. The first dose of the homeopathic doctor Mangla had no effect on Neelam.

“She may control her loose motions,” he thought.

Dr. Mangla felt a sense of satisfaction when Ramnath told him about the loose motions. She congratulated him telling that this was a clear symptom of the efficacy of homeopathic medicine. The medicine was cleansing the abdomen of the patient. After two-three days, loose motions will cease and she would be put on the way to recovery.

It happened exactly as visualized by Dr. Mangla. After remaining in coma for more than one and a half month, Neelam opened her eyes for the first time. Then she started moving her legs and arms. She started feeling sensation of pain on pinching. Her face showed some expressions when called by name.

Dr. Mangla assured more improvement in her health. Very soon, she would start sitting, communicating and understanding slowly.

The doctor and relatives were happy at the improvement in Neelam’s health. But Neha was not happy at all.

Having been hit with the rod on her head, Neelam had sunk down into deep slumber. She did not suspect that her happy home had turned into a graveyard. She was not aware that her well-built, six feet two inches tall, youthful son no longer roamed about on Royal-En-field motorcycle, nor did his friends barged into her kitchen with a sense of belonging. No longer was there any exercise on the roof top, nor could anyone see Kamal studying till late night with his table lamp on. Now Neelam need not go to him time and again to ask him to go to bed.

She did not know that her husband no longer gave her any chance to of complain against his late-coming. Now he remained at home throughout the day. Neither he joined his friends in drink parties nor did he bring home any longer fish or meat. Now he used to lie on a bed next to hers and kept watching her with his plastered limbs like *Bhisham Pitamah* on a bed of arrows.

Neelam did not know that she, herself, who was once called fashion-crazy, had turned into a lump of filth. She was not in a

position to change her clothes twice or thrice a day nor did she bother to make up her beauty every one hour or so. The bed-sores had made her body look like a leper.

Neelam was sick. Deformity of her identity was a natural outcome. But even hale and hearty Neha was fast losing her identity. Lively and sprightly Neha had become a picture of gloom. As a result, she had to introduce herself to her mother who had just now awakened from a deep slumber. She rather wanted her to leave this world without listening to her woeful tale.

Such ideas troubled her mind when she looked back at the chain of events which had made her life a hell.

Neha, who had lost much with the loss of her modesty, had herself prayed for death in her weaker moments. But death is never available on demand. Every time she asked for death, the misery of the disabled parents and an urge to get Kamal's killers sent to gallows stopped her.

"What is this life after all? No better than a slow death, of course," she felt.

The rapist had attacked parts of her body with a saw, in the most brutal manner. She had not so far been able to recover from that traumatic situation and the foul odour of the rapist had not forsaken her so far.

This was her first death.

For twenty days together the rape scene of Hindi feature films kept appearing on the screen of her mind. In make-believe cinema stories, the raped heroine would generally get pregnant. The very idea of pregnancy, made her shudder to the spine. In such moments she desperately remembered her mother. Had Neelam been all right, she would have become the greatest solace for her. They were more friends than mother and daughter, which is quite natural in this relationship. But whom should she vent her feelings now? Sangeeta? A friend? Or some teacher? Everybody would offer some words of lip sympathy only and scandalize at her back. It was very consolatory for Neha to think that the fact of her rape was not put on record.

Neha's maternal uncle was a lawyer. At the time of getting the case registered he had concealed the fact of rape by greasing

the palms of the doctor. But the people had somehow got wind of it. She had become a topic of public discussion. She was being called a characterless girl.

This was her second death.

Sagar, her fiancée, who had promised life-long ties with her, too had started smelling the odour of the rapist from her body. Not to speak of tying nuptial bond with Neha, he had not even bothered to express a few words of sorrow by coming to her.

This was her third death.

About how many deaths she would tell her mother. It was better, she felt, that Neelam should bid adieu to this world without ever listening to her.

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Ramnath remained outdoors for most of the time.

One by one all the servants had deserted the house and Sangeeta was always on her toes doing household chores.

Neha sat by the side of the patients and catered to their needs.

It was the talk of the town these days that the application filed by Pankaj and Neeraj to the police about their innocence was about to be accepted. This public talk, once again caused a severe setback to Neha's self-confidence awakened with the blessings of the Divine Mother.

She started having very inauspicious thoughts pestering her mind. She would see images of her cousins, who would look like demons or the murderers; sometimes the images teased her like children and at others they looked at her with very lustful eyes.

Sometimes the image of Kamal also appeared in her imagination. Kamal would caution her asking to be careful about *Bhayyas*, who might come again.

Sometimes even the walls of the house would frighten her. Even a knock at the neighbour's gate sounded like the deadly knock of the robbers to her. The quietude of night seemed like the eerie silence of a graveyard.

Sometimes she felt that she, too, had been murdered along with Kamal who had laid down his life in defending the honour

of his sister. Because of the noble cause behind his sacrifice, Kamal must have found his way to the heaven by now, while she, being defiled, was not eligible for entering the gates of heaven. That is why perhaps she had been stalking this place as a ghost. The house, where she was living now was not their house any longer. It was some haunted bungalow engulfed in sooty darkness day and night. Its rooms were full of suffocating smell. The dwellers of this bungalow kept sighing all the time. These are the dominant characteristics of a haunted place.

The residence where Neha lived prior to her death was a paradise where lived Kamal, her beloved brother. Kamal was a sturdy, tall, young man with fair complexion and beautiful neck. Neelam would affectionately call him Bhim. She wanted her son to be as strong as Bhim of Mahabharat and had started her efforts in this direction ever since he was a child. During her college days, Neelam had studied psychology as a subject. She was very particular in the selection of toys and books for Kamal. As he grew up, he was made a member of the Health-Club. He had started going to swimming pool. By the time he entered the college, he had developed an obsession for body building. This dandy boy was esteemed at school, then college and now at the university too, besides being popular in his own locality. This haunted house did not have even a photograph of Kamal in it.

Neha's House would be illuminated throughout the night with colourful lights from gate to porch, garage, lawn and lobby etc. The notes of music would reverberate in her house the whole day. Sometimes it was pop music at Kamal's music-system and at others the tunes of sacred hymns emanated from Neha's room.

Afternoons became alive with the loud guffaws by Neelam's friends assembled for a kitty party. In the evening Kamal would enjoy gossiping with his friends for hours together. Night sittings were meant for Ved to enjoy the company of his friends.

Neha, too, had a wide circle of friends. She used to keep herself busy discussing the activities of *Sehyog* and was all agog to disseminate its fragrance far and wide. Sometimes in leisure moments she would sit in meditation trying to awaken her *Kundalini*.

The Neha of this haunted bungalow was not the Neha as she used to be earlier. Mataji was not remembered reverentially in this house. Here everyone all cursed and denounced the other.

The honour of women was quite safe in Neha's house. She remembered the day when a roaming Romeo, chasing her, was stopped by Kamal on suspicion only. When Kamal hit the street Romeo on his nose, he started bleeding and apologised to Neha by addressing her as sister.

Neha was prohibited to go out of this house now. What to speak of the youngsters, even the street peddlers and hawkers could not restrain themselves from passing nasty remarks at her.

Four days back, Pinchu of their own neighbour hood had shown the audacity of passing very rude remarks to Neha. As she tried to walk away silently, the rascal felt insulted and just to avenge his insult said,

"Are we worse than even the *Bhayyas*?"

Neha felt like putting of her shoe and give him a severe bashing.

But she, somehow controlled herself and withdrew with the very thought that now Kamal was not at her back.

With a sense of helpless surrender, Neha came back into her house.

After that day Neha confined herself to her house. Thus confined, Neha was going schizophrenic day by day. She was pining for getting away from this haunted house. Sometimes she would beseech her father and sometimes Ramnath.

"Uncle, I don't feel like living here anymore. I'm haunted by the sad memories. What are we to do with such a big house now? Just two rooms will be sufficient for us. Please help me get rid of this house and this colony as well," said Neha to Ramnath."

Ramnath and his wife Sangeeta agreed to Neha over the issue of change of environment.

But as of now, there were many problems, which were far more serious than this one and they stared the family in the face. Selling out the old house and purchasing a new one could be possible only when problems at hand were solved.

They could do nothing but put off Neha by promising to do as she liked as early as possible.

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Having been stuck in Mayanagar for about a couple of months, Sangeeta was now on the lookout for an excuse to escape from here.

She would keep quarreling with Ramnath in the morning as well as in the evening.

Ramnath's earnings had come to a standstill. Resumption of work once again required hard working for years together.

Sangeeta had exhausted her leave. Now she was availing leave without pay. Had principal not been benevolent enough to her, by now she would have been transferred to a remote rural station. Sangeeta taught her students with zeal and never had less than ninety percent results. Even in a difficult subject like mathematics, most of the students would secure first division. With great deal of persuasion, her principal would try to pacify the parents who approached her with a grudge regarding the loss of studies of their wards. However, the principal had very good equation with the District Education Officer, who never refused her bidding. By getting prior sanction of the District Education Officer, she appointed a mathematics teacher on ad hoc basis from Parent Teachers Association fund. Being a raw hand at teaching, the new teacher could satisfy neither the students, nor their parents. There was a risk of some regular teacher replacing Sangeeta.

To save her house from financial devastation, it had become necessary and unavoidable for Sangeeta to resume her duties.

The annual examinations of their children were not very far-off now. Their performance in the house-tests revealed that they had lagged far behind in their studies. So the presence of Sangeeta was a must to help them make up their deficiency.

Sangeeta harboured one more grudge in her mind as to why the entire responsibility was thrust only on her family? There were other relatives also. But they simply came like guests and returned after spending half an hour or so. Somebody would

make his visit a part of his otherwise shopping trip to Mayanagar and someone else would suffix this courtesy call to his official tour to this city.

Sangeeta was pressing Ramnath for this. Neelam was sister to all the brothers. Being an advocate he could look after the police station or court side all alone. But at least for the domestic care, the wives of other brothers, should equally share her burden, be it fortnightly or monthly. Ramnath tried to persuade her on the plea that they were elders and their children were grown up. Other brothers were younger and in government job. They had a problem in taking leave. Their children were young. They could neither be brought here, nor left behind. Neelam's house was completely ruined. She, being his real sister, Sangeeta should prepare herself mentally that such a calamity has its impact on all near and dear ones.

To remove the annoyance of his wife, Ramnath started going to his house for three days a week and by requesting the judges, got his cases fixed for Monday, Tuesday and Friday.

At times he would spend a night with his children and return the next day after solving some of their problems.

Ramnath tried to impress upon his brothers to share his burden by spending at least one week each at Mayanagar. Ramnath's request had its desired impact on Ashwini to the extent that he agreed to spend his weekend in Mayanagar.

But Ashwini's two half-day visits proved no breather for Sangeeta. He used to come and sit near his sister or brother-in-law. Once or twice he would justify his visit administering them some medicine and spent rest of his time in reading newspapers or looking at his watch. He started feeling restless at three and at about four in the afternoon he would board a bus for his return journey.

One day he came along with his wife Anita. Never again thereafter, they were seen in Mayanagar. Sangeeta wanted some helping hand in the kitchen. She had to spend the whole day in the kitchen preparing kedgerree, porridge, tea or milk for the patients and sometimes food for the guests as well. Due to constant contact with water, her hands were getting gangrenous and cracks had developed in her heels. Severe backache had

also started. "The day is not far when I, too, shall be confined to the bed," she thought.

Since the day, that she came to know about the possibility of Pankaj and Neeraj being declared innocent, she was feeling more anguished at heart.

Being the wife of a lawyer, she was quite familiar with some legal points. Giving a clean chit to the accused would mean more trouble for the complainant side. The police is supposed to gather proofs against the accused. The aggrieved side does not have any problem if the police perform its duty tenaciously. But if police is out to collect proofs in favour of the accused, the complainant side has to fight a dual battle - to demolish the citadel of pro-accused evidence raised by police and to collect evidence against the accused themselves. Sangeeta had this much understanding of law.

This battle was all the more difficult for Ved's family. Not even a single member of the family was alright. One of them was dangling somewhere between life and death and another was trying to balance her mental equilibrium. How long could other people help them? Even the closest relative, like Sangeeta, has now reached a point of break down. She wanted her husband also to run away with her from here. By the time, the complainants would be able to fight a legal battle, the *Mahabharat* would be over and the *Kauravas* would get the war declared won in their favour without fighting with the *Pandavas*.

Sangeeta had done her utmost till now. But she was not a divine being to stake her own health, the equanimity of her husband and the future of her children for her relatives.

She was pressing hard on Ramnath that at least she should be sent back so that she might take care of her children and household.

Though Ramnath agreed with her at his heart, outwardly he was coaxing his wife to keep patience.

In the beginning he had hoped that his responsibilities would be over within twenty days or a month. Once the charge-sheet is filed, there would be no problem for him thereafter. There would be at least a month's time between the hearings. He would have no problem in appearing in the court after a month or two.

But now, the legal battle was stretching indefinitely longer and it was getting serious too. There was also a possibility of frequenting the Supreme Court, as well as the High Court. He was an advocate. The lawyers would charge a reasonable amount of fees from him. The lawyers of higher courts charged exorbitantly. Their reasonable rates too would drive him to bankruptcy. He had reached a stage from where it was not possible either to go back or move ahead.

Coaxed by Sangeeta, he had spoken to his sisters also. But they were living with their in-laws. Still, as an obligation, they had extended whatever little co-operation they could.

The brothers were self-willed.

Ashwini had said categorically, "We have to run our own homes also. For how long can we keep sitting there? Let them face their destiny on their own."

Mangat Rai said, "You are a lawyer and know well the ways of police and judiciary, what shall I do there?"

Ramnath could only advise or exhort his brothers, but in no way he could compell them as he did not have any patriarchal authority over them. They lived independently with their families.

It was under this logic that Ramnath had been asking Sangeeta to keep patience. But now Sangeeta had crossed all limits of patience.

"Find out some solution if you can. Otherwise I will have to take some step. Then don't feel bad," Sangeeta had proclaimed her final decision.

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For the last few days a tension had been simmering between Ramnath and Sangeeta.

And it had come to the notice of Ved also.

They were not on speaking terms with each other

Ved had seen life and he could see reason behind their strenuous relations. For about two months, both the husband and the wife had been stuck here. Their earnings had ceased and expenditure was crossing all limits. Their children were staying neglected without them. Sangeeta was an employee and

accustomed to a comfortable life. Here she had to clean Neelam's filth and work in kitchen as well. The disease and police case were stretching beyond all limits and there seemed to be no possibility of any improvement in the conditions.

Neelam's loose motions had added fuel to the fire. Although, most of the time, she was looked after by Neha, but when, just to give respite to Neha, Ramnath tried to assist her in cleaning, Sangeeta had to take away soiled clothes from him out of a dual sense of shame. She could not bear her husband doing such a womanly job in her presence. Secondly, how the nudity of a sister could be exposed to her brother. Women are generally used to doing such jobs, she thought.

But now Neelam had recovered a little. She could follow the signals or change sides herself. As she felt a call of nature within her body, she knew it and signalled to other.

There must be some other reason also behind Sangeeta's annoyance.

Ved wanted to reach the root of the problem, albeit he knew that even after knowing it he would not be able to solve the issue. He himself wanted Ramnath and Sangeeta to go back and set their house in order.

Neelam's condition was known to all. Ved, too, was handicapped. He needed the support of two persons for changing sides and defecation etc. Due to being conscious, he did not bother others except when it was unavoidable. Despite being thirsty he did not take water lest he should have an urge for urination. Similarly he did not have full meals, so that he does not have to bother anybody for helping him in defecation. He was fond of cleaning his teeth with the *neem datun*. In this state of disability, he had to leave this habit which resulted in embittering the taste of his mouth. The doctors had allowed him a soft *datun* for cleaning his teeth. But for this he would have to sit up, which would require the help of two persons: one for putting the *datun* in his mouth and another to help him mouthwash in some pot. Timely administration of medicine was more than sufficient, he thought and put up with the bitterness of taste lingering in his mouth. As if this was not enough, he had made some other compromises also. Neha was

the darling of his heart. He loved her more than anybody else in the world, even more than Kamal. No father would ever like to make his daughter remove pots containing his excreta or urine. But he was tolerating this also most unwillingly so that Ramnath or Sangeeta did not have to do this retching job.

The guilt-ridden Ved had thought several times to say good bye to this infernal existence. But he was not free even to end his life. He could not get up and commit suicide by plunging into any well or river. He could not either buy poison from a chemist's shop. Even if he got it from somewhere, nobody would feed it to him.

Once or twice he had asked the names of some toxic drugs from the doctors and nurses. Judging his intentions; they would rather start consoling him rather than meeting his demand. He should think more about his young daughter, they would say.

Ved had cared a lot about Neha throughout his life. He could say 'no' to Kamal but never to Neha. She was really a very fortunate girl.

A little after her birth they had come to settle in Mayanagar. Here they had earned a lot of money. Neelam, who had always longed for small ornaments like rings, had purchased many sets of diamond jewellery. She was the first to buy any latest designed sari. The fixed deposits and saving bonds were multiplying in her bank lockers day in and day out. They secured membership of many well-known clubs of the city. Neelam became a member of many kitty clubs and voluntary social organizations.

Ved had seen hard times. In his own city, he had been running his house in just eight hundred rupees per month and spent by making a budget.

Sudden richness had surprised him. It seemed as if he was having a dream. Rather than filling his coffers like a miser he believed in enjoying the comforts of life. Every other day he would buy something for his house.

Ved's noble intentions bore fruit. His wife was running household with great skill. Both the children were intelligent and sensible.

Ved loved Neha because of a peculiar characteristic of her

personality. At an age when girls loved going to canteen or picnics, she had dedicated her life to metaphysical pursuits like yoga and self-realisation. The innocence of age had helped her touch spiritual heights very soon.

Neha had made the family environment very pious. Inspired by Neha, Ved first gave up bringing fish or meat to his house and then he became fully vegetarian. He started feeling ashamed of entering his house after having some drinks in the company of some professional friends. Actually his profession demanded personalised relations with others, which was hardly possible without sharing one or two drinks with them. It was only for the sake of maintaining business relations. He started controlling his drinking habit even without being asked by his daughter. Swearing before *Mataji* he had pledged that he would not consume more than two pegs. Then he came down to one peg and ultimately became a teetotaler.

Earlier he thought that no progress in business was possible without drinks. But he was mistaken. After giving up drinking his business started flourishing more. People started believing him more, thinking that he was a man of religious temperament. He attributed this sea-change to the influence of Neha and the divine mother Kalyani.

Like other *Sehyogis*, Ved too saw a reflection of some divine power in Neha. He considered himself lucky that a goddess had taken birth in his house. In his heart, he would pay obeisance to her.

And now some demonic power had deprived her of all divinity and the poor girl was forced to lead an accursed life.

During the last two months Neha's face had lost its glow altogether. Her vibrant mien had become a portrait of melancholy. Her fashionable dresses like jeans, pants and shirts lay dumped in the almirah. For days together she would not change her clothes now. There was no nail polish on her well-kept nails, arms had become as thin as bamboo sticks and hands had turned pallid. Sitting near her was no longer as pleasant as it used to be earlier. That peace and tranquility was now missing altogether from her personality.

Ved too seemed to have been disillusioned with her. Often

he would rebuke her over very trivial things. She would invite his ire if there was a little delay in administering him medicine or water got spilt on the bed or an overdose of food was put into his mouth or he felt pain as she helped him change the side etc. As if he was always on the lookout for an excuse to rebuke Neha.

Before getting bed-ridden; Ved would apologise to Neha if he ever happened to rebuke her. There were no more any affectionate apologies now, as he knew that he would resort to this paternal arrogance many times a day.

Earlier the admonitions of father would fill Neha's eyes with tears. But now, the reservoir of tears seemed to have evaporated to its last saline droplet. She had developed a sort of insensitivity towards all harshness. She had almost become a robot who would obey commands given to it.

Ved was being harsh on his gentle and docile daughter only to avoid harassment to Ramnath and Sangeeta.

He did not want to lose the only support of his family.

As the rumour of the possibility of an early acquittal of Pankaj and Neeraj started spreading, the number of visitors who came to enquire about the health of Ved and Neelam, had come down to Zero. The worldly wise relatives did not believe in spoiling relations with the affluent brothers for the sake of Ved's family, which was ruined irretrievably.

The extrication of Pankaj and Neeraj from the case would only prolong it indefinitely. This injustice would serve as a shock to Ved's family, while Pankaj had nothing to worry about due to his Mammon power. There had to be frequent appeals on the smallest points. Sometimes the cases lying pending in higher courts gobble up a full generation.

This state of affairs disheartened Neelam's kith and kin. For how long could anyone sit there leaving his home and hearth? Why not get rid of the situation right now, as the affected family was bound to take it ill tomorrow, if not today.

Along with relatives, the friends too had started being evasive. Even Ved's workers stopped coming to enquire about their health lest the boss should ask them to do something or go somewhere.

Ved pretty well understood the situation.

So to save his own house he must remove the irritants between Ramnath and Sangeeta.

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To find out the reason behind their mutual tension, Ved tried to talk to Ramnath in one way or the other but Ramnath avoided the issue every time it was touched.

He even talked to Sangeeta and suggested her to go and spend a day or two with her children. But she simply kept mum with tearful eyes, neither accepting the proposal nor rejecting it.

Ved thought that the matter was far more serious than just going back home. He shared his thoughts with Neha since it was she who kept company with Sangeeta all the time.

“A lot of expenditure is being made on treatment and the court case. Every penny is being spent by uncle Ramnath. I think, now he wants to take loan by mortgaging something and auntie is opposing it,” Neha told whatever little she knew.

Ved was already aware of this issue. Whatever cash and jewellery was there in the house had been looted. From the day one till date, all expenditure was incurred by Ramnath. Ved had asked him several times in this regard but every time he had avoided talking over this issue.

It was Neelam who kept accounts of money in the house. Lockers and bank accounts were in the name of Kamal and Neelam. Some plots were in Neelam’s name and some others in Kamal’s. Neha was quite younger as yet. They had never involved her in pecuniary affairs. She had to leave her parents, after all, and go to her in-laws after marriage. Who knew what type of husband she was going to have? With this farsightedness, Ved reserved for her only that much amount, which she would be able to keep forever. Even this money had been loaned out by him to his near & dear acquaintances on interest with a view to enhance it for his daughter.

Neha had handed over to Ramnath whatever amount she had in the bank. She had got her fixed deposits encashed prematurely and taken loan on National Savings Certificates.

Kamal had died. His nominated heir was his mother, who was alive only technically. The bank authorities were not ready to take her as alive because she was not in her senses. The bank lockers could not be operated without her consent, nor could any money be withdrawn.

The property in the name of Kamal's name was to be transferred into Neelam's name first. Only then it could be sold out. But till she does not regain her consciousness, it would be useless to transfer property into her name. Legally, she was not competent to strike a bargain regarding the property.

It was due to such technical constraints that they could not make use of the property in spite of being its owners.

Ved had never felt any need to keep more than four or five thousand rupees in his pocket. He had invested all the money he had in his business.

The countrywide recession had its worst impact on Mayanagar. The rates of real estate had fallen abysmally low. The people had even forfeited their amounts paid in advance for the purchase of a plot or ready-built house.

During easy times, Ved had done a very good business. Due to his credibility, everybody would get ready to be his partner. The buyers as well as the sellers both trusted him. They never resorted to any documentation, either for accepting the advance money or giving it. This sort of dealing was done just by word of mouth.

This very trust was now costing dear to Ved.

The friends were turning into foes.

They knew, Ved had no future now. He was a victim of the disease as well as that of litigation. Of these, only a single calamity ruins the man, but Ved was facing the two simultaneously. Moreover, he was pitched against a very strong party in the criminal case. Uncertainty prevailed regarding his health condition as well. Nobody knew whether he would ever be the same complete man. There was a strong possibility of his getting disabled for life. Even if he gets well, he would not be able to move about at least before one year. He had lost his only son who was in the prime of his youth. The loss of a son steers the very direction of life. It becomes like a ship without

rudders. One is left with no zest for work. On the contrary, approach towards life becomes very negative and destructive. Come what may, Ved would never be the same again.

Those who were very hasty had started coming to the hospital. Immediately after he regained his consciousness, they had opened the account books. Ved had abandoned every hope of life due to mental tension, distress, uncertainty of future and physical pain. He felt greatly embarrassed at the very mention of trade and business and under this embarrassing state of mind he agreed to what the partners proposed. He had to suffer a heavy loss in most of the partnership deals. Some of them had expressed honesty and sympathy by giving nominal profit.

Those who waited till his home-coming after recovery included mostly those who had no documents regarding their business transactions with him. They had to keep mum lest a distressed Ved should say 'no' to them. In that case what could they do? That is why they were silent. Now that he had recovered a bit, they would come to him and try to remind him about his liability in a very tactful but courteous manner. When Ved promised them every pie he owed to them, they refrained from committing the earliest mistake again. In the changed scenario, his verbal promise did not have the value it earlier had. They demanded a little bit of documentation with some relative standing surety to the liability or some property as a pawn.

Those, with whom he had entered into some written agreement, had started sending him legal notices. Most of such notices came from those whom Ved had paid earnest amounts. The sales of plots were declining and it was difficult to find new customers. He was not in a position to get the property registered in his name by spending from his own sources. But the notice-senders were asking him to ensure the registration of property within the stipulated period or get ready to wash his hands off the earnest money.

These notices anguished him more than Kamal's death, his disease and indifference of the relatives. And ironically, these vexatious documents were sent by those who were given a sound footing by Ved.

For the last few days this problem had become more serious. Someone had spread the rumour that Ved was going to be bankrupt. The irate people started intimidating him and calling him names even by coming to his house. One or two of them were accompanied by the rogues also. Some gentlemen had sold out their rights to the scoundrels. Equipped with the documents as well as weapons, their agents started roaming near Ved's residence.

Ved found himself being surrounded by the vultures ready to prey upon him. Scared awfully, he agreed to each and every proposal offered by the parties concerned. To someone he gave the possession of a plot and to other he forwent his partnership in a shop.

But still the list of takers seemed to be endless.

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In spite of this dismal state of affairs, Ved knew that there was enough money and gold in Neelam's lockers. A single locker would be sufficient to pay off all the debt he owed to others.

That is why Ved was eager to settle accounts with Ramnath. He should have thought it earlier that his silence could lead to split in Ramnath's family. At least he must assure him the payment of all that he had spent till now. Ramnath might think that Ved was in no mood to compensate him. Ramnath was the brother of his wife after all, a very sensitive type of relationship.

"No, no. I must mend my error before it is too late," he thought.

That very night Ved made Ramnath sit with him and demanded the details of expenditure made by him. This time he did not let Ramnath evade the issue. This was more than enough for him that he and his wife Sangeeta had been neglecting their own family for them for a long time. Moreover, the expenditure was in lacs. It must be accounted for.

Ramnath had spent four lacs till now. Most of it was spent on the treatment of Ved and his family. He had all the bills as a testimony to the expenditure made. He had spent very sparingly in the police station and the courts. Still he had to shell out one lac rupees. There are no receipts for graft money. He was

apprehensive about giving details of money given as bribe lest Ved should distrust him and he should earn a bad name.

Ramnath felt that Ved had smelt the tension simmering between him and Sangeeta. This is what urged him to ask for the expenditure made by him.

However Ramnath liked this attitude of Ved. At least he must know how much he had spent so far from his own pocket. Some relatives had also contributed to the expenditure. It, too, needed to be brought to Ved's notice.

Ramnath, no longer, had capacity to spend any more. Now if something had to be mortgaged, then it should be done by Ved. Let him face one more loss alongwith many others he was already going through.

Ramnath mustered courage to give an outline of the expenditure.

Ved was startled at the dizzying expenditure of four lacs. He had calculated it nearly to one lac.

After remaining stunned for some time, Ved contained himself. Bills were lying before his eyes. There was full transparency. Nothing had gone wrong anywhere. This was only a rough estimate, having no mention of small miscellaneous expenses which Ramnath had owned himself.

Ved was overwhelmed by the nursing spirit and sacrifice of Ramnath. A deep sense of gratitude glistened in the moistened eyes of Ved. He wanted to embrace Ramnath and express his indebtedness to him. But his arms did not cooperate with him. He had to restrain his feelings but his quivering lips communicated everything.

"Don't worry Ramnath. Let me recover a little more. I'll arrange everything. This much will be available even in a single locker. Neelam has four lockers. You should acquire permission from the court to open her lockers," he said.

"For the time being we should not reveal our lockers. Some creditor may come forward and get them sealed. Don't worry about my money. That will be taken care of later on. First, let this catastrophe pass off," Ramnath warned against the trouble that might result from the opening of lockers.

The assurance given by Ved regarding paying back the

money spent by him provided a great relief to Ramnath's mind. Till now he thought that he was not going to get back the money he was spending. Now both the problems were solved: Ved got familiar with the expenditure incurred and the possibility of reimbursement of the same emerged.

"In future, you are not going to worry about money. I'll make some arrangement. You go and sleep well now."

Sending Ramnath to bed, Ved felt that the path to the normalisation of relations between the husband and wife had become clear.

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"**Where** to arrange money from?" was the anxiety which disturbed Ved throughout the night.

First, he thought of his friends in *Mayanagar*. He could not recollect even a single name who might have offered him any financial help during this entire crisis. Whosoever came, he came only to settle accounts with him and get his arrears.

How to grudge against others when his own blood, his nephews, was the real architect of his misfortune. This was *Mayanagar*, the city of wealth or illusion. Where was the point to resent, if relations based on wealth proved illusory?

Then, he directed his focus on the friends of his native town. The very thought of his old friends gladdened him to the core of his being. The playmates had not forgotten him so far. Of course, very few of them visited him during his sunshine days, but now that the clouds of distress had overshadowed his joys, every one of them had come to console to him. Earlier, they visited hospital, now they were coming to his house. Quoting from scriptures they would console him, asking him to face the hard times with fortitude. They assured him all kinds of help and nobody had ever come with empty hands. Someone would bring along a can of milk while some other would come with a bag full of fruits slinging on his shoulder. Ved tried to dissuade them not to bother so much, but no one listened to him. It was their tradition.

Unlike the urbanites of *Mayanagar*, they did not come just on holidays or at night. They came to him as on full time

engagement. Their words of wisdom soothed Ved for days together.

This affection of friends sometimes filled him with a sense of remorse. Earlier too, they used to meet him at some marriage or any other suchlike occasion and wanted to sit with him and talk to their heart's fill. During such times Ved would get fed up soon. He wanted them to finish their chatter and be off.

Now he saw value in the conversation of those very people. The hours spent in their company seemed to be fleeing as fast as minutes and seconds to him.

His friends were not rich. They were mostly salaried employees or small shopkeepers. They were not in a position to extend any financial help to Ved.

Ved calculated that even if all of them contributed their mite, the amount would not exceed ten or fifteen thousands. What shall he do with such a meagre sum?

The memory of his friends made him reminisce about his native town. He should better not have left his town in pursuit of wealth. His friends had not earned much, of course, but they were living in peace. They did not have very high goals in life. A small house and a secure job was all they aspired for. They had similar dreams for their children as well. But what had Ved attained by flying high?

What was there to call his own in Mayanagar now? All his dreams had been razed to dust with a single blow of fate. Why should he not return to his town even now? The company of his old friends would make him forget his woes. In Mayanagar, nobody had time even to ring up a friend. The old friends were still following the practice of calling at the house and enquire about his health.

Lying on his bed, Ved started assessing the value of his magnificent house. It had six bed-rooms, ten bath-rooms, six geysers and four air-conditioners. Now they were only causing lot of expenditure. One thousand rupees per month was spent on the cleanliness of the house. There were only three of them to live here.

In the changed circumstances, a two-bedroom house would be sufficient for Ved. The house they were living in could be

sold for thirty lacs. He could make a comfortable living with only the interest on this amount.

Even otherwise, this palatial house had become a site of horror for him. He was haunted by the images of Kamal and Neelam. Their memories tortured him all the time. Neha too had lost all attachment with this house. Often she would talk of getting rid of this ill-fated house.

He had another apprehension also. Some creditors might capture his house in the name of realizing his credit or some other might get auction of the house decreed from the court.

As he got up early in the morning next day, he shared his plan with Ramnath under the pretext of getting rid of the nightmarish memories of Kamal.

Tears welled up in Ramnath's eyes at the very mention of selling the house. Ved had built this house with great fondness. Very ardently it was decorated by the family. It was not fully complete as yet and there was talk of its being sold.

After a brief silence, Ramnath bridled his feelings and said, "The house is in Neelam's name. Neither agreement to sell nor registration is possible without her signatures."

This was the legal hitch in the sale of the house.

"Moreover, this house has witnessed a fresh unfortunate incident. A youthful son has been killed here. The people are likely to treat this house as ominous."

Popular superstition was another obstacle in selling it off.

"Anytime police or the defence counsel may come to visit the site of crime. This would be most irksome for the new owners of the house." Ramnath apprised Ved with all the possible complications they might come across in selling the house.

Earlier, Ved and Ramnath remained busy in their respective pursuits. They scarcely sat together and had a chat.

Now Ramnath would spend most of his time with Ved. Ramnath's arguments really surprised Ved. He realized now that the lawyers really have a deeper insight than any other person. Ramnath was hundred percent right. People may take the house as ominous or not but the property dealers must make them aware of this aspect due to their own vested interest. He himself had used this formula several times.

“The lockers cannot be opened. The house cannot be sold. There is no other property at hand. Then how to manage funds?” Ved thought hard.

One thing was certain, notwithstanding the difficulties, he must manage some money for Ramnath.

“Do one thing. Sell the surplus articles. What are we to do with two refrigerators, four air conditioners, two sofa sets? These are useless now. This is Kamal’s motor-cycle... remove it away from my sight. I just can’t stand its presence here anymore. It’s quite new. Sell it off. It will fetch good...,” Ved burst into tears before he could complete the sentence. The portrait of Kamal riding the motor-cycle flashed into his mind. The sight of handsome, stout and more than six feet tall Kamal used to be a feast for his eyes.

Earlier Kamal had a scooter. But it did not suit his well-built body. Ved had bought him this motor-cycle. As he talked of selling this motor-cycle, he felt as if Kamal was getting annoyed with him over this proposal. Kamal loved his motor-cycle very dearly. Removing motor-cycle from his sight would be as painful as removing Kamal from his heart.

Ved had no other way out. He must sever his links with Kamal.

The proposal of selling Kamal’s motor-cycle made Ramnath feel as something was gnawing at his heart. His palpitation increased. He felt as if his heart would stop right now. Kamal was a very loveable boy. Of all the children of his sisters Ramnath loved him most. He was very affable, courteous, well behaved boy and had full of respect for elders. He was really a darling of everybody. He was dreaming of getting settled in America. Ramnath, too, had dreamt of going to America on tourist visa once Kamal settled there.

Now they were trying to forget that very child and planning to sell off his memorabilia.

“I’m still alive. For God’s sake don’t talk of selling anything belonging to Kamal,” saying so Ramnath, too, burst into tears. He embraced Ved and started relieving the burden of his mind by dissolving it into tears.

Ved started crying more bitterly. The streams of tears

dammed up by them for the last couple of months gushed out of their eyes with full force.

Sangeeta and Neha were unnerved at the wails of both Ramnath and Sangeeta.

They felt that the inevitable had happened after all.

Crying, they rushed towards Neelam's room. Her pulse was quite in order.

They ran towards Ved's room now. As they saw them crying, they too could not restrain their tears.

It was for the first time that the whole family had wept together.

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The astrologers had prophesied after consulting the almanac that Ved's family was vulnerable to such calamities for seven years. This period included a span of two and half months in which they were liable to suffer from every kind of loss i.e. of life and property. Really these two and a half months were very hard on them. The conditions would start improving only after the hard times were over.

The prophecy of the astrologers was coming true.

After eleven weeks, Ved's legs and arms were x-rayed again. The doctors congratulated him as the bones had joined well. Within a day or two all plasters were removed one by one. After massage of a few days, the dormant muscles were supposed to get activated following which Ved would be permitted to walk with the help of a walker.

Neelam's health was improving consistently. With a little of support, she had started sitting for a while. Also, she had started understanding the signals and responding to them. She could utter some words like 'Kamal' and 'Neha'. Her hands and feet had become alive. She could hold a glass or a saucer in her hands now.

Yesterday, she was made to walk with support. Today, she had taken some steps herself. The doctors had said that within a few days, she would be in a position to support herself.

With Neelam's regaining her consciousness, the clouds of gloom had started disappearing from over Ved's family.

A bank-manager reciprocated to Ved's goodwill and allowed Neelam to operate her lockers by declaring her fit to distinguish between what was good or bad for her. The locker contained two hundred grams of gold, about half a kilogram of silver and fifty thousand rupees in hard cash. Neelam was very fond of new currency notes. Ved had promised to give her every bundle of new currency notes whenever he got it in any business deal. Neelam wanted to keep it for Neha's marriage. Ved had always fulfilled his promise with the idea that in a way, a fund was being raised for his daughter's marriage.

But unfortunately that saving was now being used to face hard times rather than for Neha's marriage.

The gold and silver ornaments and the cash amount saved thus, had proved to be a great succour for Ved's family.

Ved handed over gold and silver to Ramnath so that he could recover his amount by selling it.

The cash was to be used for routine expenses. By that time, the other lockers would be opened. Ved hoped that an equal amount of treasure would be available in other lockers also. To evade the eyes of income-tax people, Neelam had kept her lockers and accounts in four separate banks.

With the arrival of money, the house was once again a buzz with activity. The maid-servants who had left due to the stench of filth came back to resume their jobs. Neha and Sangeeta were absolved of the burden of kitchen and cleanliness. They found now some time to relax for a while.

Sangeeta no longer had any grudge against her husband, who would spend a couple of nights with his children and then come back to stay in Mayanagar. Sangeeta too would visit her house. They started paying off their debt in a steady and gradual manner.

Restoration of her parents' health also restored Neha's peace of mind to some extent. She cleaned her *puja-ghar* once again so that she could start meditation. Mata ji had been quite benevolent on her and would keep blessing her, she hoped.

But the hard-restored happiness of Ved's family was too short-lived.

After a couple of days they came to know about the hush-

hush whisper going on in their locality. The people talked to each other that the police had given a clean chit to Pankaj and Neeraj. They were about to be released any time.

The police itself had approached the court for their release. When the police was interested in their release, how could the Court keep them imprisoned?

A neighbour advised Ved, "The release of the boys without having been punished, will only encourage them. They can act out of revenge once again. I think, wisdom lies only in compromise."

Neighbour's warning, sugar-coated with advice, re-confined Ved to his sick bed. His joints exuded heat. A haze of frustration dimmed his vision. The whole episode seemed to be overpowering him once again.

That Neelam understood the whole thing was evident from the copious tears which flowed spontaneously from her eyes.

Neha went to her *puja-ghar* and started sharing her woes with the Divine Mother.

81

With Harish Rai becoming defence counsel for the complainant side, Pankaj felt as if a devastating bull had entered their china shop of peace and happiness. Anytime, awed by Harish Rai, the doctors could declare them as hale and hearty and discharge them from the hospital. Rather than returning to their cozy homes, they could be deprived of even the hospital rooms.

Harish Rai had a well-deserved reputation of whole heartedly helping his clients. He belonged to a very opulent family and owned property worth crores. So he had no lust for money.

In this case, he had offered his services in his personal capacity. In his personal capacity, he restricted his activities to the court proceedings only.

When a case was taken up by the Victim Welfare Society, it was probed most intensely by it to reach the very core of the issue. Hundreds of members of the Society kept an eye on every aspect of the case. In a case taken up by the Society, an officer would have to think several times before helping the accused.

The accused brothers thought that before the society espoused this case and hindered their being declared innocent; they should immediately get the report prepared by the IG. The IG must be pressurized by Baghel Singh as well as uncle Partap Singh. Whatever was to be done must be done immediately.

Sardari Lal was called to Mayanagar at once. It was only he who was competent enough to do this job.

Baghel Singh was given the due installment and was taken to Chandigarh. The Chief Minister was managed to ring up the IG. The *SSP* was pressurized to submit the exoneration report of both the accused to the magistrate and get their release order from him.

Due to the telephone calls from 'above' and the effect of money, the file travelled with an astounding speed. Within twenty four hours the case file reached very fast down to the *SHO* from the IG via DIG, *SSP* and DSP. The *SHO* was receiving telephone calls one after the other to get the accused duo released immediately and to report back.

What should the *SHO* do? The file had reached him at seven in the evening. Official formalities consumed another hour. The courts had closed and the judicial officers had left for their homes. By now someone must have left for his evening walk and some other for the club. It was not a child's play to bring all of them together at this time.

The release of the accused could be an exigency for the *SHO*, *not* for the magistrate. It was a routine activity for him. The crime was a serious one. The magistrate would not like to invite trouble for himself by declaring the accused innocent overnight. But nobody agreed to this plea of the *SHO*. The officers were rather getting annoyed with him that he did not have cordial relations with the magistrate.

To pass the buck and justify himself, the *SHO* prepared the discharge report, made the supporters of the accused to bring two crates of Peter Scott whisky and drove towards the officer's colony. Half of the crate was unloaded at the residence of the Public Prosecutor. The Public Prosecutor showed reluctance in accepting the whisky. He had got orders from his seniors for an immediate discharge of the accused. If they came to know about

the gratification in the form of whisky, they would transfer him immediately to a far-off station.

"I've brought this myself, Sir. The accused don't contact the small officers like us. They approach the higher ups only," said the *SHO* to please the Public Prosecutor.

The Public Prosecutor expressed his assent to the discharge report. After completing the formalities, he seated himself in the vehicle of the *SHO* for going to the magistrate's residence.

The magistrate, too, had received a recommendatory phone-call. But it seemed to have an adverse impact on him. Neither was he himself present there nor his children. Nobody knew where he had gone or when he would be back.

The *SHO* informed the *SSP*

"Wait for the magistrate and come back only after the needful is done," ordered the *SSP*

The magistrate turned up at about eleven. He was in a drunken state. The magistrate was not ready to listen to them. He could not understand what the public prosecutor was saying. The *SHO* was interrupted by the magistrate's wife as he tried to force the magistrate to put his signatures on the discharge report.

"Give it to me! Why do you compel him like this? You come in the morning. I'll get it signed by him. Now he is not in a position to write anything nor will I let him write," she said and put the documents in to her purse by taking them from the *SHO*. She supported the staggering magistrate in to the house.

After unloading the whisky crate at magistrate's residence, both the officers felt extremely frustrated. They apprised their senior officers with the latest situation.

As per the orders of their seniors, they came again to the magistrate's residence early in the morning next day.

Under the hang-over of the last night, the magistrate was still asleep.

The Peter Scott crate had mollified the magistrate's wife. She awakened the magistrate.

After having enjoyed a sound sleep, the magistrate was perfectly in his senses.

"Don't try to be fool me. I also know a little bit of law. The magistrate has no authority to discharge the accused involved

in a murder case. You are a seasoned Public Prosecutor; have you not read the latest Supreme Court decisions?" Annoyed over the bid of the *SHO* to compel him for putting his signatures on the discharge report last night, the magistrate gave vent to his anger first of all.

"I know Sir. But our seniors don't listen to us. They are pressing hard on us for getting the report approved, come what may," both the officers replied in unison.

"I, too, have received many phone calls in this case from the *SSP* as well as the District Attorney. I've convinced everybody. You rest assured, nobody would ask you at all," said the magistrate. He was feeling obliged for the whisky pack received last night.

"Tell us any other way out. You are an expert in law, Sir," the Public Prosecutor sought guidance from the magistrate.

"The way is straight forward. Don't get in to this trouble of discharge. The Sessions judge will have to call the complainant before approving the discharge. Sending summons to the plaintiff will make it public. You ask the accused to file a bail petition in the Sessions court. Then in response to this petition, get them declared innocent. Then who can refuse the bail?. First let them come out on bail. Approval of discharge report will be taken up later on."

The magistrate's advice convinced both of them.

In accordance with the well-devised plan, a bail petition was filed. The petition was based on the *IG's* report declaring the accused as innocent. It was a crime to keep the accused in the jail without fault of theirs.

The Session Judge directed the police to elaborate the whole situation till noon.

In the afternoon the *SSP* also appeared with the *SHO* in the court. The gazetted officer certified the innocence of both the accused.

The petition was accepted at once and within an hour both the accused reached their homes.

Having freed himself from Ved's family, Ramnath assembled

his shattered household life. He tried to put his derailed profession once again on the rails.

Most of his files had been lying incomplete. In normal office hours these could not be completed. With a good deal of entreaties he could persuade the court clerk to keep sitting overtime.

The clerk kept drinking while Ramnath was busy in inspecting the files.

Obsessed with a will to complete the work, Ramnath failed to look at his watch. By the time he reached home, the clock was striking eight. He found his children standing at the threshold with their eyes full of tears. As he entered the house they clung to him and started crying bitterly.

Ramnath smelt something wrong. It seemed as if they had received some bad news which they were going to break now. But soon he realized that it was only his fearful thinking and nothing had gone wrong with Ved, Neelam and Neha. For the time being everybody was out of danger.

"My children, I am very sorry for getting late. But I was helpless. Had I gone to a Public Call Office to ring you up, the clerk would have left by locking the almirah," Ramnath apologised and expressed his helplessness.

Ramnath felt that the long absence of parents had made the children scary. They had started magnifying even very trivial things.

Ramnath was used to coming home in time. If he was likely to get late, he would ring up well in time. He had failed in his usual discipline today. That is why the children were upset.

Ramnath's absence perturbed Sangeeta more than their children. For the last three hours she had been telephoning again and again. It seemed to her that the adversaries had rendered him unable to return home. At the instructions of their mother the children had tired themselves out by making phone calls here and there. Their papa was nowhere. They enquired about him from others, but nobody had seen him anywhere. Sangeeta became apprehensive after every phone-call.

The phone had been lying silent for some time. The children

were worried for both the parents. Sangeeta's anxiety was quite natural. In bad times, human mind is prone to invite very dismal thoughts. To remove the worries of his wife Ramnath rang up Sangeeta. Like children, Sangeeta also burst into tears. The news broken by her was really stunning.

The police had declared both Pankaj and Neeraj as innocent and submitted the report to the court. The court had admitted the petition and released them.

The accused were celebrating their success.

Some drunkard was harassing Sangeeta time and again over telephone, asking very sarcastically " So, you have succeeded in getting Pankaj and Neeraj imprisoned?" Then he threatened: "Now save your lawyer husband if you can."

Sangeeta was afraid lest some hired goons of the accused brothers should have done any harm to her husband. She was told by some well-wishers that Ramnath was the biggest eyesore for the accused duo. Had he not pursued the case so vehemently, police would never have suspected them. If at all some suspicion arose, they would have dispelled it with their money-power. Ramnath was really the root cause of all harassment faced by them, they thought. Pankaj's supporters firmly believed that but for Ramnath's intervention Ved would have agreed to make a compromise since long. His friends were sending direct messages to Ramnath that in case Pankaj suffered any more, he would be taught a lesson.

Sangeeta feared that the accused, encouraged by their release, could do any damn thing.

Listening to what Sangeeta told him, Ramnath shuddered to the bones. He, in his imagination, found himself face to face with death. Earlier, they had managed a deadly attack on Ved's family by the hired rascals just for a plot worth ten lacs. Ramnath proved more expensive for them. They could eliminate him by crushing him under the wheels of a bus or truck. Pankaj's lawyers must have told them not to feel complacent after release. It was a temporary release, not a permanent acquittal. The sword of Damocles was still dangling over their heads and the court could call them any time for trial. If the evidence came on record, they could be convicted also. If they wanted a permanent

acquittal, they must eliminate the man who might be instrumental in bringing evidence on record.

Ramnath himself had given such advice to his clients. Pursuant is more dangerous than the complainant himself. Implicate the pursuant in some case. In the process of explicating himself from the case, he would forget the complainant.

This formula could be applied on Ramnath also.

For the first time, Ramnath felt his life threatened. If the accused could get themselves a clean chit in spite of such solid proofs against them in a triple crime case, they could do anything to eliminate an unarmed soft target like him.

Sangeeta had urged him several times earlier also that he should break himself apart from this family feud in the larger interest of his own family. There are other relatives also. Nobody else has emerged as an eyesore for the enemies. Why should only Ramnath take a special interest in the case?

But Ramnath was made of a sterner stuff. Let anybody who wants to hide his face on such occasions, do so. He would not stake his conscience. So far as compromise was concerned, it was for Ved and Neelam to decide. For the time being they were unnerved by anguish and disability. They were not in a position to use their free will. When they come back to the normal state of mind, Ramnath would move aside, but till then he would perform his duties as a brother, as a human being.

Ramnath knew that the enemies had an upper hand in the case. They had tilted the scale of justice to their side by using their weights of gold and silver. But Ramnath was fighting a battle of truth and justice. He could not be a party to the acquittal of the accused by backtracking like cowards. At least Ramnath or his sisters would have no sense of remorse for not fighting a legal battle against the killers of their innocent son or the rapists of their young daughter. Ramnath had made the princely accused, Pankaj and Neeraj, have a taste of infernal jail life, even though for a brief period, for their guilt of blending in to dust the honour of their own uncle's family. He was fighting for the satisfaction of his own conscience. Getting defeated during fight was no defeat. He would not bother even if he was killed in his fight against injustice.

Ramnath laid bare his heart before Sangeeta and asked her not to block his path of righteousness. He was not the one to retract his steps.

Sangeeta warned him once again. He should not come all alone and bring along his gun. The rowdies could not be trusted. They could attack Neelam's house at night.

Ramnath readily agreed to this proposal of his wife. He took out his gun from the almirah, loaded it and telephoned his friends that they should come well-armed.

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On the way the friends started discussing every aspect of the issue. They maintained that Ramnath need not fear much Pankaj and his men. They were not professional criminals. Moreover, they had already suffered much. They had come out of jail with great difficulty and would think thousands times before initiating any squabble unnecessarily. Their relatives were rich but they would not advise them to involve themselves once again in such a serious crime.

It was no longer advisable for Ved's family to keep staying in *Mayanagar*. The case had prolonged. First, Pankaj and Neeraj were to be summoned. They had to avoid standing in the accused-box at any cost. The appeals would go up to the highest level.

In *Mayanagar*, only the rising sun was worshipped. For days together, the neighbours would not step into their house. Too much of loneliness would turn them abnormal here.

Why not shift Ved's family to the city by getting them a separate house nearby.

Ved and Neha were already fed up with *Mayanagar*. They would welcome this proposal like anything.

But Ved wanted to go to his native town, rather than going to Ramnath's city. In his own town, Ved had his old house, as well as his friends. He could pass his time more easily over there.

But it was not easy for Ved to live in his city. All the members needed medical care. Neha needed a company of her age.

The situation was not the same in Ved's town also. A

monthly or fortnightly courtesy visit to hospital was one thing and taking them to hospital every other day was another.

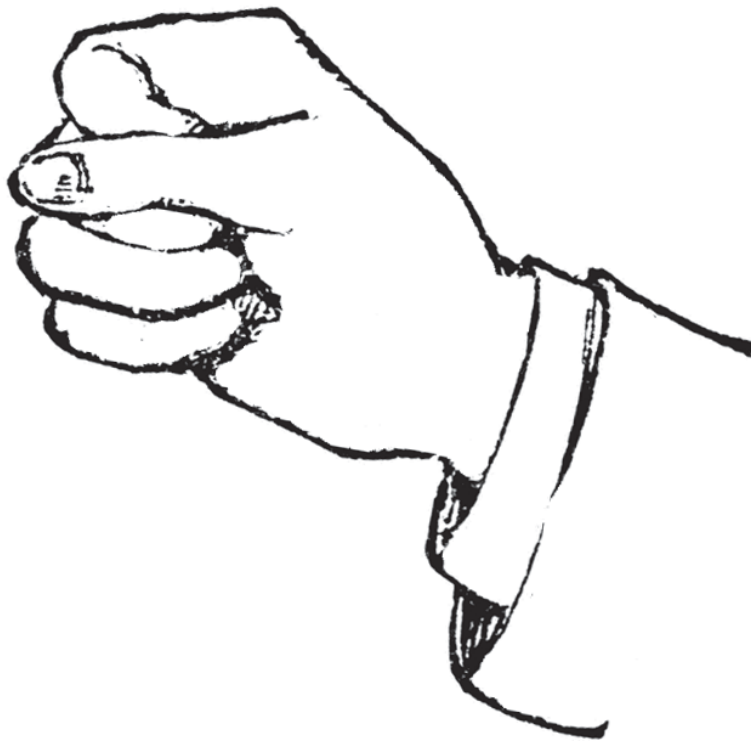
They were involved in litigation and faced threat at the hands of their own people.

Ved had lost almost all power of decision making. Trusting Ramnath's decision he gave an assenting nod to him saying,

"Take us away from *Mayanagar*. We are ready to go anywhere."

At night they packed their luggage and in the morning they bade adieu to *Mayanagar*.

PART-III



Truth remains Truth after all, whether you
believe it or not. These aching limbs Have
undergone excruciating pangs of Truth.

— Paash

Ramnath was getting one message after another from the police station.

Ninety days were about to elapse after the arrest of the first accused. Once, ninety days were over he would be entitled for bail. The police wanted someone from the plaintiff side to come to Mayanagar and get the discrepancies of the case removed.

The message was telephonic.

Ramnath preferred to avoid any compliance with it.

Getting *challan* passed would mean fattening the purses of government pleaders. The police had already excluded the names of the main accused from the case. Whatever evidence could come on record against the other accused had already been recorded. Ramnath found no sense in getting fleeced by the government pleaders.

Secondly, the police was bound to file *challan* within ninety days, failing which, the concerned police officer was liable to be punished. To avoid his own harassment, the *SHO* wanted to get the government pleader obliged by the plaintiff side. "Let the *SHO* do his duties himself, how does it concern me?" thought Ramnath.

The second message came through a constable. The former *SHO* had been transferred. He had left many loopholes, intentionally, in the case. In case, the flaws of the case were not removed well-in-time, the accused could be acquitted. New *SHO* should not be blamed later on when it is too late, the message said.

Filing the *challan* properly was the responsibility of police. To point out the shortcomings of the case was the duty of the government pleader who was paid for this. When Ramnath took up a case, he would advise his client to meet the government pleader. After taking his fees, the government pleaders would place the case file before Ramnath who perused it. The pleader would remove the discrepancies pointed out by Ramnath. Money spent by the client did not go waste. With the removal of so many flaws, the case would become intelligible.

The lawyer, who used to advise others, was shying away from meeting the government pleader today.

Ramnath had got an idea of probable expenditure from the messenger constable. He had described it as two thousand for the government pleader of the magistrate, three thousand for the prosecutor attached to the Additional Sessions Judge, five thousand for the District Attorney and two-three thousands more for miscellaneous expenses.

To avoid this expenditure of ten to fifteen thousand rupees Ramnath refrained from going to Mayanagar. In his own town, this expenditure would never have crossed two thousand i.e. three hundred for the junior pleader, five hundred for the Additional Sessions Judge's prosecutor and one thousand for the District Attorney.

Ramnath was neither in a position, nor in a mood to spend this much. Rather than going to Mayanagar, he asked Harish Rai's clerk to keep in touch with the court officials and inform him if *challan* was not filed before the expiry of ninety days.

The clerk informed him every evening. What to speak of filing the *challan*, it was not even cleared so far. Then he was informed that immediately after the expiry of ninety days, the accused had started filing petitions for the acceptance of their bail bonds.

The *thekedar* had been arrested first of all. The police had got seven days remand for interrogating him. He had gone to jail after a week. The counting of ninety days would be considered from the day he went to jail. The hearing on his petition was fixed after six days.

Pandit was sent to jail earlier and arrested later on. He had contacted the other three accomplices. The addresses or whereabouts of the co-accused as told by him were vague. They could not be arrested from there. To extract truth from him, the police had subjected him to excessive torture which had brought him on the verge of death. The magistrate had not remanded him further to police custody and sent him to jail straightway.

Immediately after the expiry of ninety days, his bail was accepted.

This was the second setback to Ved's family, the first being the release of the prime accused without giving a hearing to the complainant side.

By not filing the *challan* within the prescribed limit, the police was now paving way for getting the accused bailed out. Pankaj and Neeraj were not directly involved in the commission of crime. They were quite rich and influential. The soft corner of police for them was understandable. But their sympathy with the criminal lot was beyond Ramnath's understanding.

Ramnath regretted his negligence. He should not have been reluctant in this case and obliged the government pleaders. Anyway, all was not lost as yet. He immediately set out for Mayanagar by bus. Seething with wrath, he met Harish Rai first of all.

There was no doubt regarding the excesses of police. The two accused had been exonerated and the others were being helped in getting bail. They were likely to abscond after coming out and the case would go to the winds.

The Society had already decided not to let the victims of this case suffer any more.

Taking up the case by the Society was a ray of optimism in itself. It lightened the mind of Ramnath to a great extent. Some inner voice told him that now he could hope for justice.

Rest everything was to be looked after by the Society. It had to compel the police to file *challan* aright and well in time. The president had to decide whether this pressure had to be built up through court, media or any other way.

But it did not mean that Ramnath should become complacent. He must not slacken his efforts on his part. However, he had come with a mind to meet the government pleaders.

Regarding the government pleaders dealing with the Civil Lines police station, Ramnath was told the same thing by everybody. The government pleader attached to the magistrate did not know even the 'a.b.c'. of law. He was not capable enough to understand the intricacies of such a complicated case. He was a sycophant and a bacchanalian. He was firmly stationed in Mayanagar on the basis of this very trait of his personality.

He could neither do any good nor any harm to the case. There was no use spending any amount on him.

The District Attorney was just the opposite of him, very efficient in his work. But he was a bit arrogant. He called himself a favourite of the Chief Minister's family as well as the minister of his department. He considered it his duty to send brief-cases full of currency-notes on occasions like marriage in their families. Due to his links with the minister he always wore an expression of haughtiness. He took graft by arm-twisting. His minimum fees started from fifty thousand. In this case he was openly helping the accused. He would get fees from complainant, but help the accused. Even then he would keep showing his displeasure for giving him not enough fees. There was no point in being exploited by him also.

Luckily, the Deputy District Attorney of the Civil Lines police station was a gentle guy. He was efficient in his work and always had a soft corner for the complainant.

Meeting him would solve all the problems. The shortcomings overlooked by the junior government pleader would be detected by him. The discrepancies pointed out by him could not be set aside by the District Attorney. Many birds could be killed with one stone.

At the advice of others, Ramnath contacted Dharam Singh and tried to thrust two thousand rupees in his pocket.

Before accepting money, Dharam Singh clarified his position, "Let me make it very clear that our District Attorney is a very bad guy. He loves money more than work. For a few rupees he passes the *challan* directly brushing aside the deputies like me. APP's are scared of him. They approach him along with the *SHO* and the party. He settles his fee and signs the papers at once. The *challan* may not necessarily come to me. Retain the money with you for the time being. I'll get it after your work gets done. Have no worry from my side. When the file comes to me, I'll give you a ring and call the President also. Together we'll see what has to be done."

Once again Dharam Singh tried to return money to Ramnath saying, "You belong to our fraternity and a complainant in the case at that. This is my duty to help you in every way."

“No no, please keep it. You haven’t demanded anything. I have given it with pleasure. Please handle the file effectively.”

Ramnath sought government pleader’s help as if he himself was an illiterate rustic.

85

The former *SHO* had been transferred to the special battalion meant for the Chief-Minister’s security. He was replaced by Bant Singh.

Among the case files that Bant Singh received in his charge from his predecessor, the most important was the one relating to Kamal murder case. This was the case which invited frequent queries from the senior officers. A wise officer is the one who has the facts of such a case on his tips and has with him a ready answer when asked by the senior. While, going by this principle, Bant Singh went through the facts of the case, he was at his wits’ end. Due to failure in filing *challan* one of the accused had got bail while others were likely to get bailed out within three-four days. The present *SHO* was bound to be held responsible for this negligence.

It was three days since Bant Singh had taken over the charge. He wondered that his reader had not so far brought this point to his notice. The *Munshi* too was reticent. He should have screamed out to tell that the *challan* was getting late.

The investigation of this case was entrusted to the *SHO*. Every proceeding would be signed by him. Every report was prepared by the reader. The *SHO* only signed it. For some days Bant Singh had attached the reader of his predecessor to himself. Bant Singh knew that he was expert in the office work, due to which he was attached to the former *SHO* also. The former *SHO* had a notoriety of beating the accused mercilessly and minting money. He had a good network of informers in the entire Mayanagar and captured the accused even from the remotest hideouts. But he was very poor in office work. The judge and government pleaders gave him a severe rebuke when he had to appear for evidence in the court. So, in order to avoid any botheration, he would always keep this reader with him.

He had been transferred to the Chief Minister’s security

Battalion There, no officer was allowed to keep an assistant. That is why the reader was left behind. There was a positive point in his staying behind. The incomplete files were to be completed by the reader, thus covering the dark spots therein.

Bant Singh too was getting the files completed by him. The new reader could not handle this work so easily.

Bant Singh felt enraged at this negligence of the reader. He felt that he was being fooled by the reader and that he was trying to implicate him knowingly. He had heard that two *SHOs* preceding him had fattened their purses sufficiently in this case. The reader had a soft corner for the accused and he was showing allegiance to the former *SHO*.

Unlike his predecessor, Bant Singh was not the one to depend too much on his reader. To show this he insulted him in the presence of other staff. The reader, too, was not to be rattled so easily. He said, "Sir. I have sent message to the complainants twice. Once I myself telephoned them. Then I sent a constable. What can I do if nobody turned up? Three government pleaders have to check the *challan*. You know very well the nature of Santokh Singh. His blood pressure shoots up at once if the desired fee is paid to him. He calls names and threatens to write to the *SSP*. It is a futile exercise to visit him. The case of the complainants is being looked after by a relative, who is a lawyer. It doesn't concern us whether the lawyer pays more or less to the government pleaders. That is why; I had sent them a message."

The reader thought that this alacrity of his would be applauded by the *SHO*. But the tables were turned on him.

"You fool, why should the complainant pay any fee? The prime-accused, the root of all trouble, have been exonerated by us. Should the complainant pay us for giving a clean chit to their wrong doers? Fees should have been paid by the accused, which have been declared innocent by us. I fail to understand how the hell do you call yourself wise?"

"Sir, we can't invite trouble by calling the accused. The senior officers have directed us not even to look towards them. They ring up the officers even if we just pass by their house. Officials like me only come under the harrow. I will get the

challan passed within an hour. You tell me some way out.”

“If this is the situation, even then you should have told me. I would have talked to the officers. They would have talked to Pankaj or the District Attorney. Since the officers have helped them come out, they themselves should have cared to get the *challan* passed. This time, I’m sparing you. In future I’ll report against you and get you transferred to police lines, if you repeat such negligence,” said Bant Singh.

“Right, Sir.”

“You send a message to the accused. I’ll talk to the officers myself. I will try to convince them. If they don’t agree, then we shall find some other way out. We are not to open ourselves to departmental inquiry.” said the *SHO*. He had been told by the police station staff that the accused brothers had distributed money lavishly for gaining innocence orders. Bant Singh was jealous of his predecessors who had gobbled up enough money and left behind, this problem for him to grapple with for nothing. Anyway, he decided that whatever be the consequences, he would not get the *challan* passed by spending from his own pocket.

With the intervention of the reader, a meeting was fixed between Pankaj and Bant Singh at a secret place.

Some terms and conditions were laid down in the meeting. The accused gave thirty thousand rupees to the *SHO* to stall the *challan* from being filed in the court before ten days. By that time the *Thekedar* would come out on bail. After his coming out, the hearing of the case would be made as desired by Pankaj.

The *SHO* too had a condition. It was not for him alone to do this. The delay in filing *challan*, required the consent of the senior officers. It was for Pankaj to look after them.

Pankaj had another condition. The former *SHO*’s had not brought much evidence on the file. The file was silent about them and it must remain so.

Bant Singh agreed to it. The drawbacks were to be pointed out by the government pleaders. If they keep silence on this issue, it would save them from the botheration of collecting proofs. The *SHO* required the help of Pankaj for restraining the government pleaders from pointing out defects.

Pankaj could talk to the pleaders directly, if he so wanted. But that would cost him more, while through police he could pay less. This was Bant Singh's suggestion for Pankaj, who was ready to spend money and show no niggardly attitude in this regard.

Under this deal, the *SSP* called the case file to his office, apparently to check it as the *challan* was about to be prepared.

Bant Singh was a seasoned police officer. He recorded this order of the *SSP* in *Roznamcha*. He prepared a copy of the same and put it in his pocket. Now responsibility for any delay in filing the *challan* would come on the *SSP*.

Feeling at ease in his heart, Bant Singh started waiting for the next proceeding.

86

Bant Singh's complacency was short lived.

The *SHO's* integrity came under scanner immediately after the bail of the first accused was accepted.

The plaintiff side sent telegrams right from Chief Justice to the Prime-Minister against this manipulated injustice. A small news item appeared in vernacular papers from Ramnath's city. But nobody took any notice of this news. The telegrams had to come down to the *SSP* from all upper levels. The whole activity was being done at the directives of the District Police Chief. The complaint was to be consigned to the dustbin after a formal inquiry.

The alarm bell rang only when Harish Rai's statement hit the headlines of English dailies. He had condemned severely the connivance of police in giving clean chit to Pankaj and Neeraj, despite there being substantial evidence against them and stage-managing the bail of hard-core criminals by delaying the filing of *challan*. He demanded C.B.I. probe into the whole affair and declared that the society itself would take up this case in its hands.

This statement from the President worried not only Pankaj but also every officer associated with this case.

Pankaj and co. apprehended the rejection of their bails. "Hell with the *Thekedar!* Save your own skin first," counselled their lawyers.

The Society enjoyed its influence throughout the state and had its units right from the Subdivision level to the High Court. The courts gave a patient hearing to the arguments of the Society. Everybody knew how Pankaj and Neeraj had managed their release. If the Society succeeded in getting the inquiry handed over to C.B.I. through a writ petition, many more cases were likely to be filed against them alongwith the present case. The career of police officers and political leaders would be imperiled.

If the *challan* was delayed knowingly, the Society could get it rechecked. The Society had to tilt evidence in its favour by standing at the side of the investigation officer. After getting the earlier probe annulled, they could be held guilty in the new inquiry.

Pankaj's lawyers opined that the *challan* should be filed immediately in the court. Their safe side lay in the *subjudice* status of the case.

Scared by the telegrams and news coverage, the *SSP* immediately sent the file to the police station with the instructions to his reader that no proof of it being called to his office should be put on record.

Before some higher authority questioned the *SSP* regarding delay in filing the *challan*, he took the initiative by serving a show-cause notice to the *SHO* for this negligence.

"Bant Singh, I will take care of your first blunder. But let no other accused get released. File the *challan* immediately and get rid of the trouble looming large on us."

The *SSP* patted the *SHO* after serving him the show-cause notice.

It was eighty ninth day after the *Thekedar* was sent to jail.

If the *challan* was filed within twenty four hours his bail petition could be rejected by the magistrate.

As per the changed conditions, Bant Singh examined the file once again.

The entire investigation had been made by the earlier officers. But the *challan* was to be signed by the officer in the

saddle. Although the report was to be based on the investigation already made, but the officer who signed it would be held equally responsible.

Before taking over the responsibility, Bant Singh examined all the proofs; cast a glance over the witnesses' statements and daily dairy etc. There was nothing in the file. If the *challan* was filed like this, the accused would attract only the charges relating to the recovery of stolen goods. No evidence of hatching conspiracy of murder or committing murder was brought on record in the file. To prepare *challan* of dacoity and murder on the basis of available proofs and then putting signatures on it would be fraught with risk for Bant Singh.

Bant Singh neither had any time nor authority to prepare the whole file anew. The whole file bore the signatures of erstwhile *SHO*'s. They would have to be called for getting their signatures. He came to know that the former *SHO* was roaming in Calcutta with the Chief-Minister. He could not reach Mayanagar in time even by air. And why should Bant Singh bother so much? The former *SHO* was himself responsible for flawed investigation. He must do only whatever was within his capacity.

Bant Singh's interest lay in filing the *challan* in a roundabout way rather than raking the old issues.

Pankaj was looking for the *SHO* and the *SHO* was looking for him. Both were keen to file the *challan*.

Earlier conditions were cancelled. Under the new terms Bant Singh had to look after the two lower-level government pleaders, while the District Attorney had to be managed by Pankaj. He was too tough to be dealt with by Bant Singh. He was very demanding and rude in demeanour.

Bant Singh asked for twenty thousand rupees for the junior government pleaders.

Singla had described Assistant Public Prosecutor's fees as one thousand and that of Dharam Singh as two thousand to Pankaj, while Bant Singh had demanded five thousand for the APP and fifteen thousand for Dharam Singh.

But this was no time to be miserly. The situation demanded that he must do all he could to liberate himself and his brother

from the new calamity. He readily agreed to Bant Singh.

Bant Singh asked Pankaj to push off immediately to contact Santokh Singh. Whether he gives him fees, gets the MLA or the Chief-Minister to telephone him, was none of Bant Singh's business.

Pocketing twenty thousand, he himself started the process of managing the junior pleaders.

He obtained two bottles of whisky from the liquor vend without making any payment and rang up the proprietor of Shere-e-Punjab *Dhaba*. He told him that his reader would be coming to him along with two officers for dinner; a room should be well-cleaned on the first floor. He instructed the proprietor to serve the officers well.

Then he called his reader and gave him two thousands out of the twenty thousand. Then he instructed him,

"First take the APP to the *Dhaba*. When he finishes with the four pegs, put two five-hundred rupee notes in his pocket. Don't start drinking yourself. By the time whisky kicks him well, you prepare memo on his behalf and get it signed immediately after giving him money. See that he does not leave without doing the needful. If he doesn't feel satisfied with one thousand, give him two hundred more. I have given you two thousand. Whatever is saved is yours."

"Right Sir," picking up money and bottles of whisky, Lali felt very pleased. "Sir, what have you thought about the Deputy District Attorney?" He has been contacted by the plaintiff. He is asking whether *challan* is ready or not? He won't pass the *challan* so easily. He finds a number of faults in an illicit liquor case. It's a case of murder. He will read this *challan* twenty times. You must go to him.

Lali was awfully scared of Dharam Singh. He was not the one to be allured. He kept his work tip-top. He was not afraid of any officer and could talk to an officer with guts.

The whole case file was prepared by Lali. He had written it as directed by the officer. The judge could not hold the accused guilty of a crime bigger than theft, no matter how much close he is to the complainant.

Dharam Singh could make this shortcoming of police a part

of his comments. Later, these very comments would prove very detrimental to the interests of officers. After the accused were acquitted, this memo would become proof of the negligence and dereliction of duty by the officers.

"You take the first step yet. I'll think some way out of this Dharam Singh phenomenon," the *SHO* said.

"Well, there is one solution to this problem. According to new orders of the District Attorney, it is not necessary to take the *challan* to Dharam Singh. With an additional dose of gratification, he passes the *challan* at his own level. Give Dharam Singh's fees to him and avoid Dharam Singh," the Reader shared his experience with the *SHO*

"I have sent Pankaj to the DA Let's see what report he comes with and then we will think accordingly. You push off soon. Then I have to go to the DA also."

Bant Singh liked the Reader's suggestion. Let Dharam Singh's share of thousand be given to the DA. That would save from the unfavourable comments of the Addl PP, and also the harassment of going to him.

He took out another two thousands from the amount given to him by Pankaj and put them in an envelope. Let Pankaj pay the DA what he likes, this packet would be a gift from Bant Singh to the DA.

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For the last three months, Pankaj had been dealing with Santokh Singh and he got familiar with his nature quite well.

Santokh Singh had visited his house and factory several times. Many a time, he had lifted sweaters, cardigans, blankets etc. for himself and his officers. He was fond of luxury vehicle and many times Pankaj's vehicle had taken him to Shimla for pleasure trip.

Santokh Singh had told Pankaj hundred times that now he was no less than a family member to him. But Pankaj felt that he would not oblige him unless he was obliged.

Pankaj had made him do many things for his friends and had arranged handsome fees to him from them. If ever, the DA felt that the fees were less, he would ask them for some unpaid

obligation called *begar* in popular terms. For his friends Pankaj would come out with hundreds of excuses like, "He is a poor man"; "His business is on the decline"; "His factory is closed down," etc. What would he say about himself? Santokh Singh was quite familiar with his position. Even if he did not accept cash, he could ask for a heavy *begar*, which might cost him dearer than cash amount. That is why Pankaj had decided to pay him in cash. Moreover, in his own case Pankaj could not make any bargaining. No barber can shave his own head.

Using this prudence he involved Singla in this deal. Singla had been tested several times. He had been beneficial to Pankaj every time.

It happened this time also. Santokh Singh demanded fifty thousand for giving his approval to the police report.

Singla was taken aback at the avaricious demand of the District Attorney. He made him have a realisation of his relation with Pankaj, who had earlier paid him fees several times as well, notwithstanding the fact that every time it had gone waste without doing any good to them. Still the party had never talked of demanding the fees back. Moreover, they had done *begar* for him as and when they were asked for. Their humility must be evaluated at this stage.

"Let them pay ten thousand less, if you insist so much," said Santokh Singh evaluating Pankaj's earlier services as worth ten thousand.

When Singla emphatically asked him to come down further, Santokh Singh started counting his compulsion.

"I have to do *begar* for everybody right from the relatives of the Chief-Minister to the departmental peon. *Mayanagar* is a center of hosiery goods. One or the other officer is always on a shopping tour to this city. Big business houses like Oswal damn care about a small fry like me. And why should they? There are thousands of officers in Mayanagar from departments like Sales-Tax, Income-Tax etc. If they start being looted by the officers like this, they would become paupers by evening. They simply honour the officers by allowing twenty percent rebate. The rest of the bill is not paid by the officer. It is given to officers like me. The officer, who comes with an intention to purchase two

sweaters, goes back with his car full of them. Even the subordinate staff is no less than any officer. Someone would demand a sweater and some other a shawl for his wife. The officers treat a gift as their birth right. What I get is only a bad name. The cream is lapped up by the higher ups."

"You are right. But these are our own men. They always come forward to help us. It is not good to fleece them in their hard times," said Singla.

"Singla, I fail to understand what you are up to. What troubles you when the party is out to spend money?"

Santokh Singh was irritated at Singla's pro-party stand. "I'm a lawyer. It's my first and foremost duty to protect the interests of my client."

"But your interest lies here as well. Your commission will also rise alongwith my fees."

"I keep my own interest second to that of the client."

Singla was not in favour of letting Santokh Singh get more fees than what he genuinely deserved. He knew that the accused were released with efforts of an officer of IG's rank. Now only an officer higher than the IG could declare them accused again. Let Santokh Singh write whatever he liked, nobody would act upon it.

"Okay, I'll ask them to pay you higher fees. But at least I should know what good we are doing to them?" "*Yaar*, don't try to teach law to me. Just tell me what they can pay gladly?" Santokh Singh knew his position. Therefore he thought it wise to compromise.

"Five thousand."

"Even my APP would not go that low. Of this, two thousand will be your share. What shall I get? Just three thousand?"

"I'm trying to serve your interest. Pankaj was talking of getting you telephoned from above. 'Don't be foolish.' I said, 'Phones from above are not meant for everybody. Santokh Singh is our own man.' Only then he has agreed to pay five thousand," Singla used one of his professional tactics to cool down the District Attorney.

Santokh Singh followed the point that Singla was not in a mood to make him get fees today. He was touching his weak

nerve. It was an open secret that Pankaj's deal with the Chief Minister encompassed every stage of the case up to the filing of *challan*. Under that deal, Santokh Singh could get a telephone call from any quarters and anytime to pass the *challan*.

"I'm not afraid of the phones from above. I have to do *begar* for all the officers. They know well that the *begars* are not possible from one's monthly salary. But still I agree to your suggestion. Ask Pankaj for twenty thousand at least. You can keep fifty percent."

"I'll try, of course. But the bird might as well fly away from our hands," Singla shot another arrow from his quiver of wits.

"Then, let's not charge any fees."

"No, I had never said to do it free of charge? But just see the generosity of the party. They are ready to part with five thousand for nothing."

"Okay, do as you wish.....well, convey my message to Pankaj. Ask him to see me immediately," said Santokh Singh.

"Be wise, my dear Sir. Be wise. The Society has taken up the case in its hands. If someone sees you in the company of the accused, you will also invite trouble as did I and Satinder. Didn't you see our photographs in the newspapers?"

Singla shot his last arrow to wean away Santokh Singh from Pankaj.

Santokh Singh's contact with Pankaj had blocked Singla's income in a big way. Santokh Singh had taken upon himself all the works of the accused, as if he was their mediator not the government pleader.

"It's right. You, business men, are very sensible. It didn't occur to me. Rather you ask Pankaj not to meet nor ring me up."

All of Singla's arrows had hit their target.

Having settled the deal, Singla rang up Pankaj and Pankaj telephoned Bant Singh.

Bant Singh immediately secured appointment from Santokh Singh.

that time, the clerks and steno of his office would have left for their homes and there was no chance of receiving a message from the court. He had leisure enough to talk openly.

It was under this very policy that Bant Singh was called after five.

As the last official left the office, Bant Singh stepped in and saluted the District Attorney.

"Come on, Bant Singh, where do you live? You are hardly seen anywhere." Santokh Singh welcomed Bant Singh who had arrived well in time.

"Sir, earlier I was languishing in police lines. So, I didn't feel like meeting you. Now we'll keep meeting."

"Yes. Keep meeting. You remember we've been together at Ropar? We are to spend similar time here also. Say, what brings you here?"

"I'm entangled in a trouble. And I want to get rid of it with your help," said Bant Singh as he put before the DA the details of Kamal murder case.

"If you consider this case a trouble, what will you say about other cases? The entire police have earned a lot out of it."

"May be, you're right, Sir. But, I swear by God that nobody has given me a farthing so far."

"This is how every police officer says in every case. Anyway, don't cry like this. Tell me, have you got the *challan* passed from the lower-rung officers?"

Santokh Singh got irritated at the often used excuse of the SHO

"I've got it cleared from the APP"

"Who's your APP?"

"Mohinder Singh"

"What the hell he can check the *challan*. He might have signed it off without even reading it."

The very mention of Mohinder Singh exasperated Santokh Singh as he would have to rack his brains now for reading the whole thing.

"Who's the Addl PP?"

"Dharam Singh. I looked for him hard, but failed. Tomorrow, ninety days will be over. Earlier, the officers directed

us not to file the *challan*. Now they say, "File it immediately. Leave it, Sir. Please do it on your own."

The mention of Dharam Singh comforted Santokh Singh a little. Dharam Singh would read the *challan* ad verbatim. He would have made all the shortcomings of the case, a part of his remarks. It would doubly benefit Santokh Singh, as after Dharam Singh's perusal, he would not have to labour much. Secondly, he would have exhausted Bant Singh out by returning him time and again.

"We have new instructions from the government that a murder case must first be cleared by the Deputy District Attorney. This case is already widely publicised. If some discrepancy is left, it will become very difficult to give an explanation. I don't want to expose myself to criticism. I won't pass the *challan* at my own level directly. We must abide by the instructions."

"Why do you want us to spend on him? You can take his fees also."

Bant Singh placed the packet containing two thousand rupees on the District Attorney's table.

"What's there in it?" asked Santokh Singh who was well aware of the tactics of police. Their packets look fat but contain ten-rupee notes only.

"It's two thousand. And I'm giving it from my own pocket."

"Huh! See the one to give money from his pocket"! Santokh Singh uttered these words in silence and did not let them escape his lips.

"Only this much? It's such a big case and the party is rich. Fees is only two thousand."

"Didn't the party contact you, Sir? They told me they had talked to you."

"What does such a contact mean? He came to me in the company of his lawyer. The lawyer, too, demands his share," an irritated Santokh Singh was giving vent to his ire.

"Sir, how do we know the reality? They said they have very good family relations with you. I never knew they would involve their lawyer also in the deal. Otherwise I would make them contact you directly."

"Even now nothing is lost. Talk to them or frighten the bloody fools. You tell them that I don't agree to their lawyer."

"As you like..... But it doesn't look nice to go back on your words. It will displease the lawyer also," Bant Singh said with a tongue in cheek style.

"Okay, you take back your two thousands. Go to Dharam Singh and give this money to him. Get this *challan* examined from him. I mark it in his name. He will check the *challan* right now and give it back to you. Why should I take the whole responsibility on my shoulders? Why not work according to rules?" irked over not getting desired fees from any side, Santokh Singh started taking recourse to the red tape.

"Sir, why drag him unnecessarily in the deal. I have been sent to you by the *SSP* with request from his side also. I can ask him to talk to you over telephone, if you so like."

Compulsion of expiry of ninety days; and the *SSP's* intervention at that; Santokh Singh had no other way out but to surrender.

He put packet in his pocket and started reading the file.

"Astonishing! There are no statements from the injured so far? Whose statement says that the murder was committed before his eyes? Where has the girl said that she was raped? Ved is also silent. There is no mention in his statement as to who injured him."

"It's prepared in a very roundabout way. The former IO has done nothing. If I scribble statements after three months, it will be of no use at all. So please let it remain as it is."

"I have seen it. This *challan* cannot be cleared without proper perusal. So give me time to read it."

Santokh Singh wanted to prolong the case in one way or the other.

"I'll wait outside. Please read it, if you like," Bant Singh tried to counter the DA with the same astuteness.

"Do you think I'm a computer? I'll read the file and try to understand it. Only then I can tell you something."

"Leave this fault-finding exercise Sir. You go through the file. I'll come to your residence in the evening. We'll go to

Maharaja Hotel. It's long since we sat together. Let's celebrate a few moments of joy."

"My evening is already booked today with someone else. You come in the morning and take the file." Santokh Singh was not ready to be lured by two-three pegs of whisky.

Bant Singh had failed to win over Santokh Singh. He relaxed a bit.

"Sir, please be frank with me. I'll admonish the accused right now. Tell me how much they have given and what more do you want?"

"I've got five thousand. I want at least fifteen thousand more."

"Okay. I'll talk to them and ask them to shell out more. But I must get the *challan* passed today."

"Well, talk to the party and tell me what they say. If they pay fifteen thousand, we'll sit right now." Santokh Singh became keener now.

Bant Singh rang up the accused and called them to the police station.

"You note down the shortcomings of the case. By that time I'll bring fees from the party. It will not be wise to call them to your office."

After ten minutes Bant Singh telephoned Santokh Singh, "Fees has reached me. I'm speaking from Maharaja Hotel and waiting for you."

Fifteen thousand rupees and an invitation for dinner in the three star Hotel! Vow! Santokh Singh was all joy now.

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The very first peg of whisky refreshed Santokh Singh. The second one removed all his fatigue.

The amount of fifteen thousand rupees enlivened his brain. Like a computer he started picking up the shortcomings of the case. Bant Singh had nothing to do here. The District Attorney had to find out the infirmities while the reader had to remove them. Why should he keep himself available there?

However, Bant Singh had instructed the manager of the hotel not to take this treat as a free obligation. The bill would be

footed by Pankaj. There was no need to be miserly in serving the officer. Under the pretext of a phone call from his boss, Bant Singh took leave of the DA

Before leaving, he instructed the reader that he should try to get the *challan* signed well in time. In case of any problem, the reader should inform him while Santokh Singh gave order for dinner. Then he would come and himself get the *challan* passed.

"Pankaj and Neeraj were arrested on the charges of hatching conspiracy. Which of the witnesses had heard them cooking up a plot? Where is that statement? I don't see it anywhere."

After Bant Singh's departure, Santokh Singh, feeling a bit free, picked up the first point.

"They have been proved innocent. The officers have got that statement removed. It's no more needed now."

"It's very much needed. That statement had been mentioned at the time of seeking police remand. The plaintiffs will say that the police have destroyed that statement and tampered with the record. If that statement is available, include it otherwise write it anew."

"Whose statement should I write, Sir?"

"Of the same witness, whose statement was written earlier.

Give a natural tinge to the episode. Show that the conspiracy was hatched in the factory and make the factory clerk a witness to it. The conspiracies are made in the most secret cells and in the presence of very credible persons."

"Right Sir. I'll write it just now."

"Do write it. In the meanwhile I'll go through the file further."

"Haven't you got the accused identified by the witnesses?"

"No, Sir. They are not in a position to do so. One of them is still unconscious. The other is bed-ridden with a broken jaw bone. He can neither speak, nor move about. As far as the girl is concerned, neither the parents, nor the doctors want to bring her face to face before the accused."

"Is there any mention of this compulsion in the investigation report? If not, do it now. Tomorrow, the complainant will say that "nobody has called us for identification. We were ready

for identification, and then the IO will find it very difficult to explain.”

“Right Sir.”

“To do away with this discrepancy bring such witnesses on record before whom the accused might have confessed their crime. I mean write non-judicial confession. Write supplementary statement of Ved and Neha describing the names and appearance of the accused. Show Pancham killing Kamal and Dina committing rape and show Pandit plundering the house.”

“If the witnesses really deposed like this, it would cause harm to the accused and annoy our officers... then?”

“I damn care if it harms somebody. I won't pass any incomplete *challan*. The officers have a soft corner for Pankaj and Neeraj. We have a solution to that also. Arrange witnesses of their favour who may retract their statements at their bidding. It will serve as a saving grace for us. We shall be able to say that the proofs were brought on the file. What can we do if the witnesses have retracted?”

“You have a matchless brain Sir. I have worked with the most sensible IO's but I have never come across such brilliance. You have prepared the file with great intelligence. It suits all of us.”

“Don't flatter me. Do your work.”

Till midnight Santokh Singh kept identifying the weak points of the case and the reader kept plugging the holes.

The reader raised some witnesses of his choice so as to encash them at the opportune time. They will stand witness at his bidding and retract when asked to do by them.

The *challan* was cleared as it became fit to suit all sides.

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As soon as the *challan* was filed in the court, different units of the Society became active at once. The powerful propaganda cell of the Society worked under the stewardship of senior advocate Surinder Nath. He was LL.M. He had done research on Criminal Justice-System. His research papers used to be published in the renowned newspapers and journals of the

country. He was a visiting professor of Punjab Police Academy. He had made a profound study into the functioning of police and judiciary. He was also called for talks and panel-discussions on Radio and Television. He was sore over the trend of soft attitude of Law towards the accused. That is why he always raised his voice in favour of those at the receiving end i.e. the victims of the accused.

This cell kept vigil on the activities of every officer linked to the case, as also the lacunae of the case. It brought into limelight the derelictions of duty by the officers by projecting them through the mass media. The judges became aware of the concealed facts and aspects of the case. The information carried by the newspapers affected the opinion of the judges. The affected opinion became instrumental in making them arrive at fair judgement. This was also the actual aim of the cell.

The responsibility of examining the legal points of the case lay on the Legal Cell, which was run by three expert lawyers. Udham Singh was the patron of this cell. His intelligence was known up to the national capital. His routine fees was one lac rupees but he served the Society free of charge.

Udham Singh activated his pupils. He asked them to read the statement of each and every witness and study the investigation reports. They were also told to examine the medical reports, detect shortcomings therein and report to him.

The selfless service of the Society had inspired many voluntary organisations and social workers. Some retired police-officers, revenue officers, forensic experts, doctors and private detectives had dedicated their services to the Society. They reached where police failed to reach. This cell was known as Pursuance Cell.

Some voluntary clubs were ready for financial assistance. Lions Club and Rotary Club gave a fixed and regular financial aid to the Society. Bhagat Singh Club and Nehru Club too came forward with handsome amounts as and when called for.

The accountants, typists, stenographers and clerks, too, did not lag behind. They were also ready to contribute their mite in this noble pursuit.

To bring about coordination among these units, a

Coordination Committee was formed. This Committee worked under the supervision of Harish Rai.

As the Society took up the case, the results started coming to the fore.

The Pursuance Cell submitted its report before hearing on Pancham's bail-petition.

Pancham did not belong to the village mentioned by the police. He neither had five brothers, nor three sisters. His mother's name was also not the same as recorded in the case file. He belonged to Sitamari. When he was yet a small child, his parents had been washed away in the flash floods. Wandering from pillar to post he ultimately reached Punjab. For the last five years he had been living in Mayanagar. Committing minor crimes he graduated into committing dacoities. He had been booked earlier also in several cases of crime. The police had not arrested him from Bihar. He was arrested from this city. He was about twenty five years of age. To keep its weakness in wraps, the police had not gone to his village to enquire about his nativity and date of birth. Neither the doctor had to attend the next hearing, nor had the police to submit any report. At the bidding of Pankaj and Neeraj, the doctor had prepared a fictitious report. He had deliberately refrained from attaching X-ray report or films with the medical report. He was avoiding personal appearance.

It really happened as it was already expected. The *SHO* sent an application to the effect that due to some urgency, he could not go to Bihar. The court was requested to give an extended date. The doctor, too, expressed his helplessness. He said that he had been called by the Sessions Judge of Patiala for evidence as the Patiala court had received instructions from the High Court to dispose of that particular case. This was what had necessitated his going to Patiala. The doctor also demanded extension in this case.

The defendants were well aware of the inside reality.

They avoided argumentation on the application due to more than one reasons:

First, in the changed conditions, it was very difficult to prove Pancham an adolescent.

Second, his broken leg was in a very pitiable condition. The bones were not joining properly. The pus-formation was going out of control. In case the leg was amputated while in police custody, the government was supposed to bear all the expenditure. But outside, it would come on Pankaj to pay for the entire treatment. The expenditure could shoot up to one lac and getting Pancham released on bail would cost him very dearly.

“Third, Pandit’s bail had been accepted. He had to produce two guarantors for giving one lac surety each. It was also laid down that the guarantors should be Punjabis and their property should be certified by the *Tehsildar*. Pandit was in no position to arrange such guarantors. Coming out he would have to fall back on Pankaj.

Pandit accepted all the conditions laid down by Pankaj.

“Then why not accept what is already at hand, rather than exploring new possibilities?”

Scuttling the move of the accused to get Pancham declared a juvenile was the first success of the Society.

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Main objective of the Society was to expedite the proceedings of the case. Quicker the recording of evidence better would be the results.

Under this policy, the Society accelerated its activities.

The slackened media was reactivated. Every court proceeding regarding the case was widely reported by the newspapers. These reports started having their bearing on the officers.

The lawyers of defence now found it hard to get the case fixed unnecessarily on later dates.

Had it been some ordinary case, the lawyers of the accused would keep getting dates after dates from the court under the pretext of incomplete copies of the *challan* received by them. The judge would have ordered the government pleader to complete the copies. The pleader in turn would have passed the buck on to the *SHO*. The *SHO* would have assigned this duty to some *Hawalदार* who would avoid spending hundred-

two hundred rupees from his pocket and would get a date on one excuse or the other. The next hearing would be attended by some new *Hawaladar*. Again the same old proceeding would be repeated. Avoidance of a paltry sum of hundred rupees would result in a number of dates. The irritated judge would then request the defendants' lawyers to get the copies prepared on their own expenditure. The lawyers, gloating over their success in elongating the case would abide by the judge's order, as if they were obliging him and abandon the demand for copies.

There was nothing of this sort in this case. The judge had detained the government pleader and defence counsels on the very first hearing. He had not allowed them to leave until the *SHO* completed the copies.

The next proceeding was that of submitting the *challan* to the Sessions Judge. Had it been any ordinary case the magistrate would have made two-three hearings before finally dictating this order. For dictating the order he would have to read the file, dictate four-page judgement. All this proceeding would have taken two-three months.

But here, it was a different case. The magistrate knew that a little negligence on his part would become a bold headline in the newspapers next morning, "Magistrate's Negligence Costs Two Months Extra Jail to Four Accused' - as a result, he would be pulled up by his higher-ups.

The magistrate referred the case to the Sessions Judge on the very first hearing.

The Sessions Judge also read newspapers regularly and knew that the court proceedings of today will be covered by the press. Fixing another date would invite criticism. He did not dare to adjourn the case for the next three dates just to decide to which Additional Sessions Judge it should be sent. The case was a complicated one. On first hearing the case was referred to Sadhu Singh who was the only judge who could deliver justice by keeping his honour intact.

Sadhu Singh displayed no laxity. If the defence had any objection to the charges framed against the accused, let them plead their case at the next hearing. They were given a week's time to prepare for their argumentation.

Had it been an ordinary case the argumentation would stretch over many dates at times due to the pre engagement of the senior lawyer somewhere, and sometimes due to any other such excuse. The judge too would not have shown any haste. Many cases were lying pending in his court for the last seven-eight years. The High Court laid more stress on the quick disposal of old cases and questioned the judge as to why the judgements were not delivered soon. A new case did not attract the attention of the judge until it grew old. The judge found it hard to spare even two minutes for hearing a new case.

But this case had its own importance. The judge was ready for listening and argumentations. The public prosecutor had come after studying the file.

The lawyers of defense held a meeting one day before the hearing. They came to the conclusion that argumentation would be of no use. Since the judgement would be based on evidence, let the court frame whatever charges it liked against the accused.

With the defence allowing the court to proceed without any arguments, the judge saved one hour.

Sadhu Singh was happy with the cooperative outlook of the defence. Everybody knew the legal irrelevance of argumentation. It was meant only to please the clients. Here nobody needed to please the clients.

"Do we have to summon the accused, already declared innocent, or not?" Sadhu Singh asked the PP before fixing the case for the next date.

"They must be summoned Sir," said Ramnath before the PP could say anything in reply to the judge.

"It's for the PP to decide, not you. And I've asked only him."

Objecting to Ramnath's intervention, Sadhu Singh reminded him of his authority and repeated the same question.

"We have to summon them Sir," replied the PP in an almost inaudible tone.

"Then are we to call all the witnesses or only those relating to them?"

"Where is the need to call all of them Sir? First we shall call the complainant alone. Other witnesses, we shall call after Pankaj and Neeraj are summoned."

This is what the judge wanted to listen from him.

“Okay. Dictate the names of whichever witnesses you have to call, to the steno. He will order the appearance of that very witness.”

The judge fixed the date for evidence which suited both the parties.

Leaving the rest on PP the judge started disposing off other work.

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Neha had to make her statement the next hearing. Through her statement she had to narrate what she had seen and what had befallen her on that ill-fated night. The defence would shower on her a volley of questions called cross-examination in legal terminology. Neha would be trained in replying to the questions that could probably be asked by the lawyers of the defence. “What is there to prepare me in it if I have to narrate an eyewitness account of the incident,” Neha asked.

In reply to this innocent query Ramnath had made her familiar with the relevance of this preparation saying, “The criminal law treats the accused as innocent. To prove that they are not, the complainant has to come up with solid evidence which may prove that the accused is hundred percent guilty of the crime, he is said to have committed. If the story looks even a little doubtful, it goes to the benefit of the accused, who is acquitted by taking benefit of doubt.

To elucidate his point Ramnath gave an illustration, “The four accused bludgeoned someone to death. According to the doctor, the death was caused by a single blow on the head. The witnesses missed telling the judge who was the man to give that fatal blow to the deceased. The court found it hard to identify the killer and all the four accused were let off by giving them benefit of doubt.

“Had these witnesses been trained by a seasoned lawyer they would say confidently that the victim was hit on the head by Natha Singh. It would have got Natha Singh sentenced to life-imprisonment.”

Thus, to fulfill this requirement, the complainant has to allow

some falsehood in the truth. The story has to be moulded according to the legal requirements.

It was necessary to train Neha for making statement in a court of law. 'The statements... solid proof... alloying truth with falsehood!' Neha failed to understand the legal jargon. She started understanding it a little when her own statements prepared by the police were handed over to her for memorizing them. The whole incident was narrated as under:

"It was midnight. I was fast asleep in my bed-room. Kamal was in his bed-room while Mummy and Papa were sleeping in their own bed-room. I do not know what happened earlier. I sensed trouble only when a young man jumped on my bed. The light of the room was off. The torchlight handled by the accused was blurring my vision. I was in my nightie at that time. Like a stroke of lightning he fell flat on me. He threw the torchlight away and gagged my mouth with his freed hand. With the other hand he tore away my clothes within no time. There was nothing akin to the rape sequences of Hindi films. Neither I, found any chance to runaway nor to scuffle with him nor to hit him with a table lamp or a chair. I know a little bit of Judo Karate, but no tactics of the martial art came to my help in throwing the rapist off my body. He sat firmly on me like a rock. I could do nothing but resign to my fate like a drenched sparrow that can simply flutter its wing but not fly.

"Meanwhile, the sound of Kamal's footsteps was heard from outside. Kamal switched on the light as he entered the room. Sudden light confounded the rapist. He left me and pounced upon Kamal.

"Before I could leave my bed and contain myself, Kamal and the rapist scuffled their way to the lobby. In the meantime a masked youth stabbed Kamal twice in his abdomen as he found his accomplice grappling with him. Kamal was felled on the spot.

"I could understand nothing whether to cover my nakedness first, take care of Kamal or chase the killers. I could understand nothing.

"Then I saw two masked men bringing Ved and Neelam in the lobby. They started demanding cash and jewellery from

them and compelled them to unlock the almirahs and trunks. When I rushed toward them, one of the mask wearers hit me in my chest. As a result, I fell unconscious. What happened thereafter, I do not know.”

Later, the missing link had been filled by Ved. He stated that he did not know how the four masked men barged into his house. One of them deployed himself before Neha’s room and another before Kamal’s. The two of them awakened him and Neelam. They started demanding cash and jewellery. There was no way out but to oblige them. They handed over to the burglars whatever they had in their house. It was perhaps less than their expectations. They demanded more. But since there was nothing left in the house, they had nothing to offer more. The irritated burglars then started beating them up.

In the meantime, the animal in the burglar deployed before Neha’s room, overpowered the man in him. He entered her room. What happened thereafter, only Neha could tell.

The chain of events was so fast in this entire incident that Neha could not note age, appearance, language and names of the masked robbers. She remembered only one thing – the odour of the rapist’s body, his weight and his grip.

Ramnath told that such a truthful statement was not sufficient enough for the court to punish the culprits. It neither indicated the identity of Kamal’s murderer nor that of the attackers of Ved and Neelam, Neha did not know the name or appearance of any of the accused. The Goddess of justice, though with blind-folded eyes, had the scale of justice in her hand. Both the sides were equal in her-eyes. Not even the meanest criminal could be punished on the basis of suspicion only.

It was with a view to turning suspicion in to reality that the police had distorted Neha’s statement.

Neha was unconscious when the case was registered. The police was keen to complete its official formality. Neha’s statement was written as it suited the police.

Later, the conditions changed. The accused were apprehended and stolen property was recovered. Neha had regained her consciousness. The details of the incident became available.

As per the changed conditions, the police prepared new statements to bring about coordination among the requirements of the F.I.R., actuality and the law.

The new statement which Neha was being asked to remember was like this:

“On the night of the incident, all members of the family were sleeping in their respective bed-rooms. Four persons entered the house by scaling the outer wall. I was awakened at the sound of their entry and tried to know the cause of sound. I was half-asleep at that time. I saw two men demanding the keys of the safe from Mummy and Papa. Papa handed over to them the jewellery and cash lying in the almirah. They put the valuables in their pockets and started demanding more. When Papa and Mummy expressed their helplessness in giving more, they started beating them up. One who hit Mummy on the head with an iron-rod was Pandit and he who broke Papa’s legs and arms was Kalia. I stepped forward to rescue my parents. As the light of my room was switched on, another accused name Dina entered my room. He silenced me by brandishing a knife and raped me. I was writhing and tossing on my bed. I hit the table-lamp which fell on the ground from the side-table. The sound of its fall awakened Kamal. He ran towards my room but was intercepted by Pancham stationed before his room. Before my eyes he stabbed Kamal in his abdomen and felled him on the spot. The accused called *Thekedar* ordered them, “Run away with the booty.” While going, they boxed me in my chest and I fell unconscious.

During this incident, the accused had all the time been talking to each other. From the dialect they used, they appeared to be *bhayyas*. They addressed each other by name. First addressed the second as Pandit and second addressed the third as Dina. Alongwith their names I had registered in my mind their stature, appearances and age as well about which I had told the police later on.”

Apart from this main statement, some short statements were also recorded. One of these pertained to her visit to the police station and identification of the property recovered from the accused, while another related to the identification of dresses

worn by the accused at the time of committing the crime.

Nothing contained in these statements had happened before Neha. That is why she found it hard to memorise the statement.

“Uncle, I won’t be able to tell such a big lie,” an irritated Neha told Ramnath.

“You will have to tell this lie, my child. This is the tragedy of our judicial system. If we speak the truth, the criminals are acquitted, but if we tell a lie even the innocent are punished.”

In utter confusion Neha could not help but keep mum.

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Despite all efforts on her part, Neha could not succeed in memorising the statement.

Not just a statement, she was supposed to memorise the whole incident.

The very memory of the incident would make her shudder down the spine. She felt as if her brain would blast into smithereens with the very invocation of the dreadful incident. Her whole body seemed to exude a nauseating smell. She was filled with a sense of self-remorse.

She was not only ravished at a physical level but her academic career and her future in general, everything looked ravished to her. Her studies had terminated. She was deserted by her fiancé. Her dreams to lead a very happy marital life with an educated and smart spouse had collapsed like a house of cards. Now she would be married only to a needy widower, father of four children or some handicapped person who would keep teasing her throughout life by reminding her of her unintentional guilt.

While memorising her statements, the horrible sight of Kamal being stabbed to death, was conjured in her mind. Kamal’s entreaties and shrieks would tend to tear asunder her ear drums. She was filled with a guilt consciousness and felt that she was responsible for Kamal’s murder. Had she not been born, there would be no question of her being deflowered. Also, there would have arisen no chance for Kamal to protect her and get killed in the process.

Without Kamal her family was facing void which could

never be filled. The parents had lost all meaning in their life. For what and for whom would Ved work hard and earn money?

Now Neha was a sister with no brother at all. Nobody would like to marry a girl without brothers. The parents are not going to be there forever; and after they are no more, the umbilical cord of the daughters with their parental family is snapped once for all if they have no brothers. Neha, even otherwise was no longer fit for a good match. This desideratum would only add to her woes.

Ved had started moving about, of course, but he had always pain in his joints. He could not eat properly. His business had come to a standstill. The money invested already had gone down the drain and he did not feel like embarking upon any new business now. Pecuniary pursuits had already got on his nerves. He could not do anything but sit repining at home.

Neelam had become self-supportive. But due to head-injury she had started forgetting. Sometimes, she would remember her lost son and start wailing for him. Whenever she remembered her raped daughter, she would start sobbing bitterly by holding Neha fast to her bosom. She caressed her on her head and kissed her time and again.

Sometimes, she forgot everything and asked why Neha was not going to her college or why was Kamallatein the evening.

“Who has taken away our car? Where is our motor-cycle? Why are you wearing such ordinary clothes?” She would ask Neha and make her weep in silent sobs.

Neelam was like a living corpse. As per medical opinion, there was a possibility of only ten or fifteen percent more improvement in her condition, not more.

To look at, she appeared all right. She would go to bathroom or toilet herself. Day by day she was heading fast towards old age. Ved’s bones had become brittle. He could not support himself properly.

“Who will look after them when I’m gone?” was the anxiety that perturbed Neha day in and day out.

However, the family felt a sense of relief after shifting to this place of Neha’s maternal grandparents. There were new surroundings, new relatives, maternal uncles, aunts and their

kids. Everyday someone or the other would visit them and console Neha," Look *beti*, now you are the one to replace Kamal and care for the devastated family. The world has advanced fairly now. The society does not object much even to adultery now a days. You see, there will be a number of respectable families to ask for the hand of a beautiful, educated girl like you. So take care of yourself and forget your past."

But Ramnath would not let Neha forget her nightmarish past. He was compelling her to remember each and every detail of the horrible incident.

Whenever Neha found some leisurely moments, she would spend them in Ramnath's library. Why does law force the witnesses to tell lies? To satisfy her inquisitive, she would start reading the earlier judgements. During her studies of law-books she would dream to be a great lawyer. At times she imagined herself draped in a black coat and arguing bombastically in a court of law. Sometimes she envisioned herself as getting the rapists and murderers convicted.

But in reality, she would sweat while memorising her statements.

As the date of hearing drew near, she lost her appetite. She was very sad at heart. She would keep lying on her bed with her face covered with a sheet for hours together. Sometimes she would fix her stare on the ceiling which turned into a screen flashing scenes of rape, rapine and murder. She would feel like screaming out her heart at that time.

The date of hearing was yet many days away. She would go mad by then, she thought as she tried to mug up her statements.

"*Mamaji*, can't I be exempted from narrating my statements in the court?" She would share her apprehensions with Ramnath in such a disturbed state of mind, "As I read the statements, I get charged with tension. I forget everything and remember Kamal. I feel like crying. I fully remember all that actually happened but I can't memorise a syllable of what has been interpolated later on. The names of the accused muddle up with each other. Their appearances disappear from my mind. How can one remember so much?"

"You are right. But the law is blind and heartless. This is what it demands."

"No judge has ever undergone such a situation, I think. Otherwise they would never demand such bull shit."

"How can the judges sitting in air-conditioned offices and traveling in luxury cars, have a feel of the agonies of common man? They are concerned more with the human rights of the accused than the sufferings of their victims."

"You told me that the fact of rape had been concealed, but my statement had a mention of it."

Neha was told that to avoid social stigma, the rape incidence had been concealed. But it formed a part of her statement. It was also mentioned that the rape had been committed by Dina. An exasperated Neha was asking for an explanation from Ramnath.

"You can see your medical report. The doctor has clearly mentioned that the girl is a virgin. It's nowhere in the case registration report as well. I don't know how the police incorporated it later on."

"Then how does it become my statement. Why didn't anybody bother to ask me before it was written?"

"The police officials write the statements themselves and nobody questions them. The witness gets confused in the court. If he treats the statement of police as right, it changes the very sequence of events. If he does not agree to it, the statement is described as revised. In both the cases, the accused is benefited. What can one do? The law has given enormous authority to the police."

"Now tell me what should I state? There is another nonsense also in it..... what about that?"

Due to her urban upbringing, Neha was a girl of liberal ideas. She could talk candidly to her uncle over issues like man-woman relationship. Still she was evasive to talk on some facts mentioned in the statements.

Ramnath too was feeling greatly abashed and ashamed in explaining to her daughterly niece, the explicit intricacies of rape.

What Neha hinted at was her panties which formed a part

of evidence collected by police from the site and blood stains on it. She also hinted at the bed-sheet and clothes of the accused on which spots of semen were mentioned in the statement.

“Whether the accused is acquitted or convicted, we shall retract on this sign of evidence. Come what may I will not let your future be stigmatised.”

Following Neha’s hint, Ramnath started trying to dispel her anxieties.

“Later the police tilted towards the accused. Nobody has ever talked to us in this regard. They wrote what they liked,” said he.

“Now should I speak truth or tell a lie?” asked Neha.

“What can I tell? Law allows us neither to speak truth, nor tell a lie. The truth will not allow the facts to fit in to the definition of crime given by law. As a result the accused will be acquitted. If we tell a single lie, we shall have to tell hundred others to conceal it. Lie will be detected and our story will become doubtful. It will make our story suspicious. Again the benefit will go the accused.”

“You mean, the accused will never be convicted?”

“Why not? We’ll ensure that they are. We’ll make such an admixture of truth and lies that the court will find it very difficult to sift lie out of it. For the time being you memorise your statements. Then I’ll tell you how to face cross-examination. Then Udham Singh will give you a tutoring in cross-examination. He is a very experienced person. Once you receive a few tips from him, the defence lawyers would not be able to entangle you in any of the questions,” thus Ramnath tried to boost Neha’s morale. “This is gross injustice that the accused should be represented by his lawyers and the witness should answer his queries himself. This is a glaring example of disparity. Either the accused should ask questions from the complainant or the complainant should also be represented by his lawyers. Only then it will be called system of justice at par.” Ramnath added.

Some specimens of questions which the traumatized rape-victim are asked, were studied by Neha from Ramnath’s files. How will she reply to such inhuman questions? This was what

perplexed poor Neha who wanted to know some solution to this problem from her uncle.

Ramnath had only one and the same worn-out answer to each of her queries, "Law favours the accused."

"Then why don't they change such a law?"

"Who should change? The change-makers themselves are the criminals. These loopholes suit them. They are worried more about themselves than people."

Neha was left speechless. She had nothing else to ask and Ramnath had nothing more to answer beyond this.

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Neha's statements had to be recorded on Friday.

Sitting at home, she was cramming her statements and trying to coordinate the questions to be asked during cross-examination with the answers she would give.

On Sunday, she was called to Mayanagar. The lawyers of the Society had to examine her preparation for appearance in the court. Shortcomings, if any, had to be removed.

These days, Ramnath was busy in the preparation of one of his cases. This case pertained to a rape-victim. For the last few days he had been going through the law-books and pondering over the statements of witnesses. It seemed as if he found it difficult to prepare proper argumentation.

Neha was fond of reading rape-cases.

Seeing Ramnath engrossed in the case, she would show a keen desire to know the facts of the case.

One night she picked up the file and started reading it.

Harbans had raped Shindo, the daughter of a farm worker, as she went to his field to collect some fuel. There was nothing unprecedented about this incident in the village. Ever since the times immemorial, the women of farm-workers had been treated by the landlords as their private property, just like the land they tilled. They had always been free to molest these like damsels in their fields.

Earlier, the matter used to be settled in the village itself after admonishing the guilty brats a little. This time, too, the village elders and the police had tried to hush-up the matter.

Compensation was also offered, alongwith apology. But the newly formed Farm Workers' Union did not agree to any sort of compromise.

Scared of agitations and demonstration, the police had to register a case.

The irritated police started helping the accused. They declared the virgin girl as a professional. The doctor, too, authenticated the police version and described the girl as a sex-maniac.

Ramnath was hired by Harbans, the rapist. The questions he asked Shindo during cross-examination were more abominable than the rape itself.

While going through the salacious questions, Neha identified herself with Shindo. She felt enraged at her uncle. With his words, he had disrobed the poor girl publically in the court.

Were these the questions to be asked by a gentleman: with whom did you sleep first of all? According to the doctor Shindo's virginity membrane was already damaged. Ramnath had asked her, "Who violated your virginity? How did the accused disrobe you? Why were the clothes not torn in scuffle? Was the string of your *salwar* broken? If yes, then how did you wear the *salwar* without string? Who removed your panties? Did the hook of your bra break in the process or not? Were you laid on the bed or the ground? Was the bed covered with a sheet or not? Why are there no bruises on your body? Why didn't you scratch Harbans's face? How long did the coition take place? Who put on the clothes first? Why is there no bloodstain on your panties? Did the accused kiss you? Why didn't you bite him with your teeth? Did he rub your boobs? Why did you keep putting up with everything?

After these inhuman questions Ramnath levelled charges against Shindo saying that she had illegitimate relations with Dheera of her locality. Harbans had caught her red-handed in a compromising position with Dheera. That is why she was revengeful against Harbans.

Neha could well realize Shindo's wounded psyche at the time of answering such barbaric questions.

Shindo was cross-examined by only one lawyer. While Neha would be open to the cross-examination by five lawyers. The tricky lawyers of Mayanagar would grill her more than Ramnath had grilled Shindo. After reading Shindo rape-case file Neha visualised court as *Kaurav Sabha*. She was afraid lest she should be disrobed in public.

“*Mamaji*, you never told me that I will be asked such type of questions, nor have you ever told me how to answer them.”

Puzzled at the non-sensical questions, Neha put Ramnath in a very embarrassing position. He started sweating out of sheer embarrassment. He had never thought that Neha would ever read this file and raise objection against his cross-examination.

He felt disgusted with himself and his profession.

While studying law, Ramnath was taught that the job of a lawyer is not to favour any party. His prime duty is to bring forth the truth and help the judge to arrive at it. But the practice was quite the contrary to it. The first and foremost aim of the lawyer was being loyal to the interests of only his client. To win a case, the truth was not only camouflaged, but distorted as well in favour of the client.

Ramnath had realised the agony of the complainant only after undergoing the harrowing experience himself as a complainant. While preparing for the argumentation, Ramnath could see Neha in Shindo. His conscience cursed him for trying to exonerate Harbans. The legal tactics used by him would pave way to the acquittal of the rapist. The ravished Nehas and Shindos would gain only life-long sighs rather than justice.

Should Ramnath argue in favour of Harbans, or hand over his case file to him. Ramnath’s mind was torn in this conflict at this stage.

But just leaving one case by a Ramnath would be no solution to the problem. Some other lawyer would jump upon the opportunity to grab Harbans’s case and get him acquitted.

But someone has to take the initiative of standing in favour of justice. It was under this state of mind that he wanted to kick this bundle of lies. Due to this predicament he could not prepare argumentation for this case.

Neha’s question had stirred the dormant waters of his

conscience. It had shaken his soul out of slumber.

Earlier he had played the Dushasana of Mahabharat and enjoyed the disrobing of Shindo. Now someone else would act Dushasana and disrobe Neha. He would be compelled to see this diabolic drama as helplessly as Bhishma.

“What could I tell you, my daughter? I was very ashamed of myself. We, the lawyers, are the criminals to all Shindos and Nehas. Pardon me, my daughters! Pardon me !” saying so, Ramnath burst into tears like children. His tears started cleansing the dirt on his soul.

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Ved’s family started feeling at ease in this city.

Neelam remained lost in the household chores. Ved developed a friendly circle and started spending his time in it. This was in a way a forum to share his heart felt grief. Neha spent her time in the company of uncles, aunts and their kids. Sometimes, she would study law-books also. Trying to understand the acrobatics of law, she would forget her woes.

Ramnath felt that if things went on like this, the situation will get back to normal in a few months.

But ever since the day, Neha had started preparing for appearing as witness in the court, she always remained perturbed.

Ramnath understood her perturbation. The refreshed memories had disturbed the stillness of her mind. He wanted her to wean herself away from her past after appearing in the court once, so that she might be able to care for her future.

But nothing goes in life as desired by man.

On Saturday there was a message from *Mayanagar* that she need not come on Sunday.

Last time, the government pleader had made a mistake. He had not studied the case minutely. As in ordinary cases, he had called the witness who had got the case registered first. This case had different conditions. Pankaj and Neeraj were not a direct party to the crime. They were guilty of causing crime by hatching the conspiracy. Neha knew nothing about this case. According to the case file, the conspiracy was cooked up in the

presence of Pankaj's *munim*. To prove the crime of Pankaj and Neeraj, the *munim* should have been called as witness first of all. The gatekeeper had seen the *Thekedar* coming to the factory. His entry was recorded in the gate-keeper's register, where the *Thekedar* had put up his signatures also. He was given two rods and a bag from the factory. An entry to this effect had been made by the store-keeper in his register. These rods and bag were recovered from the site. This evidence was to be given by the store-keeper. The *Thekedar* had talked to both the brothers on mobile phone a few days before the incident and on the day when it took place. This conversation pertained to executing the conspiracy. The evidence of the mobile phone company's employees must have been held before that of Neha.

Due to this blunder of the Public Prosecutor no worthwhile progress could be made on the next hearing. First, the witnesses to prove conspiracy would be called. Then there will be debate on whether Pankaj and Neeraj can be held as accused or not. In case, the judge agreed to the complainant, Pankaj and his brother would be ordered to appear in the court. They would then approach the High Court for appeal. Who knows how many years the case would take in the High Court?

Then only Neha has to be summoned. By that time, she would have forgotten all that she had memorised. There was no point in burdening her mind right now.

At this message from Harish Rai, Ramnath felt irritated with himself rather than with the PP. The PP was a government officer and had every right to commit blunders as it had little effect on his salary. But why did he himself commit the mistake of not reading the case file carefully. Had he done so, he would have detected this mistake on the very first day and saved Neha from this undue harassment.

Anyway, what was done could not be undone. To avoid recurrence of such a blunder, Ramnath read the file ad verbatim and brooded over every weak and strong point. His heart started beating fast as he read the file. It was replete with infirmities. Except Ved, Neelam and Neha, all other witnesses seemed to have been booked at the bidding of Pankaj. The gate-keeper, the store-keeper and the *munim* were his humble employees

never to be disloyal to the salt. They could never go against their employers at any cost. Without their evidence, no proof could be brought on file. Without solid evidence, nobody would declare Pankaj and Neeraj as accused.

Ramnath felt duped. Both the brothers had been permanently excluded from the case.

Ramnath started repenting over his miserliness and negligence. He would always advise to meet the government pleader and to remove the discrepancies. But in his own, personal case he had become indolent.

Had he listened to police and contacted the government pleader, the case would not have met this fate.

However, this was not an ordinary case. It had come into the notice of the state police chief. Many officers had given their remarks on the file. Making any alteration in it would neither be within the competency of government pleader nor the *SHO*. Spending money would have been of no use at all.

Ramnath justified himself by inventing a new logic in his favour.

The store-keeper and the gate-keeper were the important witnesses who could not be replaced by anybody else. The *munim* could be substituted with someone else from Mayanagar. But Ramnath knew nobody in this city. Had the police agreed to him and demanded some substitute for the *munim*, how could he find anyone in Mayanagar who could appear as witness against the rich accused? They would dazzle the eyes of the substitute also with the glare of money. He would also say what the *munim* was to say now.

The conspiracy was not hatched before the *munim*. The police had prepared his statement without asking him. He could not be compelled to tell a lie. But the true eye-witnesses could be made to speak the truth. Ramnath felt that neither the store-keeper would say the truth nor the gate-keeper.

Ramnath found it hard to think about how these eye-witnesses should be made to tell the truth.

After the case was fixed for another hearing, Ramnath met the President and said, "This is what irritates me most. The judges boast of delivering justice, while in fact, their judgement

is governed by the evidence of the eye-witness. If he says that the crime was committed before his eyes, the accused is convicted. But if he shuts his eyes to the crime committed before his eyes, the accused is acquitted. Nobody has any control over the eye-witness. He is free to speak the truth or tell a lie, nobody can question him."

The President agreed to Ramnath. The witnesses could say anything and harm the plaintiff side.

"The fault lies not with the witnesses, but the system as such. Science has reached Mars after conquering moon, but we are still clinging to the laws made in 1872. We need eye-witnesses to prove every crime and avoid scientific methods. From where can you find witnesses who have seen the conspiracies being hatched in a dark room? The falsehood has no ground to stand on. The story will become suspicious and the accused will get the benefit of doubt. He will get acquitted to the chagrin of the plaintiff. We are fighting against this very injustice."

The President was struggling for the solution to this problem in its entirety, not only for Ramnath's problem.

"Who knows when the law will change? We have to grapple with the situation today," Ramnath had little interest in the utopian ideology of Harish Rai, President of Victims Welfare Society. He was worried about his personal issue only.

"If we fight for transforming this system, we'll definitely succeed one day. With the passage of time our voice will turn into vox populi and one day it will come out of the court, on to the roads. The government will be compelled to react when the thrones will be shaken. New laws will come into existence."

"We cannot keep waiting till then. Our date is just one month away. We have to prepare for that right now."

Once again Ramnath steered Harish Rai's attention towards his case.

"Don't worry. We'll contact each and every witness of this case and appeal to his conscience. Taking oath in a court is just a ritual, but we shall take scriptures to their houses and make them swear by touching the holy books that they will speak truth only. I hope we shall be successful."

“ And what if money suppressed the religious sentiment?”

“Then we shall use scientific methods. We can collect hundreds of specimen signatures of the gate-keeper and the store-keeper and then tally them with the registers. The signatures of the *Thekedar* are available on the file. We’ll tally it with the signatures put by him in the gate-keeper’s register. When forensic experts testify their handwriting at both the places, they will have no way but to submit.”

“The court shall not allow us to call the experts, when the signatories themselves are present, who will allow us to produce secondary evidence.”

“We’ll get the permission. If the court refuses, we shall strive for it.”

“What about the *munim*?”

“We’ll not touch him. He will be free to speak the truth. You meet the witnesses on your own and exhort them to speak the truth. May be your endeavour bears fruit.”

“I have already tried. Their factory is just like a fort. Not even a bird can enter its premises without permission of the owners. It’s impossible for me to meet the witnesses.”

“Don’t lose courage. Our duty is to make effort. Go to their houses rather than going to the factory. Meet them through their relatives. You must do your efforts and the Society will try at its own level. I hope our efforts will fructify.”

“As you wish.”

“You come tomorrow and get the summons prepared from the reader. I’ll exert pressure on the *SHO* through the *SSP* that the investigation officer, who has recorded the statements of the witnesses, should be responsible to ensure that what they say is right. He should save them from the pressure of the accused.”

After talking to the President, Ramnath felt a little relieved. He felt that something good will come out of it.

Pankaj had never hoped that the police would become disloyal to them so soon.

Earlier, the smallest and most insignificant development

regarding the case would reach him from several quarters. The Munshi was keen to inform him first of all and deserve prize. The reader was even keener. The *SHO* too would not lag behind. Once or twice, even the *SSP* himself had warned him regarding the clouds of risk hovering over his head.

But this time all proceedings had taken place in a hush-hush manner. Pankaj had thought that the summons of eye-witnesses would come two-three days before the date of hearing. Earlier, the constable coming with the summons would visit their factory straightway. After taking one or two hundred rupees from the accused, would ask his wish. The summons were served only to the witnesses named by Pankaj. The remaining summons were returned under one excuse or the other.

The lawyers had advised Pankaj to send the witnesses to their native places a week before the date of hearing. *Munim* should be asked to accept it. His evidence was just verbal. He can be asked to retract from his earlier statement at this hearing. The other witnesses had to speak as per record. It was very difficult to make them change their version all of a sudden. They would be made to appear any other time.

But their plans were foiled.

A day before the hearing, the police prepared summons in the name of four witnesses. The *SHO* himself went to serve the summons. He chided the witnesses in the presence of all the members of the family.

“You have to speak the truth. If you told a lie under some temptation, you will have to suffer. And mind it; you must appear in the court. If you miss, you will attract only arrest warrants and, may be, you have to spend a few days in jail.”

The *SHO*'s words had the desired impact on the witnesses. They were frightened. Pankaj tried hard to convince that it was nothing but sheer bluster, but failed to relieve them of fright.

The *SHO* had knowingly done so. There could be no legal remedy against this intimidation.

The fear of real witnesses in speaking the truth was justified but nobody had dissuaded the *munim* from saying the truth. Everybody knew that no conspiracy was hatched in his

presence. This is what he was supposed to tell the court. He was evasive on saying what was right also.

If the witnesses made statements, it would be detrimental to Pankaj and Neeraj.

Pankaj asked the *SHO* about his hostile posture. He passed the buck to the *SSP*, who in turn passed it further to the Chief-Minister whose order, he said, had reached him through the state police chief.

Pankaj had no direct access to the police chief. He talked to Baghel Singh and asked what had gone wrong now. According to the settlement, entire amount had reached the MLA. Why was the Chief-Minister annoyed? In case, there was some other bidding to be done for him, he was prepared for that also, but why were they being thrown into the same inferno once again?

Baghel Singh swore that he did not know anything about this change of attitude. He had been out of touch with the case for a long time now. However, if there was some hint from the Chief-Minister in this connection, he could tell only after enquiring about it.

Baghel Singh enquired into the matter and told that there was no signal from the Chief-Minister. The local police was afraid of the Society. The officers had done blunder during investigation. They were apprehensive about their own guilt. That is why they danced to the tune of Harish Rai, the President of the Society.

It was a court case. The Chief-Minister could not meddle with the affairs of the court. The elections were round the corner. He could not let the media spit fire against him by annoying the Society.

Pankaj consulted the lawyers.

The lawyers sensed danger.

The *munim* was the most important witness. The police had asked him also to speak the truth. He was playing mischief by avoiding the truthful statement. It seemed that some knower of law had made him familiar with the value of his evidence. He was demanding price for speaking the valuable truth. The lawyer advised Pankaj to read between the lines and evaluate his evidence reasonably.

The store keeper and the gate keeper were afraid. Their fear must be taken care of. They should confess that the entries in their respective registers were made by them. In case they said it was not their handwriting, the court would get it tested by the handwriting experts. They would prove that the entries were made in the handwriting of the witnesses. It could be very harmful for the witnesses as well as the accused.

In the defence of Pankaj and Neeraj, the witnesses should be made to tell the court that the police forced them to make these entries under pressure. They neither knew any *Thekedar*, nor had he ever visited the factory. These statements would serve as the dual purpose of saving the *Thekedar* and Pankaj in one stroke.

The *munim* must be coaxed to give his mind. Till the accused duo viz. Pankaj and Neeraj, are fully satisfied with his intention, he should be stopped from appearing in the court.

All the witnesses had been working under them for five-six years. They were quite loyal to their salt. They could not stand as witnesses against their employers by looking eye to eye at them. But Pankaj and his younger brother Neeraj were not supposed to be there in the court at the time of evidence. This legal hitch was detrimental to their interests.

For the time being, Neeraj and Pankaj were not accused. Without being accused, they could not be a part of the court proceeding. The witnesses were to appear against them, but not in their presence.

Sadhu Singh knew law and he was to implement it in letter and spirit. Whether these witnesses had to go against Pankaj and his brother or the *Thekedar*, he would not allow the other lawyers to cross-examine them. The *Thekedar's* lawyer was incompetent. What to speak of arguing in favour of Pankaj and Neeraj, he would not be able to argue in favour of even the *Thekedar*.

There were two solutions to this problem. First, a competent lawyer should be hired for the *Thekedar*. But the *Thekedar* did not agree to it. He was not ready to trust Pankaj. They had already implicated him and secured their own release. They could play foul again. Good or bad, he trusted his own lawyer.

Second, the *Thekedar's* lawyer should be helped in the preparation of case.

The second alternative was opted for.

On the date of hearing three witnesses were produced out of the four.

The witnesses seemed to be under such a spell of the Society that their memory started failing as they entered the court. They could not retain in their minds even a single point dictated to them by Pankaj.

After having taken oath by touching the holy Geeta, their legs started trembling. Impelled by their voice of conscience they forgot telling lies.

The Public Prosecutor asked only two-three questions.

"Do you recognise the *Thekedar*? Has he ever come to your factory? Did you make an entry of his arrival in your register? What did he take away from the factory? Did you make an entry of it in the stock-register?"

The witnesses nodded in affirmation to all these questions.

The judge did not allow the *Thekedar's* lawyer to make much argumentation. The witnesses had to appear once again for evidence. He would be given time for open argumentation.

The *munim* was represented by his son who told that his father was suffering from loose motions and thus not in a position to move about. As a testimony to the same he had brought a medical certificate.

Sadhu Singh was infuriated at this trickery of the *munim*.

"He doesn't suffer from any loose motions as yet. But he will suffer now. Produce the *munim* day after tomorrow or otherwise he should be ready to go behind the bars," Sadhu Singh threatened the boy and issued a notice to the doctor asking him to appear with record pertaining to the *munim's* ailment.

The case was fixed for hearing after three days.

Moving the case so expeditiously by the judge became a headache for Pankaj and Neeraj.

They had read in the newspapers that the criminal cases spread over years together. The accused booked under charges

carrying not more than three years of punishment, keep languishing in the jails, sometimes for ten to twelve years. The hearing of their cases was never completed.

The higher courts often reprimanded the lower courts, directing them to settle the cases soon. But still the cases lingered on.

But here it was the other way round. The accused were interested in elongating the case, but the judge wanted to settle it.

Despite all efforts, the first two witnesses had appeared against them. "What will *munim* say in the court?" was still an enigma for them. They tried hard, but failed to make the *munim* break his silence. He was being followed by Pankaj's men. They had reported that the Society people had not so far contacted him.

Neither Pankaj, nor his lawyers were ready to digest the espionage report that the plaintiff side had not contacted a very important witness of the case so far. They doubted that the plaintiff had struck a secret deal with the *munim*. That is why he was so mysteriously silent over the issue and that is why perhaps he was not ready to make any compromise with Pankaj.

Pankaj's lawyers advised him to placate the *munim* till the date of hearing. Pankaj was already going very cautiously. Since the day, police had made him a witness in the case; the *munim* was being given a VIP treatment.

The *munim*, too, had become aware of his value. He found it the most opportune time to milk his employers.

Since long, he had been demanding a plot for his son-in-law on installments and wanted the amount of installment less than even the interest of the cost amount. That is why Pankaj had been dillydallying so far. Now when he repeated his demand, Pankaj could not refuse him. He even got the plot registered even before the installments were paid.

"Your son-in-law is something to us also. Ask him to build two rooms on the plot with the remaining amount," allowing him a concession of fifty thousand rupees, Pankaj advised the *munim*.

The brother of Pankaj's wife had a bicycle manufacturing company. There was a great demand for their cycles in the

market. Even the rural shop keepers used to sell two-three cycles daily. The elder son of the *munim* had a cycle repair-shop. The *munim* had entreated before Pankaj several times that he should get cycle agency for his son.

Pankaj had never asked his relatives for such an obligation. They hardly obliged anybody, not even a minister in such things. Getting an agency would amount to a monthly income of thirty to forty thousands.

Now the *munim* was repeating this demand also. Pankaj talked to his wife and apprised him with the importance of the *munim's* evidence. He made her recommend this case to her brother and get an agency for the *munim's* son.

But the *munim's* aspirations were touching an all-time high now. He would approach Pankaj every day with a new demand.

At the advice of the lawyer, Pankaj was swallowing every bitter pill.

The next hearing was to be held after two days. The *munim* was taking full advantage of these two days, as if he had a premonition that he would be thrown out of job after the hearing.

Pankaj was quite apprehensive about the *munim's intentions* lest he should move against him even after gleaning all kinds of benefits. But his fears were unfounded. *Munim* had shown greed, of course, but he showed no sense of disloyalty.

He stood by his employers dauntlessly in the court and said that no conspiracy was hatched in his presence or to his knowledge.

Pankaj had a great sense of relief after the *munim* finished with his evidence.

But Pankaj and Neeraj were not fortunate enough to sit comfortably for long. The judge again landed them in hot waters. "Mr. PP do you have to apply for summoning Pankaj and his brother?" the judge asked the Public Prosecutor immediately after the *munim's* evidence was over.

This question came as a bomb-shell for Pankaj who was sitting on benches meant for spectators.

Pankaj was told that on first hearing, the PP would not apply for summoning them and ask for some days' time. If need be, the application would be filed on the next hearing. The lawyers would demand time for replying to the application. The process of replying, argumentation etc. would spread over many a hearing.

The District Attorney had assured Pankaj that as far as possible filing of application would be avoided. No proofs sufficient enough to apply against them, were there on the case file. The store keeper and the gate-keeper only proved *Thekedar's* visit to the factory but in no way, hatching of a conspiracy there. The *Thekedar* was a leader of labourers and a labour contractor. He had a routine of coming to the factory for meeting his men. The factory owners used to present bags to their workers, one of them might have given his bag to the Contractor. There was nothing unusual about it. The bag cost just fifteen-twenty rupees. It could be given to him as a gift as well. It did not prove any conspiracy. A police officer of the rank of IG had declared Pankaj and Neeraj as innocent. The statements of these witnesses were there on the file even then. The IG was not convinced with these witnesses. Describing them as false, he had exonerated Pankaj and Neeraj. The government pleader would never go against his own report.

The District Attorney had also assured this to him. Also he had issued his government pleader instructions to this effect. Pankaj should satisfy himself by meeting him before the next hearing.

But Sadhu Singh had not given Pankaj any chance to meet the government pleader.

"Yes Sir," the government pleader and President spoke in unison.

"Come on, then."

"The application has yet to be prepared. Kindly give us a few days sir."

"I've already prepared it," the President took out the application from his brief case and put up before the government pleader.

"Would you put your signatures on it?" The President asked

the government pleader who was dazed at seeing the application. By assuming a tough posture Harish Rai wanted to convey to the government pleader that he was quite aware of what transpired between the officers and the accused.

“Why not?” now the government pleader had no excuse to say no and he scribbled his signatures half-heartedly.

“Give us a copy of this application. We’ll make argument on it,” the lawyers of the accused started demanding copy of the application.

“This application concerns the court and Pankaj-Neeraj only. You are not lawyers to those accused. You have no right to make any argument on it.”

The judge rejected the request of the defence.

The government pleader’s application was accepted at once.

Pankaj and Neeraj were held guilty and ordered to appear at the next hearing.

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Sadhu Singh finished the proceedings of three months within three days.

Pankaj wanted to keep the case suspended indefinitely so that the complainant side and their witnesses exhaust themselves out.

If Sadhu Singh pursued this case so frantically, it would not take long for them to go behind bars.

This fast momentum of the case must be slowed down.

It could be done in two ways:

First, the case should be shifted from the court of Sadhu Singh, by accusing him of partiality. But because of the credibility of Sadhu Singh, nobody would believe it. High Court would throw away the petition.

Second, Sadhu Singh’s judgement should be challenged in the High Court.

There was no mention of their names in the report. The main witness of conspiracy had retracted in the court. The top brass of police had exonerated them. Under these circumstances, there was full possibility of the acceptance of their appeal.

Once the appeal is admitted, they will be benefited in a big

way. If it is not admitted at the first date, it will be kept for hearing. That too will serve them good. The file will go to the High Court and will get beyond the ambit of the lower courts. Once a case is stuck in High Court, it is not cleared sometimes for twenty years. By that time Ved and Neelam will be no more. Neha will find her way in some asylum. Sadhu Singh will be running his legal practice in some or the other town. Ever declining standard of judiciary will have reached an abysmal low. Now the government pleaders send their go-betweens after the accused. By that time, the judges themselves will be doing this. Then Pankaj will have nothing to worry about.

By showing suchlike dreams of better days ahead, the lawyer made Pankaj file an appeal petition in the High Court.

On one hand Sadhu Singh had become a nightmare for them and on the other, the Society was hell bent on taking them to the gates of jail.

The High Court based unit of Society was already on the lookout for an opportunity. It poked its nose at the very first hearing.

The appeal was admitted, of course, but neither the case file was called, nor was any ban imposed on lower courts for hearing the case. Rather the tables were turned upon them. Immediately, as the appeal was decided, Sadhu Singh directed his ire on this case.

A date after one month was fixed for evidence. Hearing was kept for two days without break. On the first day, Neha, Ved and Neelam were summoned while the second day was reserved for other witnesses.

Despite all efforts made by Pankaj, the case would not linger on, at the most, beyond six months. Pankaj wanted it to go on at least for one year, after which Sadhu Singh was to be transferred. His transfer was sure to steer their destiny favourably.

“What for we are here my son? What to talk of one year, we’ll keep it going for ten years. It’s difficult to finish the case, but there is no problem in stretching it further on,” Nand Lal boasted when Pankaj asked him a solution to the problem.

“You encourage us every time, but the end result is always

disappointing even after doing all that is possible.”

“What can we do brother? Every time we have to come across the parties far stronger than us. First, Baghel Singh stepped into the arena and now, Society has come in the open against us. Anyway, even then I guarantee elongation of case for three to four years.”

“What magic wand do you have now?”

“A wrestler never discloses his tricks. I have so many ways to depend on. One of our accused is on bail. Had all of them been out on bail, I would keep it going for ten years.”

“Give me some hint, at least.”

“Keep watching patiently. Do one thing. Pitch a mischievous lawyer on the side of one of the accused.”

“What for?”

“Why should anybody lock horns with the judge for us?”

“To get his fees. He will be paid fees only for this very purpose. There are so many people of this kind in Mayanagar. This is the only thing that they do. Within no time, they take cudgels against the judge. Sadhu Singh can be set right only through this formula. Otherwise, conviction is sure within six months.”

“We don’t know anything. Hire one more lawyer or five. Do whatever you like, but help us get rid of all this.”

“One more thing. Do you have any influence on the accused whom we helped in getting bail? Can he go to jail for a week or so, if need be?”

“Yes, he is under my influence. I have kept him in the factory of my friends. Factory is guarded round the clock by security personnel. Without their permission he cannot move out. At my bidding he is ready to commit murder also. I’ll pay him a little more for the purpose assigned to him by us as and when required.”

“Then see what I do. Sadhu Singh wants to finish with the evidence in two days and I will not let it start. Case will be adjourned immediately after the call is made, you see. What will the judge do in two days then?”

Nand Lal was bragging, but Pankaj could no longer be pleased with such tall claims.

Neelam was now able to support herself and move about, but there was no encouraging improvement in her memory. She could not tell the days of the week in their right order. She would forget the names of her family members. She sometimes forgot that she had already taken a bath and started bathing again.

A person with such an impaired memory could not be called as witness.

The law would not be satisfied with pure truth. The truth was to be alloyed with a little of falsehood. Many facts were to be distorted. The main plot had to be pruned of some sub-plots and some others were to be interpolated. Neelam was not in a position to narrate the whole incident as it really happened. Then how could she face cross-examination or make any alteration in the story as required by the situation.

The lawyers of plaintiff decided that she would not be produced in the court and she would be exempted from personal appearance in the court.

Neha was made to memorise her statement even three months ago. A little bit of more rehearsal would make her cram the whole thing like a parrot.

Ved was educated. Ramnath had made him familiar with the names of the accused, their appearances and the crime committed by them.

But as the date of hearing was drawing near, the statements were losing strength. Ramnath knew the reason. Day by day Ved and Neha were getting more ill-at-ease. The stillness of their being had vanished. The memory of Kamal had started tormenting them once again. The lights of the rooms of both Ved and Neha remained switched-on throughout the night. They kept tossing on their beds, the whole night.

Ved had suppressed his agony in his heart. He had steeled his heart and resolved to take vengeance on the killers of Kamal. To control his wavering mind, sometimes he would go to his bed by taking some tranquilizer.

Neha could not conceal her uneasiness. She had told Ramnath, as well as the President of the Society, that she wanted to forget her past. She was afraid of appearing before the

murderers of her brother and the rapists.

But nobody had any solution to the problem being faced by Neha. She had to cater to the wishes of law.

Along with Ramnath, the Society was also on its toes to deal with this case. They wanted the witnesses to appear at the next hearing. A very competent judge like Sadhu Singh was dealing with their case. They did not want to waste even a single minute.

The lawyers of the Society were working hard to prepare the witnesses whose memory was tested first by the junior advocates and then by seniors. Except for some minor chinks, everything else was all right.

The witnesses were brought to the court only after the lawyers were satisfied with their preparation. As the judge occupied the Chair, he was given the list of witnesses who were present there.

Nand Lal and Singla had arrived first of all.

The *Thekedar's* lawyer was represented by his clerk. He gave his boss's message that the court might start the proceedings and that he would cross-examine the witness later on.

Pandit had changed his lawyer. Now, Chaudhary was his lawyer.

He submitted his Power of Attorney after reaching in time. He was ready to take part in the proceedings.

It was a hard time for Kalia. His lawyer was demanding exorbitant fees and Kalia could not afford it.

It started interrupting the proceedings and it irritated the judge.

"Didn't you give him his fees?"

"Don't know Sahib. My family members had talked to him," Kalia replied as he was tutored by Nand Lal.

"Where are your family members now?"

"Don't know Sahib. Nobody has come to pursue the case."

This too was a tutored answer.

"Well, persuade your lawyer to come to the court by eleven, otherwise I'll record the statement of the witness even without your lawyer," the irritated judge threatened Kalia.

But it had no effect on the accused. Nand Lal had told him

that it was a serious case of murder and no action was possible in the absence of the lawyer of the accused. He had no reason to feel afraid of the judge's intimidations. They had to get a new date on the ground that Kalia's lawyer was absent.

"Right Sahib," said Kalia and came out of the court.

It was forty five minutes to eleven yet.

"Sir, shall we look after some other work till then? We'll be back by eleven." Nand Lal sought permission from the judge.

The judge did not want to disperse the lawyers who were assembled with great difficulty, but they could not be detained either for no purpose at all. He had to allow them a brief outing.

There was no use detaining the witnesses also. They were also allowed to leave and return by eleven.

Since morning Neha was under great mental stress. She was feeling a sort of mental heaviness and her memory seemed to be betraying her. She was forgetting everything including the names and appearances of the accused. Who hit whom, and with what weapon was the information that eluded her memory sometimes and hit upon it at others. Due to mental strain, she was feeling thirsty time and again.

There was no arrangement of water in the court complex. The thirsty people were compelled to be exploited by a soda water vender who was selling it on a hand-cart. The inferior quality soda water increased their thirst rather than quenching it.

Realising well the gravity of this problem, Ramnath had brought along a water-can in his vehicle.

As the judge allowed the witnesses to go, Neha rushed towards the vehicle. It would be very difficult to stand in witness box with a parched throat.

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At eleven also, there was no change in the situation.

Kalia's lawyer had not turned up. His message had. The message said that he was no longer Kalia's lawyer.

This indifference on the part of Kuldeep Singh infuriated Sadhu Singh. If he was not keen to plead Kalia's case, he should have informed the court earlier, so that some alternative arrangement could be made. But refusing at the eleventh hour was an escape from duties.

Kuldeep Singh was ordered to appear in the court to explain why he was no longer the lawyer to Kalia. To ensure his presence, the message was sent through the orderly.

After an hour or so, instead of Kuldeep Singh, his clerk appeared only to say that Kuldeep Singh was going to be busy till noon in the court of the senior judge in connection with a murder case. He could appear in the afternoon only. But, since he was not Kalia's lawyer, it would be of no use to wait for him.

It enraged Sadhu Singh still more. He gave vent to his ire by scolding the clerk.

"Sir, don't be so hard on this poor fellow. He has simply conveyed the message of his boss. Why bother your brains for nothing! Give us the next date and finish with today's business."

"No next date. The witnesses will be recorded. Kalia will be given chance later on," said the irate judge who bothered little for the sarcasm hidden in Nand Lal's words.

"Sir, your honour is famous for compliance with law. Would you not be defying the rules by recording a witness in the absence of his lawyer?" Chaudhary flung the first arrow from his quiver of arguments. This is what he was hired for.

"What if the lawyer of one of the accused is not present here, when the lawyers of other six are already here? The seventh accused is not being meted out any injustice," Sadhu Singh justified his stand.

"Rules are rules, after all. Why should any other lawyer plead the case of any accused who is not his client? The loss of one accused may be beneficial to another. To my mind, the law must be complied with," Chaudhary was adamant on his stand.

"Please do cooperate with me. Fixing another date will waste two valuable days of the court. I can't tolerate this."

"Now you are wasting the time of lawyers. First six lawyers came at eleven, and then they came at twelve. Now you will ask us to come in the afternoon and then give a date. Is there no value of our time?"

Sadhu Singh could not help yielding to see Chaudhary losing his temper. The rules of High Court conformed to what Chaudhary was saying. The court must act in presence of lawyer of the accused. If the accused is not rich enough to hire the services of a lawyer, the court should arrange one for him. Sadhu Singh abandoned the idea of going against rules.

"As you wish! Come in the afternoon. Let's see which way the wind blows," the judge adjourned the proceedings once again.

In the afternoon, Kuldeep Singh appeared in the court by obeying the orders of the judge.

"You have some moral obligation also towards your client and the court. Money is not everything after all," Sadhu Singh indicated his displeasure as soon as Kuldeep Singh entered the court.

"Where is the question of money, Sir? I haven't got so far, a single rupee from him."

"What is the problem then?"

"No problem. I have never been his lawyer. Once some one from his side had approached me and returned after enquiring about my fees. He never turned up again. Then tell me, how am I his lawyer?"

"How is your attendance being marked in this case?"

"What can I say? I have never appeared in any of the hearings. As you have marked my attendance today, similarly, other courts might have done so."

Sadhu Singh realised his mistake. Really Kuldeep Singh had never appeared before him. His attendance was being marked on the basis of last orders.

"You can become his lawyer right now. Let's appoint you his lawyer from legal aid side," feeling rebuffed the judge said.

"This case demands lot of hard work. The government will not pay me according to my labour."

"I'll get you that. Tell me what your fees are?"

"I'm a senior advocate. My fees run into lacs. But I'll accept only fifty five thousand from the government."

"Okay, I'll recommend these fees to the government. You're appointed his lawyer. Let's record one of the witnesses today."

The others will be recorded tomorrow. Free the poor girl, please."

"Right now? Immediate cross-examination in a case of murder and dacoity? No Sir, I've no lust for money. If you want to give this case to me, give me time also so that I may do justice to my client."

"There are six other lawyers. Your attendance is just filler."

"I'm not to be treated as filler only. If I take up the case, I'll work hard on it. For the time being I know nothing regarding this case. I'll get the case file and talk to my client. Then I'll prepare my notes for cross-examination. If you want just filler, call some novice. It will be financial help to him also."

Kuldip Singh laid down pre-condition before being the lawyer of the accused.

Sadhu Singh's problem was still unsolved. He wanted to record the witness but it seemed that all the lawyers had come prepared to prolong the case.

"What about tomorrow?"

"It's very hectic tomorrow. Not even a minute's time to spare," Kuldip Singh consulted his engagement diary and expressed his helplessness.

"Let's record the brief examination of the witnesses. You can cross-examine them tomorrow. Let there be some progress at least. My whole day is wasted in this case, with no result at all."

"Sir, I'm not at all conversant with this case. The lawyer is supposed to be familiar with the facts even at the time of examination-in-brief."

The lawyers were not relenting a bit.

Kuldip Singh was engaged for Kalia by Nand Lal and fees were given by Pankaj. That is why he was being true to the fees received. He had been instructed in the morning that the witnesses should not be examined. If Sadhu Singh was a judge, Kuldip Singh too was a renowned lawyer. The judge could not defeat him in argumentation. With great astuteness, Kuldip Singh was brushing aside every proposal of the judge.

Sadhu Singh gauged the situation. All the lawyers were chips of the same block and harping on the same thing. They had enmeshed him in a labyrinth like *Abhimanyu*.

He could not help but adjourn the case.

"Anyway, see which date suits you next week?"

All the lawyers started consulting their diaries.

"Monday... Okay?"

"No Sir, this whole month is already booked." Nand Lal expressed his compulsion by placing his diary before the judge.

"No question of a month. All the witnesses are here. I'm also accountable to somebody. It won't be more than eight days."

"Why Sir? Do you have so special an interest in this case that you are bent on finishing it off as early as possible?"

When Chaudhary saw that Sadhu Singh was in no mood to give a new date of hearing after a month, he resumed his duty of embarrassing the judge.

"What do you mean?"

"There are hundreds of cases lying pending in your court for more than five years. High Court expects to dispose them of first. You pay no heed towards these cases. In this case, it's the first hearing and your Honour is in a hurry to finish it off. I am just asking."

Chaudhary was hired to lower the morale of the judge. With this very objective in view, Chaudhary shot another arrow.

Chaudhary was known as an advocate of just average intelligence. But due to his habit of saying bitter truth on one's face and his obstinacy, he did not get much work. His outspokenness had made him an eyesore for the judges who, out of bitterness, delivered judgements against him. The clients of Mayanagar were good connoisseurs of lawyers. They could not spoil their case by hiring such a pugnacious lawyer. It narrowed down the circle of his clients. Now he was approached only by that client who wanted to take cudgels against the judge.

Seeing Chaudhary's power of attorney, the judge would come to know the mood of the client.

Sadhu Singh also understood their intentions.

Although Chaudhary had pungent sarcasm in what he said, yet there was nothing wrong about it.

Sadhu Singh made a bit of introspection. Really he was drifting away from neutrality, which should be the hallmark of

a judge. He was inclining towards the plaintiff side. As a judge, he was not supposed to be sentimental. He must abide by the rules with a firm resolve.

He rectified his mistake.

"Tell me when you are free? Let's first make this case old. When the witnesses are exhausted out and they stop coming to the court, that will be the right time to start this case," a disappointed Sadhu Singh was mumbling in an almost inaudible tone.

"I'm free after the twentieth of next month."

"Let the case be fixed after one and a half month, you mean."

"Right Sir."

"All right, come on twenty third and twenty fourth," said the irritated judge and threw down the file.

Outside the court, Nand Lal congratulated Chaudhary for his victory.

"This is what we call a trick. There are seven accused in all and this trick can be played seven times."

"Don't worry. My next trick will be even more dangerous. The judge will become helpless for six months."

Pankaj felt a sense of relief.

For the first time, Nand Lal had come true to his words.

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On the first hearing, only Neha was prepared for statement. Since that day she had not been her normal self.

This time both Neha and Ved had to appear.

In the process of memorising the statements, Ved was stuck so badly in the ghastly memories that he would find difficult to take himself out of the trauma. Earlier, he did not seem so much shocked by Kamal's death. It might be due to the effect of sleep-inducing pills. Now it seemed to him as if Kamal had died just today.

He stopped going out of his house. He would go on talking endlessly about Kamal with Neelam. First, he would start weeping himself and then impelled even Neelam to start sobbing. He abandoned food and would not take bath for days together. He did not change his dirty clothes also and avoided

taking medicine as if he had lost desire to live.

Neha was not unaware of the miserable condition of her parents. Sometimes she would nestle into the lap of her mother and at others throw her head on the shoulder of her father to lighten her heart by shedding tears.

At the last hearing, Neha had met in the court a girl named Shruti, who had come as a witness in a rape case.

Fifteen year old Shruti was shot by the arrows of Cupid and she fell enamoured of a neighbouring boy. Obsessed with her juvenile infatuation for the boy she ran away with him one day.

The worried parents chased the love-birds. Within ten days, the police captured both of them.

Exerting pressure on the police, the parents managed to send the boy to jail and through false statement got rape case registered against him.

Shruti was married as far away as Calcutta with the idea that girl's sullied reputation would not reach so far.

Three years passed peacefully and joyously. Shruti gave birth to two children during this period.

But their joy did not live for long. As the case grew old, the police was pulled up by the authorities for producing the witnesses.

The scared police tracked down the girl.

The parents entreated to the police, saying that they themselves would produce the girl in the court. With a good deal of entreaties and money, the police could be stopped from going to Calcutta.

Under one pretext or the other Shruti was brought to her parents' house and produced in the court.

On the first hearing, the advocates went on strike while on the second, the judge proceeded on leave. The third hearing brought the cat out of the bag. The in-laws smelt something suspicious in Shruti's frequent visits to her parents. Third time, her husband accompanied her. When everything came into light, he deserted Shruti then and there. They were not very rich, of course, and her husband was also fairly older than her, but they were prestigious people. They were not ready to accept a girl

as daughter-in-law, who had eloped with her lover.

All the time Shruti had been weeping, sitting by Neha. She had become an untouchable with a single blunder committed under the sway of passion.

Neha would often start weeping at the memory of Shruti's suffering. Shruti had run away from her house willingly. She was wrong. But Neha was being punished for no fault of hers. Her husband would never be able to love her from the core of his heart. Even the wives of his brothers would have no compunctions in taunting her throughout her life. Then her children would abhor her as they grew up. This stigma would accompany her to the cremation ground.

Ramnath had tried his best to absolve her from her sense of guilt. But his lectures had only a temporary effect on her. Again she was engulfed with anguish.

One and the only solution to this problem was to get the witnesses statement recorded as early as possible.

Whenever he found time, Ramnath went to Mayanagar and shared his grief with the President of the Society.

"We have tried our level best to get the witnesses examined during the last hearings. Now what can we do if the lawyers of defence have dodged the judge."

Harish Rai understood well the helplessness of Ramnath but he himself was helpless before the infirmities of law.

"Let's try approaching the judge."

"That can be of any use only if the judge is of a dilly-dallying nature. He, too, is out to examine the witnesses. Sadhu Singh has a feel of the plaintiffs' sufferings. What shall we say to him?"

"Should we try to approach the lawyers? I can go and meet all of them one by one. I will beseech them in the name of professional fraternity."

"It will be of no use at all. The lawyer has to look after the interest of his client. They are afraid of Sadhu Singh and want to prolong the case till Sadhu Singh is transferred."

"It will take one year then. By that time my niece and brother-in-law will go mad. They cannot remain under such mental stress for so long."

"You are a lawyer yourself and know well the pettifogging objections of law. We'll have to face the situation how so ever

odd it may be. I assure you that the case will not be allowed to linger on because of any reason other than the in built debilities of law. You yourself are getting disheartened. First contain yourself and then encourage your relatives by boosting their morale. Don't slacken your struggle. The Society is at your back."

The President had been on the lookout for such a chance since long. Thus finding the opportunity, he made Ramnath realise his tilted equilibrium of mind. His frequent visits to Mayanagar and harping on the same point again and again were not signs of a normal state of mind.

Ramnath at once followed the cue.

Sitting in solitude, he made some introspection. Really the sufferings of his sister and brother-in-law had affected his psyche. Talk of approaching the judge, beseeching the lawyers of opposite side, harping on early recording of witnesses etc. What was all this, if not symptoms of lunacy?

Ramnath thought that he should withdraw himself from the case if he had lost courage. Nothing was lost so far. The offers of compromise were still coming.

All of a sudden he contained himself. No, he would not make any compromise. Whatever be the outcome, he would not bother.

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The plain words of Harish Rai transformed Ramnath. Rather than falling under the sway of lunacy, he started tending towards finding solution to the problems.

Prolonged illness, horridness of the chain of events, dimness of future and twenty four-hour idleness was some of the problems which had destroyed the morale of Ved's family. The obstacles placed by the opponents were adding fuel to the fire.

For a solution to the problem, Ramnath consulted a psychiatrist of his city. He advised that keeping the family busy in constructive work was the only panacea for all their ills.

In such circumstances, even the psychiatrist failed to understand how to involve the affected family in some constructive pursuits.

But then, all of a sudden, Ramnath hit upon an idea.

Ramnath's schoolmate Pandit Parmanand was settled in America for the last three years. He was an expert in understanding religious philosophy from a scientific point of view. He was blessed with the grace of his Master. With the belief that only Pandit Parmanand could put the educated Americans on the right track, the Master had sent him to America. He was made the in-charge of the American center. Parmanand was coming true to the expectations of his Master.

He was on his visit to India along with his American disciples who were interested in touring the land of saints and seers. Immediately as he came to know about the sufferings of Ramnath, his old chum, Parmanand had called at his house to share his grief.

These patients were not to be healed by medicines or psychiatric tips. They needed surely a faith healing at the hands of Parmanand.

They needed meditation and worship for keeping themselves busy. Yogic concentration of energies was required to assuage their mental stress. To develop a detachment with the deceased Kamal, they must read Geeta and listen to the recitation of Garud Puran.

Very next day the house was consecrated with religious rituals like *Havan*, worship of deities and chanting of hymns. The smoke of burning *Havan* material and incense filled the environment of the house with fragrance. The conch, bells and castanets added mellifluous music to the atmosphere. It certainly helped a good deal in mollifying the perturbed minds. The recitation from scriptures twice a day provided them fortitude to face the oddities of life bravely. They got to understand the fact that Death is inevitable and all other mundane relations are just soap bubbles before it. Man is nothing but a puppet in the hands of Divine powers. Nothing goes in this world as he wishes. Neither he has any say in taking birth nor has he anything to do with the span of life he has to live. Only God is the prime mover. He does well to all and happiness lies in bowing head before His will. Suchlike sermons strengthened their minds.

Like in *Mahabharat* they were also cheated. Their unarmed *Abhimanyu* had been killed. War was only thrust upon them. They had to fight for truth with indomitable courage. They had to appear in the witness-box irrespective of the result. Selfless effort must bear fruit.

Parmanand's therapy had fructified.

Ved's family was going to the court without fear. They memorised every word of what they had to say. But Ramnath's heart-beat increased as he entered Mayanagar. A voice from within told him that witnesses would not be recorded even today; Nand Lal would come forward with a new legal trick.

With wavering mind he reached the main gate of the court.

First of all, Ramnath read on the Notice Board the list of cases to be heard today. Last time the judge had kept only two cases for hearing. Of these, the important case was theirs. Today, the situation was different. The list of cases to be heard was very long.

The number of cases scheduled to be heard seemed to confirm his suspicion. The judge might have heard some inner voice hinting at the same thing. So in case of adjournment of this case, he had taken up a number of cases to keep himself busy.

Ramnath had his own apprehensions. The accused might bring some stay-order from High Court. The lawyers might have gone on strike or some judge, advocate or a minister might have passed away, thus causing the declaration of holiday all of a sudden. One of the lawyers of the accused might have requested the judge to adjourn the case due to some compulsion.

There must be some reason that the judge had kept so long a list of cases for hearing. But the reader allayed his fears. There was nothing of the sort. All other cases would be finished with only within one hour.

By ten thirty, the lawyers of the accused started reaching one by one. Ramnath had a sigh of relief when all the lawyers arrived in the court.

At eleven a.m. Kamal Murder Case came up for hearing.

The four accused that were sent to jail were produced in the court by the police constable. Pankaj and Neeraj occupying

the benches behind the lawyers' chairs got up and came close to the other accused.

Pandit was on bail. He had not turned up so far.

"Has your accused come to the court today? Did you see him outside?" Sadhu Singh had sensed the game. Still he asked Chaudhary just to clarify the situation.

"I don't know Sir. I'm coming here all the way from my residence. We should wait a while for him."

"Yes of course, we must wait for his Lordship. This is the directive from High Court, Eh? Anyway, take care and tell me when he comes. I'll start the proceedings."

This time Sadhu Singh had come well determined that he would not loose temper come what may? The final decision laid in the hands of the accused, not the judge. As he tried to be a little expeditious, a mischievous lawyer had snubbed him. The judge had his own compulsions. If he acted in an arbitrary manner, the accused would write a complaint against him to the High Court on a post card. A judge would come to probe into the complaint with the retinue of his staff. He would be pulled up unnecessarily on the plea: why was this case not being treated like any other case? Sadhu Singh did not take it as an ordinary case. It dealt with many heinous crimes simultaneously. The complainant family was destroyed absolutely. They needed an immediate healing touch. Their hurt feelings could be assuaged only if the accused were punished immediately. This is what Sadhu Singh wanted to do. This was his duty as well. But the lawyers of defendants did not like it. They were taking full advantage of the loopholes in the law. During the last hearing they succeeded in taking away the witnesses and got a renowned lawyer hired for a pauper. Sadhu Singh gauged the whole situation with his sharp intellect. Pandit was managed to be absent knowingly, to see that two-three dates are consumed on the pretext of arresting the accused. There would be a gap of at least fifteen days between the two dates. Pandit must be hiding in some well-fortified factory of the accused. Ultimately, the court would have to declare Pandit as a proclaimed offender. It would prolong the case for two three months further. No matter how much did Sadhu Singh try, the

proceedings must linger on for at least six months.

Then the accused would invent some other obstacle in the way. The case had to be decided on the whims of the accused. What could the complainant do? That is why the judge had become helpless and was acting with a temperate mind.

After an hour or so Sadhu Singh once again asked his orderly to call out for Pandit. The orderly had already been keeping an eye on the accused but had failed to spot him so far.

"I think, the accused has slipped away deliberately. Let's send the witnesses for the time being. We shall call them in the afternoon, if need be," a dismayed Sadhu Singh conveyed to Ramnath who stood there with sadness writ large on his face.

What had Ramnath to do in the court? He too accompanied the witnesses out of the court.

Till the closure of the court, the accused was called out aloud by the orderly several times. But how could he appear when he was not there at all.

Sadhu Singh apologised to the witnesses for inconvenience.

With a single trick, the defendants had got six months' time and postponed the judgement till Sadhu Singh would be replaced with another judge with great adroitness.

Who can say when the witnesses would be examined?

The witnesses were exempted from appearance in the court till further orders.

Once again Ramnath felt disappointed at going back empty-handed.

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While maneuvering the absence of Pandit, Nand Lal had calculated that it would take one year for him to be declared a proclaimed offender.

For putting the case again on evidence, the court had to fulfill a number of formalities. Pandit's surety had to be called and given two-three chances to produce the accused. Then arrest warrants had to be issued. For carrying out the warrant orders, the police had to raid his possible hideouts. Finally they had to report that the accused was untraceable. Then Pandit would be asked through public-notice to produce himself. Finally

constable would be required to go to Bihar for pasting the public-notice on the door of the house of the accused.

If Nand Lal created even a little bit of obstacle in the process, it would take double the time that is normally required. Surety could be made to delay his appearances. The constable, going to Bihar, could be intercepted midway. The arrest warrants could also get misplaced or if not, the public notice could be lost.

But Nand Lal could not do anything to stall or even slacken the proceeding of declaring Pandit as a proclaimed offender. It was so because the judge was irritated over the crafty moves of lawyers. Secondly, the Society did not let any paper stagnate anywhere. Moreover, this proceeding was going on between the absentee accused and the judge. Nand Lal had no right to interfere in it.

As a result, the proceeding which was expected to take one year was wound up in four months.

Sadhu Singh had yet four months of service. He could send the four accused to the gallows within these four months, if he so liked.

Pankaj and Neeraj were worried with the case coming on evidence once again. So what? Nand Lal's arsenal was still not exhausted. But it was not proper to irritate the judge for nothing. The other four accused were in jail. In case one of the brothers abstains, they could have to spend some days in jail. Sometimes, an accused once jailed for a day or two, keeps pining for his release till the case is decided. Nand Lal was not ready to take any risk. There were many chances ahead to prolong the case. Thirty witnesses had to appear for evidence. Nand Lal could manage the whole thing in different stages. At one stage, he would ask the doctor to file an application that he could not appear as he had to attend an emergency operation. At other, he would get a wireless message sent by the *SHO* that he was going out with Chief-Minister. The Chief-Minister's security was naturally more important than the court case. Then the accused would be given a chance of defence. They had to bring in the Member Parliament and doctors of Escort Hospital in their defence. Such prominent persons do not come so easily.

There was nothing difficult for Nand Lal to pass four months.

In case none of these tactics worked, Nand Lal would use his last weapon. Pandit had to be declared proclaimed offender for this very purpose. He would be produced in the court on the date of judgement. With his appearance the 'snake and ladder' metaphor would come true. In this game called *Snakes and Ladders*, sometimes the winner tumbles down from near his destined point i.e. ninety nine to zero. In this case also, the whole court proceeding would have to be initiated a fresh from the starting point.

Nand Lal guaranteed that this case would not be decided by Sadhu Singh's pen. But what was the guarantee that his successor would not turn out to be akin to Sadhu Singh. There were many judges who had no lust for money. There were still others, who would feel scared of earning a bad name by acquitting the affluent accused. Out of this fear they would deliver punishment to Pankaj and Neeraj. Someone of them could send them to gallows in view of the gravity of the crime by taking it as their moral duty.

The efforts to bring the judge of their own choice should start right now.

There were some judges in Nand Lal's mind, who looked honest apparently but were venomous from within like a viper. They accepted bribe, but with great care. They left no discrepancy in the file at the same time. Such judges would find no difficulty in acquitting Pankaj and Neeraj. The case was full of infirmities. If one of these judges succeeded Sadhu Singh, the judgement would be made according to Nand Lal's wish.

But how to get here a judge of their own choice transferred? Even a peon would find it difficult to be transferred to Mayanagar. This was after all a matter of getting an Additional Sessions Judge posted here.

Nand Lal had a solution to this problem also. The promotion of Hazari Lal, the senior most judge of High Court was due. His record was not very clean. Though this was no obstacle in his promotion, but it impeded his promotion as Chief Justice of this very High Court. Of course, Hazari Lal wanted to be a Chief

Justice at home and was making frequent visits to the bungalow of the former *MP* Mr. Shukla. The former *MP* himself had been Law Minister at the centre. The present minister not only belonged to his party but had been his class fellow also. Nand Lal knew that Mr. Shukla could oblige Hazari Lal. In that case, an indebted Chief Justice would always dance at Mr. Shukla's tune. With this long-term plan in view, Nand Lal advised Pankaj and Neeraj to have tie up with the Ex-Law-Minister and start sending his and his relatives' cases to Mr. Shukla. They should leave the rest to him, he said.

The lawyers told the accused duo that there was no need to be scared of Sadhu Singh. Despite his entire competency, he could not take this case to conclusion.

The case should otherwise be ripe for judgement till his successor takes over the charge. The new judge must start his job in Mayanagar with acquitting them.

The defendants girded up their loins to cross examine witnesses at the next hearing.

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The stratagems of defendants tortured the plaintiffs and made even the judge feel helpless.

With all swiftness at his discretion, he had completed the formality of declaring the accused a proclaimed offender. But he least hoped that the case would progress any further.

During the last dates of hearing dozens of witnesses had been appearing and he had felt small at sending all of them back without examining them.

Keeping in view the background of the case, this time, the judge had not reserved two days, for hearing. He had reserved only one day for this purpose and summoned only eye-witnesses rather than all as hitherto fore.

The accused was charged of rape as well, along with murder. Sadhu Singh felt very ill-at-ease in hearing a rape-case. He visualised himself as heading a *Kaurav Sabha*, where an innocent girl was being disrobed before his eyes, with words of course, and he had to remain a mute spectator to the sight because of the fetters of law which rendered him helpless.

Pandit Parmanand had given Neha a little dose of sermon before she left for Mayanagar, saying that the court should be the battlefield of Kurukshetra in her eyes. She must not cry for mercy in fright of being disrobed. Like *Arjun*, she should rather shoot the darts of evidence towards the Kauravs. These darts would become a noose for the accused.

Along with her statements, Neha memorised Pandit Parmanand's sermon as well. She would pounce upon the murderers of her brother like Rani of Jhaansi, from the witness-box.

It being a rape case, the court proceeding was to be held in camera. Nobody would be allowed in the court except the judge, Public Prosecutor, witnesses, the accused and their counsels.

When called out by name, Neha appeared in the witness-box.

The judge was not sure whether the witnesses' evidence would start. To be sure he asked the lawyer:

"Should we start?"

"Yes, Sir," all the lawyers said in unison.

Although the proceeding was in-camera, yet the court was full of onlookers. Six accused and their six lawyers were standing on one side, while two junior advocates and three clerks were allowed in the room to assist the senior advocates. In all there were seventeen persons standing by the side of the accused.

There were only a few persons on the side of plaintiffs. The Public Prosecutor and Harish Rai were there to fight for their cause. Ramnath, himself had preferred to go outside. He would not be able to see Neha, who was no less than his daughters to him, being cross-examined, as some of the questions would be very lewd and uncultured. Moreover, Neha too could feel embarrassed in answering in his presence.

For assisting the Public Prosecutor there was a *Naib Court* also. He was looking after the case-property, as also the file.

Before saying anything, Neha was administered an oath in the name of God to speak the truth.

Taking the oath Neha started describing the incident.

"We had our house in street no. 4 of Deep Nagar. We were

a small family, leading a very happy and comfortable life. Kamal was doing his M.B.A. in the University....” Neha’s throat was choked at the very mention of Kamal. Her eyes were moistened. She paused, bewildered for some time. Then she remembered about Pandit Parmanand’s teachings. She was neither to show diffidence, nor to be swayed by emotion. She had before her a full life to wail over the loss of her brother. She was not to get weak in the court.

This condition of Neha silenced at once the whispering among the lawyers. There was silence all around.

“And you were doing M.A. in English.... Go ahead.” The judge completed the sentence and encouraged her to resume her narration.

This was however illegal on the part of the judge to encourage a witness like this and it was known to both the parties.

Harish Rai felt that the defence would raise a hue and cry at this partial outlook of the judge. But Neha’s choked throat had its impact on everybody. There was no objection from any side.

But thus encouraged by the judge, Neha regained her equipoise.

The next part of the statement had no mention of Kamal. It mentioned only that it was midnight and everybody was asleep in his or her bed-room. Also she found no difficulty in narrating the event of the accused having entered their house after scaling the outer wall.

But when she touched the context of the culprits’ stabbing Kamal to death, she could not contain her tears which gushed out of her eyes.

“They stabbed into the abdomen of my bro” said Neha and burst into tears without completing the sentence.

Neha’s tears moistened the eyes of all including the defence counsel as well as the clerks.

“Have courage *beti* ... Boys, give water to the girl,” said Nand Lal, who was the first to feel pity for Neha.

Again the proceedings stopped for some time till the witness could contain herself.

Due to release of pent-up emotions and intake of two glasses of cold water, Neha felt quite comfortable now.

After a brief respite, she, herself co-operated in the resumption of proceedings.

The remaining part of the statement concerning Kamal was completed by the judge himself. This, too, was unwarranted for the judge. He should have dictated what was spoken by the witness. But the emotion-charged atmosphere made the defence counsels forget their rights.

Neha narrated uninterruptedly the whole story regarding how Pandit injured Neelam, how Kalia wounded Ved and how Dina roused her up. She also told that it was the *Thekedar*, who had ordered them to loot and all together rampage their house.

“What about rape?” Neha had not mentioned about being raped by Dina. For clarification, the judge asked the Public Prosecutor.

“It was not committed,” Neha herself replied to judge’s query.

Before Neha could point her finger of accusation towards each and every accused and identify Kalia and Pandit, there was one more activity to be carried out.

Police had got some important clues during investigation. Some articles had been recovered from the site which proved the presence of the accused there and some articles were recovered from their possession which testified their participation in the crime. Neha had to identify all these articles.

First of all a parcel of Kamal’s blood-smearred clothes was opened. At the time of post mortem the doctor had taken these garments in his possession and sent them to the laboratory for chemical examination. Ultimately the clothes had found their way to the court.

Then another parcel was opened at the orders of the judge. It contained the blood-stained dagger which was used for stabbing Kamal. Pancham had taken this dagger along with him, while leaving the site. Later Pancham had helped in recovering it, after receiving a severe thrashing by the police.

As the parcels were opened, a mixed stench of moisture and stale blood contaminated the whole atmosphere. Some

lawyers covered their noses with the handkerchiefs and some others stopped their breath.

Kamal's stinking clothes could be nauseating for anybody else than Neha. For her it was an invaluable treasure. At the very site of his *kurta* and *paijama* the image of Kamal was conjured in her mind. Neha had gifted this dress to Kamal on his last birthday. He looked like a prince in this dress.

The images of *kurta paijama*, Kamal, dagger and gore created a commotion in Neha's mind. The dagger penetrating her brother's belly, streaming of his blood, his intestines peeping out and a squirming Kamal flashed on the screen of her mind. She felt like swooning and was about to collapse when someone shouted, "Help! Support the girl! She is fainting."

The President stepped forward with a panther's agility and supported Neha. She was made to sit on a bench and then lie on it.

Ramnath was called in to look after her.

An eerie silence engulfed the whole atmosphere.

Ramnath helped Neha regain her consciousness by sprinkling water on her face and eyes. He consulted the President to ask whether she should be allowed to continue with her narration or not. Harish Rai too was thinking over this point.

Postponing her evidence would not be without risk. It was with great difficulty that the lawyers were tamed. It had to be like this one day or the other. The girl must be freed after recording her evidence and very little of it was left now. Only the accused remained to be identified. In case Neha did not recover properly, then some other date could be taken for cross-examination. Her health was more important than evidence.

Neha recovered quickly and she remembered well the name and appearance of all the accused.

"Are you all right my daughter? If you don't feel like, we can adjourn the case. There is no compulsion at all," Sadhu Singh called Neha to himself and said.

"I'm all right Sir. Please start the proceedings".

"That's like a wise girl," the judge encouraged Neha.

“Sir, get her statement completed now. Let the cross-examination be held in the afternoon.”

All sides consented to this suggestion given by Harish Rai.

For the completion of her statement, Neha again came to the witness-box.

An important proceeding of the case was about to start. If Neha identified the accused they could be punished. If she failed to do so, they could be acquitted of the charges of murder and dacoity. As a result they could be charged of possessing stolen goods only. It carried imprisonment for maximum three years, half of which they had already undergone. The rest of it would be condoned due to the rebates permissible to the prisoners. Immediately after the decision they would be released.

As the process of identification started, it alerted all the sides.

Nand Lal gave a sly signal to the accused, who reciprocated by nodding their heads.

Neha cast a glance at the accused. Two of them were her cousins, responsible for the murder of Kamal and her own disrobing by proxy. They were the ones behind the crippling of their own uncle and aunt. Also, they were the ones who made her happy family paupers.

Casting wrathful eyes at the accused, she moved ahead.

But situation seemed to have changed here. Rather than four, there were six accused standing there and all looked alike in appearance. The two were dressed in white *kurta pajama* and the rest wore light blue night suits. All had saffron *Parnas* on their shoulders and *chequered mudasa* on their heads. The style of their mustaches and beards was almost the same.

How did the accused multiply from four to six? Neha looked towards Harish to satisfy her curiosity. But Harish Rai had no right to help his client, nor could he ask her what her dilemma was. He could only voice his protest against the undesirable questions put by the defence side.

The President looked towards the judge to indicate the predicament of Neha. Sadhu Singh had already grasped her problem. The defence counsels had made a mischief. In the guise of clerks they had brought two men in the court who resembled the accused in appearance. To confound the witnesses they had

made the two wear dresses similar to those of the accused.

“Eh, Munshi, what are you doing here near the accused? Get aside.”

The defence strongly objected to this order of the judge.

The witness was identifying the accused for the first time. As per rule, this identification must have been made immediately after the arrest of the accused. By now they had appeared several times in the court and the witnesses had seen them every time. One of the accused had his leg amputated during this period. His identification had become easier that way. The accused must get justice. They had a right to impartial identification. If the witness could recognize the accused properly, what objection had she to identify them from amongst the six?

But the judge did have the objection. If the accused were interested in identification parade, they should have applied for that to the judge and sought his permission. Their act is an interruption in the proceedings of court; it is misleading the witness as well. The judge could sue them on the charges of contempt of court.

The legal duel went on between the two sides for some time till finally the judge ordered them to send the clerks outside.

Neha's problem was still unsolved. She had to identify one out of the four and this was no easy a task for her.

To Neha all the four looked alike. When the accused were shown to her, the *Thekedar* looked quite mature in age with a muezzin style beard with some silver-lining in it. He had mustaches also while the other accused were clean-shaven. All had black hair. Now she found it difficult to recognize the *Thekedar*. Kalia had very short hair. Today all of them had the same hair-style. He had an ear-ring in only one of his ears, while the others had none. Today all of them were having ear-rings in both of their ears. Pancham was darker in complexion than others. Neha found it hard today to distinguish dark black from light black complexion as if everybody had blackened his skin. Neha had to recognize Dina from his torn pant. He attended every hearing in these clothes. But he, too, was in different dress today. She could not recognize even Pancham. He too had come

with an artificial leg instead of crutches.

“Tell us, gentle girl! Who is the accused?” the defence wanted to take advantage of the confused state of her mind.

Neha’s cramming had betrayed her. The defence counsel had succeeded in confounding her.

Instead of relying on cramming, she started pressing hard on her memory. She was told that his incident had been committed by these very accused and in a way mentioned in her statement. Then what was she afraid of? She should recognize the accused with her sensory knowledge.

Dina had raped her. The odour of his body had permeated every pore of her body. She could smell this odour from a distance of miles.

With the permission of the court, she walked past all the accused one by one. Dina was detected at once from the scent of his body.

Kamal was murdered before her eyes. The hands of the killer were not ordinary ones. His hands were padded with coarse fingers. With a little mental exercise she closed her eyes. As per the method taught by the Divine Mother, she focused all her attention on her *agya chakra*. She replayed the whole incident in her mind like a film and freezed the image at the hands. At Neha’s request, all the accused were asked to stretch their hands before her. Pancham had the same hands which had destroyed all happiness of Ved’s family life.

The second correct identification encouraged Neha.

Of the remaining two, she had to identify the *Thekedar* only. As the fourth one would be identified automatically.

By shaving off his beard and mustaches, the *Thekedar* had concealed his age to some extent, but failed to conceal his paunch. And this is what made his identification easy.

Neha got greatly encouraged at the identification of three accused.

She looked at the ears of the accused very carefully. Kalia must have been wearing ear-rings since his childhood. The hole of his ear-lobe must be bigger, as the other accomplices’ holes should be new or they might be having artificial ear-rings like actors.

She was right.

The real culprit had a comparatively bigger whole.

After the identification parade was over, the court was adjourned till afternoon.

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Except *Thekedar's* lawyer, the lawyers of other accused were hired for them by Pankaj. It was their duty to work under the supervision of Nand Lal.

Thekedar's position was different. He could afford to spend something. That is why he had hired his lawyer himself. Neither he himself trusted Pankaj, nor his lawyer obeyed Nand Lal. They played their own fiddle.

For the last couple of days, Nand Lal was training the defence counsels in their respective argumentation.

The case had, *ab initio*, been weak. Neither the names, nor their appearances formed a part of the police-report. Also there was no mention of any particular mark of identification. This discrepancy could be removed later on through identification parade. The police had not done so. Now, if the witnesses identified the accused by appearing in the court, it would be of no importance. The defence counsels did not have to labour much.

Dina was accused of rape. This accusation was hollow in the sense that neither the police report nor the medical report mentioned it any way. The police had mentioned it in one of Neha's statement recorded by it, a month later. The court does not accord much importance to the charges leveled later on. Moreover, Neha, herself, exonerated Dina of rape charges.

A complacent Nand Lal thrust aside all the lawyers and took over the command himself on behalf of all of them.

"Well, baby, how many times had the police recorded your statement?"

"Thrice," Neha had been prompted the answer to this question, the first statement was taken in the hospital, on the basis of which the case was registered. The second statement was recorded at her friend Pallavi's house. In this statement, she had given the names of the accused and details about the

weapons used and crimes committed. The third one was recorded in the police station when she had gone there for identifying the articles recovered from the accused.

"Did the police read out all these statements to you?"

"Yes Sir," Neha knew answer to this question. She knew it also that she had put her signatures only on the first statement.

"You said right now that nobody raped you."

"Yes, I've said and rightly said so."

"Did you ever make any mention of this rape in your statements given to police?"

"Why should I have mentioned when there was no rape at all."

"Baby, your second statement says that Dina raped you by barging into your room. Didn't you tell it to the police?"

"No, I didn't tell it to them."

"You mean, the police wrote it itself."

"May be."

"It means the police didn't read out the second statement to you and had it been read out to you, you would have interrupted and said, 'Please correct my statement.' Is that right?"

This was a complicated question. Neha was asked to describe the whole statement as right except the part pertaining to rape. Now what to do? If she said, that the statement was not read out to her, it would mean that the names and the addresses of accused were written by the police itself. And, if she said that it was read out to her, the question would arise as to why she did not ask the police to correct the statement. She had no answer to this question.

The President understood her problem but kept mum. He could not guide his client. He felt irritated over the right of police to record statements without consulting the witnesses. This was what had put Neha in a quandary now.

"Come on, baby! Say something what is there to think much in it?"

Nand Lal did not want to give much time to the witness to think over as it could help her in contriving a right answer.

"Sir, may I consult my lawyer on this issue?"

"No, baby, you can't do that."

"Sir, if the accused have the right to hire half a dozen lawyers, then what stops me from consulting a lawyer?"

"The law is there to stop you."

"But, why Sir?"

"You are an eye-witness, who has seen the whole incident. Truth needs no crutches to stand on."

"But Sir, the crime has been committed by these accused. Let them question me if I give a wrong statement? Why are there lawyers to question me on their behalf?"

"Law considers the accused as infallible and the witnesses as paragons of evil. That is why it provides lawyers to the accused, so that they may sift truth out of the alleged mis-statements of the witnesses."

An irate President gave vent to his ire for the first time.

"We have been slaves to the British for two centuries. They imposed their principles on us. An innocent was hanged in good old days. It created turmoil in the entire country. Afraid of the public wrath, the law gave a theory that it is better to acquit one hundred accused than punishing one innocent person. The country which gave this theory brought to zero level the scope of doubt by adopting scientific means of investigation. But we, here, have made this theory an instrument of acquitting the accused by following it in word, not spirit. The accused are allowed lawyers to make the whole story look suspicious. As a result, the guilty are acquitted by giving them what we call 'benefit of doubt.'"

Taking it as his duty, Sadhu Singh made Neha familiar with the background of the present state of affairs.

"Our country believes in sacrifice. We must change the old theory into new one, which may justify hanging an innocent to convict one hundred culprits."

The President furthered the discussion.

"Sir, let this topic be debated at length in a seminar later on. One more witness is still pending. Why not finish our work for the time being?"

To put an end to the academic type of discussion Nand Lal interrupted Sadhu Singh.

"Sorry! Yes, tell the court, gentle girl, what you have to say." The apologetic judge ordered Neha to answer Nand Lal's question.

"The second statement was read out to me but at that time there was no mention of this incident in it," Neha replied in a roundabout manner as instructed by the lawyers. It silenced Nand Lal, as it meant that police had been altering the statements at will. This is what he wanted to prove.

"Now tell us, when did you know the names of the accused?"

"At the time they were committing the incident. During conversation they addressed each other by name."

"These are five accused. You have told their names very correctly. Did you note down these names or you just remembered them."

"I remembered them," Neha knew that she would have to face this question.

"Why didn't you tell these names to police at the time of getting the case registered?"

"Nobody asked me," this was the most suitable answer to this question. This was also a prompted reply.

"The hospital record reveals that first of all your *Mama* met you in the hospital. Is that right?"

"I was dazed at that time. I don't remember anything."

"Okay, did he keep meeting you daily at Pallavi's house after you were discharged from the hospital?"

"Yes, he kept meeting me there?"

"Is he a lawyer?"

"Yes."

"Did he ask you the names of the accused from you?"

"No."

"You mean, you disclosed the names of the accused to police only. And that too after fifteen days. And at their asking only?"

"Yes"

"Do you know that all the accused had been arrested by then. Their names, addresses and photographs were published

in the newspapers. Do you know that?"

"No I don't know."

"We'll see the record. Why ask her?" Sadhu Singh interrupted Nand Lal.

"Right Sir! Now tell us baby, how did you identify the accused?"

"From their marks of identification."

"What are those marks of identification, tell us also?"

"Peculiar formation of Pancham's hands, Kalia's ear-ring and Thekedar's paunch....."

"But you didn't get these identification marks recorded in your statements. Why did you avoid it? Is there any special reason?" Once again Nand Lal read out all of her statements. None of these had any mention of the marks of identification.

Neha was left answer less now.

"Look *beti*, you are telling a lie. This incident was the handiwork of *kala kachha* gang. You wanted to settle scores with your cousins. In connivance with the police you implicated these *bhayyas* also, along with the Pankaj and Neeraj. Isn't it?"

"Sir, I want to ask one thing from the honorable lawyer."

"No my daughter, you have no right to ask anything either, from any lawyer or from a criminal."

"Sir, what kind of law is this! The accused are asking questions upon questions and the witness is not free to ask even a single question," Neha felt greatly irritated at Sadhu Singh's refusal.

However to satisfy his own curiosity, Sadhu Singh asked Neha what she wanted to say.

"Sir, I wanted to ask why I should have implicated these accused by leaving out the real murderers."

"We'll tell you this also at a proper time," said Nand Lal to stop cross-examination going out of context.

"Wind up now. It's too much now." Sadhu Singh wanted to free Neha as early as possible.

"As you wish, Sir," said Nand Lal, putting an end to the cross-examination.

The *Thekedar's* lawyer was playing his own fiddle. He was given a separate chance to cross-examine Neha.

Almost all the questions had been asked by Nand Lal, but the *Thekedar* did not relish his putting entire blame on *kala kachha* gang. This plea could save Pankaj and Neeraj, no doubt, but it could become a noose for the other accused. Actually, there was not much difference between the *kala kachha* gangsters and them. It would be very difficult for the *Thekedar* to distinguish the notorious gangsters from the men of his social strata. His lawyer had come prepared in his own way.

“Look girl! You had a love-affair with a boy in the university. He used to come to see you at night. On that particular night also, he was in your room. By chance Kamal woke up and saw you together. Seething with rage, he attacked your lover, who in turn killed him in self-defence. To save yourself from slander, you made these poor folks the scapegoats.”

This new story made Neha weep once again.

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The *Thekedar*'s wife would tell him about a new calamity every time she came to see him in the jail.

First time she told that one of his pupils had grabbed all his work. The people waited for some time and then thought that since he was involved in a murder case, there was no hope of his early return. They could not wait that longer. They contacted the new contractors.

Some people who had booked him, refused to give him any project as his real face was unveiled. They never knew that he was a party to plunder or dacoities as well. The *Thekedar* and the owner of project have very close relations. The *Thekedar* could go to their house as and when he liked. The *Thekedar* knew well, where money is kept. Who knows when such a person might come with evil designs of loot and plunder? Nobody wanted to have any links with him now.

Second time she told that the business in his shop had dropped down to half. Actually, the shop was running on the basis of purchases made by the workers working under the *Thekedar*. Now they purchased everything from the shop of the Contractor they worked with. The whole-sellers had stopped supplying anything on credit to them. Whatever grocery lay in

the shop was used at home. The shop was nothing but a playground for big fat rats. There was no other means of income. The things had come to such a pass that beggary was not very far off .

Then she told that their son was getting spoiled day by day. Earlier he smoked stealthily, but now he was doing so openly. She could not say from where he got money to drink. He had made it a habit to come home drunk in the evening. The girl too was getting out of her control. She had seen her several times, dating with the street urchins. She had lost all respect for her mother as well. If she rebuked her a little, the shameless girl paid her twice the amount. She could elope with somebody anytime.

If the things went on like this, they could go back to their native place by selling their house and household goods anytime.

The *Thekedar* had his own problems in the jail.

His accomplices danced at the tune of Pankaj. They acted as advised by the lawyers of these rich people. The affluent brothers were playing all tricks for their own acquittal. They had no sympathies with the *bhayyas*. Nobody was going to help in their acquittal and nobody was going to acquit them. They had to fight their own battle, but nobody listened to the *Thekedar*. Pandit had absented himself at the behest of Pankaj and Neeraj, who would surely get him arrested when it suited them. Then he would have to languish in jail throughout his life.

The *Thekedar* had become slothful. He could not bear the rigours of the jail. But for his accomplices, there was not much difference, whether they were in the jail or out of it. Outside, they lived with ten others in a single room, which had no basic amenities like electricity and water. They were stung by the mosquitoes throughout the night. They could hardly get two square meals even after their day long toil. If a day passed without work, they had to remain without food that day. To them, the jails were more comfortable than the world outside. There were fans in the barracks, a tube well to take bath, a television set for recreation and free medical treatment. Pancham's leg was treated in Dayanand Hospital. Had he not

been in the jail, he would have to pay one lac rupees for this treatment. But for the timely treatment he would have died by now due to shortage of money.

The *Thekedar's* accomplices were not so keen to come out of the jail.

But the *Thekedar* was very anxious to be released from the jail. His jail mates were instigating him. It was more than a year since he had been in the jail. That is why it had become his claim now to be released on bail. The law favoured the accused. It enjoined upon the authorities to release the accused on bail if his hearing was not completed within a year. He could not be imprisoned lifelong in the jail after all.

The jail inmates asked, why he was not filing a bail petition in the High Court. They said that he should not be afraid of the fees of the High Court lawyers. Every Saturday some lawyers came to *Mayanagar* for getting work. They were the ones who were either new or who were not having a very good practice. The accused who could not pay much, or whose kins could not go frequently to Chandigarh, hired such lawyers.

Had *Thekedar* been outside, he would hire a good lawyer by going to Chandigarh himself. His wife, who had never seen the bus-stand of even *Mayanagar*, could not go to Chandigarh. Also they did not have enough money to hire an expensive lawyer.

She could hardly manage ten-fifteen thousand by selling her ornaments.

She showed documents regarding *Thekedar's* case to one of such peddling lawyers. He gave full assurance that there was hundred percent possibility of bail in this case. His name did not figure in the police report. He had been in the jail for one year. The case would go long enough. The bail was cent per cent sure.

The lawyer had not charged very high fees. He had taken only 2200 rupees plus five hundred as miscellaneous expenses. He charged one thousand five hundred rupees in advance and remaining amount was to be paid later on after the needful was done.

The High Court lawyer filed bail-petition, attaching the

copies of statements made by Ved and Neha. No statement conformed to the other. The whole story seemed cooked-up. The *Thekedar* was shown as being implicated intentionally because of his being poor and migrant. Only two witnesses had appeared so far and scores of them were yet to be recorded. As a result, an innocent person was being forced to remain behind the bars. He was ready to obey any order of the court if proved guilty. His family should not be ruined so prematurely.

The High Court delivered an impartial judgement.

The lower-court was directed to complete the hearing of the case within two months. In case some delay seemed inevitable, the *Thekedar* should be released on bail.

109

The *Thekedar* had triggered the court into action in his favour.

The grilling of the judge by advocate Chaudhary at the first hearing had not lost its impact so far. Sadhu Singh had stopped being hasty and the case was running with its usual speed.

Sadhu Singh had as yet three months at his disposal. The case was sure to consume at least three years. The accused could easily get rid of Sadhu Singh.

The *Thekedar's* lawyer had made a blunder. Under the lure of fees he had played childish. Everybody in the High Court knew what type of orders was passed by the judge hearing the bail-cases these days. These were: finish the case within three months or within four months. Suchlike orders harmed the accused more than they benefited him. Due to the occurrence of incident being still fresh, the witnesses' anger is not cooled so soon.

The accused were liable to be punished rather than acquitted.

Sadhu Singh was already known for his pro-plaintiff stance.

Under one plea or the other, he would convict even those accused who could otherwise be easily acquitted. Let them go to High Court, he thought. Sometimes High Court agreed to his plea and maintained the conviction. Even if they succeeded in getting acquitted from the High Court, they would have suffered a huge loss, pecuniary or otherwise, in the process.

Till the hearing they had to remain in the jail. Sometimes, the hearing was not conducted for as long as three years. In that case they had to pay heavy amounts by way of their lawyers' fees and the sword of Damocles' regarding possible conviction was still hanging over their heads. This much harassment was enough for the educated rich accused.

When Sadhu Singh received this order from the High Court, the next hearing was still a week away. He called all the officials at once. The *ahalmad* was ordered to prepare summons of all the witnesses at once and put up before him.

The Stenographer was directed to write a special letter to the District Police Chief, with special reference to the High Court orders. Any laxity in the compliance of summons would be treated as contempt of court. The *SSP* should be told this very clearly in the letter, the judge said.

The Public Prosecutor was directed to apprise the *SHO* with the High Court orders and be asked to appear on the fixed date along with record.

The defence counsels were strictly asked to be present at the next hearing. In case anyone of them wanted to leave the city, he should seek the prior permission of the court in this regard and give a substitute to the court.

All concerned were told categorically, "I have to complete the hearing within two months at every cost. I will hear this case even daily, if need be. No legal tricks should be resorted to for prolonging the case and justice demands that the case should be decided on the basis of merits and demerits."

This development, in a way, foiled the designs of the defendants.

Pankaj and Neeraj felt greatly disheartened. But Nand Lal was not discouraged at all. How much so ever Sadhu Singh might try, he could not write judgement of this case with his own pen.

It would take two months for the witnesses of the plaintiff side to record their statements and at least fifteen to twenty days would be taken by the six accused to present witness in their defence.

Four-five days would be given for the preparation of arguments as well.

“Even if the case is prolonged for two and a half months, our victory is guaranteed,” said Nand Lal.

“How?” Pankaj failed to understand this carefree attitude of Nand Lal.

“We’ll produce the absconding Pandit in the court on the date of judgement. Following his appearance, the whole proceedings will have to be started afresh. Sadhu Singh would not be able complete it in six months, even if he worked day and night on it. By that time Sadhu Singh would go home. The *Thekedar* would come out on bail and sit silently. Then the judgement would be made according to our wishes.” Nand Lal made Pankaj familiar with his scheme.

By getting Pandit declared proclaimed offender, Nand Lal had, in a way, prepared a pawn to be used on suchlike occasions.

110

The judge was taking full advantage of the High Court orders.

Nand Lal’s forty years’ experience was being blended into dust. He cross-examined the witnesses for three hours each instead of usual half an hour. The variegated record right from the daily-register of police-station to the printouts of the Telephone Company was sought. It was dissipated here and there. Sadhu Singh did his best to thwart the scheme of Nand Lal. Rather than letters, he sent his orderlies to acquire record. They were directed to bring along the whole record as *Hanuman* had done by lifting the whole mountain on his shoulders for a single medicinal herb. Somehow the whole record meandered its way to the court.

Nand Lal made the witnesses run away from their homes. Someone was asked to send a medical certificate, while some other was shown as gone to attend funeral rites of a relative. The judge fixed three dates for evidence as fifth, twentieth and thirtieth of the month. The witnesses were given the liberty to come at their own convenience on any of these dates. Nobody could stay away from his home for a month. Someone appeared on fifth, some other on twentieth and remaining ones on the thirtieth.

Only two chances were given for defence. It was with great difficulty that they could get third chance.

Due to this running around, the accused were feeling fatigued in two and a half months. He still had fifteen days at his disposal.

Pankaj and his relatives tried their best and approached all kith and kin of Sadhu Singh living in Delhi and Canada. But none of them gave them an encouraging response. They told Nand Lal that if Sadhu Singh was to deliver final judgement, no one can save them from conviction.

Nand Lal had been involved in this case for the last three months. Rest of his work was suffering in a big way. He wanted the case to keep going till the next judge occupied his seat. Then he would not have to take the trouble of repeating the whole process. But now there seemed to be no way out but to repeat the whole thing once again.

The *SHO* was asked to win laurels by apprehending an absconding hard core criminal and get prize from the department.

He was informed about Pandit's hideout.

Next day, the *SHO* appeared in the court even before the court proceedings started and saluted the judge by joining both his heels. The judge asked the purpose of his visit.

The *SHO* boasted of his gallantry and produced the handcuffed fugitive accused in the court.

The judge gave a wry smile at the sight of Pandit. He showed no expression of surprise at the sudden appearance of the accused, as if he knew the whole game.

"Make him sit there," Sadhu Singh ordered the *SHO*

"Now, Sir..?" Nand Lal knew what was coming ahead, but still he asked, just to take the mind of Sadhu Singh.

"Do you have any lawyer or I should hire one for you on government expenses? Instead of replying to Nand Lal, the judge asked the accused.

"No, Sir. No."

"Right. Babu Nand Lal, you take up his case as well. I'll write to the government for your fees."

"As you like, Sir."

"Tell me, which witnesses have to be called again?"

"Sir, this accused has been associated with the case since the time of incidence to the arrest. Every witness is linked to him. All the witnesses will have to be called again."

"You mean telephone company officials, the store-keeper, gate-keeper, those who helped in recovering incriminating articles from the other accused etc. what have they to do with this accused?"

"They have much to do Sir. Who knows when any of them turns useful?"

"This is the misuse of law and sheer wastage of time. Anyway, as you wish," Sadhu Singh expressed his helplessness.

"Sir, all these witnesses cannot appear even in six months. Kindly grant bail to my client."

Feeling happy over the prolong on of case, the *Thekedar's* lawyer reminded Sadhu Singh of the High Court order.

"The situation has changed. I'll deliver some judgement within four-five days." Sadhu Singh knew from the day one that he would not be able to give a final touch to this case. But he had made up his mind that till the last day of his duty, he will keep trying to conclude it. That is why he had given a befitting rebuttal to all tactics of the accused.

To summon the main witnesses of the case, he fixed the date of hearing after a gap of one week. All other witnesses were called on the fifteenth day.

After the departure of lawyers and the accused, Sadhu Singh looked at his watch. It was half past eleven yet. The argumentation was to go on throughout the day. He had not kept any other case for hearing.

Sitting leisurely, Sadhu Singh hit upon an idea. There was no point in calling all the witnesses again. Although, the law demanded calling all of them, but it seemed that this principle, evolved in the context of some particular case, was being misused here. This ruling must change.

The order-directing acceptance of the *Thekedar's* bail also needed reconsideration. The order was obeyed in letter and spirit. Had the accused not misused the concessions of law, the judgement would have been delivered before the scheduled

date. The case was lingering due to the astuteness of the accused, not any laxity on the part of the court. *Thekedar* must not take advantage of this trickery. More time should have been sought from the High Court.

Sadhu Singh called his Steno and dictated him a confidential letter addressed to the Chief Justice.

"The order of the High Court directing completion of the case within two months is laced with benevolence. It would definitely be instrumental in delivering justice to both the parties. Certainly, if the accused is innocent, he need not languish in the jail. He must be released. On the other hand, the detention of the accused is justified till the evidence of witnesses is recorded. Their release is bound to terrorise the witnesses.

"I can well understand the spirit of goodwill governing the said order and have complied with the same.

"But now the circumstances have taken a new turn. In case, complying with the orders of the High Court, the accused is released on bail, it will forfeit the very spirit and purport of the order. The justice demands that the release of the accused should be put off for another six months.

"Secondly your good self is humbly requested to relax the rule of calling all the witnesses again.

"There are many witnesses in this case who have no role to play in proving Pandit's guilt. There is no point in compelling them to appear again in the court. Thus exemption from calling them once again is humbly solicited.

"The eye-witnesses, who have already been cross-examined by the defence, need not be subjected to cross-examination again. Only the accused that has appeared now should be given the chance of cross-examination.

"It would be logical as well as less time-consuming."

The Chief-Justice's reply reached well before the next hearing.

Both the submissions of Sadhu Singh had been accepted.

The *Thekedar's* bail was put off for three months.

It was ordered that only those witnesses, who are concerned with the new accused, should be called. Other witnesses should not be bothered to appear again. If any of them was not recorded

in his presence, he was not to blame. Only the accused was responsible for the same. During the first hearing, six lawyers were present. There was no scope of any discrepancy. Only the new accused should be given a chance of cross-examination.

The new order had no effect on Nand Lal. His sole purpose was to pass a period of fifteen or twenty days. This was happening in spite of this order.

He started cooperating in the compliance of the High Court orders.

111

It was Sadhu Singh's last day on the seat of judgement.

He was sorry that he could not decide this case. But he had a satisfaction at heart that till the last minute he had been trying to take it to its fair conclusion.

What if he could not decide the case? The witnesses of the plaintiffs were heard well. In spite of all their tactics, the defendants had not succeeded in manipulating the case in a self-willed manner. This was no small achievement on Sadhu Singh's part. He had nothing to do with how his successor handled this case. But he was clear about what judgement he would have given himself.

The evidence, documentary or circumstantial, might come up to the requirements of law or not, but the fact remained that Pankaj and Neeraj had hatched a conspiracy to settle personal scores with their uncle's family. The crime had been committed by the *Thekedar* and his accomplices. There could be variation in statements regarding whether Pancham killed Kamal or Dina did so. Whether inmates of the house were attacked by Dina or Pandit? This was also a very agonising fact that Neha was raped, but afraid of social stigma, the poor girl had to swallow the bitter pill of exonerating the rapist from the shameful act. The house was looted and the booty was distributed among the accused. Sadhu Singh did not want to bother his brains on who committed which crime and with what intention. He would have held all of them commonly guilty of dacoity and murder and sentenced them to death on gallows.

Pancham was not less than twenty years of age. Even if he

had been, Sadhu Singh would not have taken him as less than twenty. Rather than forgiving him vis-a-vis his tender age, he would have pronounced capital punishment for him. The venomous snakes must be crushed while they are still in infancy, not to speak of youth, he thought.

Even the flaw in identification parade meant nothing to Sadhu Singh. The judges were compelled to abide by the laws of nineteenth century in the twenty first century. Sadhu Singh was exercising whatever right he had, to put the outdated law on modern lines. To justify the first identification also, he had his own logic. If the traumatised girl could not narrate the whole incident in perfect order, soon after the incident, what was there to blame her for? What was her fault if the police itself scribbled down her statements as they suited its own convenience? It was the law which was at fault as it had empowered the police to do so. Why can't the accused be identified by the marks of identification? The murderous hands and the odour of a rapist cannot be forgotten throughout life. The identification made on the basis of these identification marks was the most credible one. The innocent girl had not flirted with the accused that she could recognise them at once. She felt like collapsing at the very sight of the accused and would go out of herself with rage. It was after swooning several times, that she could look towards the accused. Why should she have tried to implicate them falsely? Sadhu Singh would have framed a new rule and left everything else on High Court.

He was not the one to spare Pankaj and Neeraj. The proofs that had come on the file were sufficient to prove them guilty. He did not need any bogus witnesses who might have heard the accused brothers hatching the conspiracy. The conspiracies are not hatched in the presence of others, nor do the conspirators leave any trace behind. These are judged only from the circumstances. The circumstances of this case were mostly antagonistic to Pankaj and Neeraj.

But Sadhu Singh could not do what he wished.

At the next hearing, Pandit was to be given time for his defence. The accused must get reasonable time to prepare for his defence. In the changed circumstances, proper time could not be less than ten days.

“Are you happy now”? Sadhu Singh asked Nand Lal and while fixing the case after ten days.

Feeling the sting of Sadhu Singh’s hint, Nand Lal felt very small. A single sarcastic smile on the lips of Sadhu Singh, as he said these words, shook Nand Lal from within.

As a lawyer, Nand Lal’s duty was to help the judge in delivering justice. But he had always been an obstacle in the way of justice.

“Is this the only duty of a lawyer?” Sadhu Singh seemed to be asking him.

Nand Lal had lost courage to look into the eyes of the judge. He came out of the court with downcast eyes.

Having got a date of hearing after Sadhu Singh’s departure, the defendants felt elated with a sense of victory.

But Nand Lal, perhaps for the first time in his life, felt defeated today.

112

Nand Lal wanted Bhagat Ram to replace Sadhu Singh in Mayanagar.

Bhagat Ram fulfilled all the conditions to be posted in Mayanagar. He did not take bribe in every case. He did it very sparingly after a good deal of thinking over. That is why he was known as an honest judge. He was not as adamant as Sadhu Singh. He obliged the officers without any avarice. That is why he was a favourite of his high-ups.

His posting in Mayanagar suited Nand Lal who took up the cases of rich parties only. The rich people focussed their attention mainly on winning the case with money power. They might be a little thrifty in paying the lawyer but were quite generous in paying fat sums to the judge. Nand Lal, too, had his share in the fees given to the judge by his client. As he was a confidant of Bhagat Ram, he would be greatly benefited with the latter’s posting in Mayanagar.

This was an open secret that the former *MP* Mr. Shukla had helped Hazari Lal in becoming the Chief Justice and keep posted in Chandigarh. Only Bhagat Ram knew that Nand Lal had personal relations with Mr. Shukla. Pankaj was offering fat sum

to the ex-MP for posting a judge of his choice in Mayanagar this was known to Nand Lal only.

The judge whom Pankaj wanted to be posted in Mayanagar had very bad antecedents. He had invited protest and criticism at every station he worked earlier. It was impossible for the department to post him in Mayanagar. He had only two years of service left with him. Therefore, he wanted to shovel as much money as possible for the post-retirement period. He was a very close friend of Pankaj's father and had family relations with him. He had assured Pankaj of acquittal. He was ready to contribute from his own pocket also for this prize-posting.

Nand Lal knew that due to the pressure of the Society, he was not being given his coveted posting. Alongwith the name of Pankaj's favoured judge, he gave the name of Bhagat Ram also to Mr. Shukla.

But it seemed that the Chief Justice had turned ungrateful towards Mr. Shukla. None of the two judges was posted in *Mayanagar*. Instead, a third one was chosen for this industrial city.

Before Pankaj could ask the MP, the MP himself asked the Chief Justice. He had digested a big amount given by the accused party. How could he face the party now?

"Don't worry. Mangat Ram will start his work with acquitting you without expecting a penny," he said. He explained why Hazari Lal could not oblige them.

"The President of the Society has come to know about your recommendation. He himself came to me and aired his protest. The foolish judge recommended by Pankaj came to his residence several times in his staff car and has been calling them from his official phone. The President is in possession of the whole record. He also has a record of nexus between Bhagat Ram and Nand Lal. Any of the two judges, if posted in Mayanagar, would have found him in troubled waters. What to speak of doing our work, he could have found it difficult to save his own skin. We would have earned a bad name for nothing."

Mangat Ram was one of the loyalists of the Chief-Justice. He was posted in Mayanagar by the Chief-Justice on specific conditions. He was very clever. He would do all but in a very tactical way.

Mr. Shukla believed what he was told by the Chief Justice. But Nand Lal did not trust Mr. Shukla. He could not take any risk for his clients on the basis of the unreliable promises of a politician.

Pandit had already undergone his defence exercise. Others had already finished with their defence.

The case had come up for argumentation several times but due to uncertainty of success, Nand Lal had been evading it under one or the other pretext.

After four hearings, Mangat Ram found it difficult to fix the case any further as repeated adjournments would mean that the judge was awaiting a silver-key from any of the parties. Mangat Ram had to acquit the two very rich accused. The Society could detect it.

Suspension of judgement was harmful to all.

One day he planned a special visit to Chandigarh and brought the whole affair into the notice of the Chief Justice. Let him not be blamed if anything went wrong.

The Chief asked Mr. Shukla the cause of delay and Shukla in turn asked Nand Lal who dilly-dallied again.

When even the next date passed off without argumentation, Mangat Ram found his seat shattering. He was facing risk from both sides. If the accused were not acquitted, it would annoy the Chief Justice, and if they were acquitted with delay, the Society would take cudgels against him.

Harish Rai had objected to the frequent postponement of argumentation and hinted to the judge that the party was looking for some mediator and the argumentation would take place only on sound footing.

One day Mangat Ram called Nand Lal to his retiring-room. He needed Nand Lal's cooperation.

The transfers were made late this year. The admission dates had lapsed in all the colleges. Mangat Rai's son was not getting admission in any of the colleges. Mangat Rai had sought help from many lawyers including Harish Rai. Everybody had suggested Nand Lal's name. He was the President of the Managing Committee of Arya College. The boy was to get admission with a single stroke of his pen.

On this very excuse, he had called Nand Lal to his retiring room.

“Start your argumentation, Mr. Barrister. This is an order from the Chief Justice,” Mangat Raitried to persuade Nand Lal before talking over other miscellaneous issues.

113

Ved’s family first severed its links with *Mayanagar* and then developed a sense of disgust towards it. At times, the reminiscences of Kamal attracted them to their *Mayanagar* house but since it too had been sold out, this affinity also vanished. The people of *Mayanagar* forgot Ved’s family and they thrust into oblivion the city.

Ved’s business had come to a grinding halt. Neha’s studies were interrupted halfway. Ved had sold all that he had in the name of property and deposited the money in a bank. He could not start any new business till he regained his health properly. He was running his household with the interest of his deposits.

Every morning and evening he would go to Geeta Bhawan with Neelam and listened to the holy texts there. It was a source of great solace for them.

What he was most worried about, was the matrimonial prospects of Neha. He would keep pressing hard on Ramnath to find some suitable match for her. Ramnath also wanted to marry her off as soon as possible. But no match was insight for the time being. Ramnath asked all of his acquaintances for their cooperation but all in vain.

“We can’t tie her to any worthless person in haste. She has not grown overage after all. We’ll definitely find a good match in due course of time,” he would console Ved with such soothing words.

There was no provision for higher education in this city. She could not join Master’s course in English literature despite her keen interest in it. The only means of killing time was reading law books. She wanted to keep herself busy, this way or that way. At the advice of the psychiatrist, Ramnath helped her in keeping busy. He would make her familiar with a case being taken by him, its background, possible legal points to be raised

and the view of High Court or Supreme Court on the same. He would prepare a list of the judgements given by the higher courts which were applicable in that particular case. Rest, he left on Neha to go through.

While going through the judgements, Neha wondered at the cleverness of the judges. In almost every case the accused was acquitted very adroitly on one excuse or the other. People like Neha also formed a part of these cases. It seemed as if the judiciary was totally devoid of human aspect. Reading judgements on the cases akin to hers, she thought that one day the accused in their own case would also be let off.

The plight of the plaintiff would make Neha feel very perturbed at heart. What should she do? She had asked Ramnath in this regard many times.

Ramnath had learnt a lot out of adverse times. Now he felt a prick in the conscience while advocating the case of the accused. He tried his best to take up the case of the plaintiff and burnt midnight oil to ensure conviction of the accused. It gave him sense of satisfaction.

Now Ramnath had a feel of the real objective of the Society. Had Neha been an advocate, she could lend a helping hand in promoting the cause of the Society. She could do nothing for the Society in her present position.

"Uncle can't I get admission in to Law classes? After passing Law Course, I shall become a member of Harish Uncle's Society. Then I will raise a voice against this pro-criminal law," said Neha one day to Ramnath.

"Why not my child, you have so brilliant a score in graduation that you will find your name among the first five in the merit list. This is a golden idea. May God fulfill your wish!"

Neha's decision had pleased everybody in the family.

Her becoming a student would solve many a problem. She would be engaged for three years and feel good in the university atmosphere.

Now everybody waited for her admission in the Law Course.

Sadhu Singh's derisive smile on his last day in the seat of judgement had stung Nand Lal like anything.

"Are you happy now?" Sadhu Singh had felicitated Nand Lal on his success in placing obstacles in the way of justice, by saying so.

"Is this, what you think the duty of a good lawyer?" in the garb of his conscience, Sadhu Singh seemed to be asking him repeatedly.

Nand Lal was very proud of his professional efficiency. But for what purpose he utilized it? To mint money? To get the rich criminals acquitted? To convince them that they are above law? They should have no fear of law? And thereby, helping the multiplication of crime? However, the soul-searching lawyer found answer to these questions in the affirmative. And this was what made him penitent now.

He was aware of all ins and outs of the case. The charges levelled against all the accused were right. Nand Lal had got all the proofs obliterated by using unfair means. Now no judge could convict the accused.

The argumentation had been already postponed umpteen numbers of times. It must take place now and he had promised the party to make it this time. Any further extension would neither be in the interest of his client, nor the judge himself.

But now, after having listened to the voice of sanity, he was shying away from helping the accused in their acquittal.

Who had appointed him a lawyer to advocate the case of professional criminals like Pancham? What professional duty he had performed by making available the services of top lawyers to the professional criminals? Why did he obstruct the path of justice by using his good offices? Why did he make the witnesses retract? Why did he impede Sadhu Singh's way to deliver justice? Why did he play a role in getting the judge of culprit's choice posted in place of Sadhu Singh?

This was crime. Not at all a legal practice. Under which sections of Indian Penal Code could he be booked?

These were the questions which had been gnawing at Nand Lal's heart for the last three days.

Sadhu Singh seemed perfectly right to him now. Harish too was on the right track. But what could be done now? What was already done could not be undone.

But penitence, they say, helps cleanse the sins of even the worst sinner. But what about one who spends his whole life sinning and atones for his sins when he has his feet in the grave? But it is also said that a little flame of an earthen lamp dispels the darkness of ages. It's better to wake up late than not to wake up at all.

These 'buts' really made his being aflame and in the light of this Divine flame he withdrew himself from the case. He called Singla and apprised him with the latest situation. Feigning illness, he asked Singla to handle the argumentation alone as he was not feeling well.

He asked Singla not to worry as both their clients were sure to be acquitted. The clients had managed it themselves. The lawyers would be credited without much of their contribution. Since Nand Lal had spent his whole life taking such credits, now it was the turn of his disciple.

The government had appointed Nand Lal as lawyer for Pandit, but he did not feel like advocating his case. He had returned the fees he got from the government. He withdrew his Power of Attorney submitted on behalf of Pandit. Singla was asked to intimate the judge in this regard.

Nand Lal gave one more advice to his disciple,
"Don't be tempted to advocate Pandit's case. Let him be convicted for his misdeeds."

Singla failed to understand this enigma.

He could not understand the way his mentor was talking today.

115

Neelam's head injury would take a pretty long time in healing. The doctors said that she should be kept free of all anxiety. The anxiety would weigh upon her mind, which made her suffer from fits. Once started, the fits would continue for days together.

Every unpleasant development was concealed from her. But surprisingly she foresaw the judgement to be pronounced

tomorrow. She had been silent since morning. And it was a forewarning that she could have a fit anytime.

Neha had not allowed Neelam to do any work and done everything herself. Neelam needed rest. She was not allowed to leave the bed.

Reading newspaper in the verandah, Ved had constant eye on Neelam.

He could not know when Neelam woke up and went to the bath-room. He came to know only when she fell with a thud in the bath-room.

Ved was boggled at the advent of this sudden calamity. He forgot for the time being that he was not as able-bodied as he used to be earlier. He forgot that his limbs were frail and fragile now. His physique was supported by the plates. He needed help for walking even a few steps. He was forbidden to lift weight and walk fast.

But Neelam's fall made him ignore all the precautions. His body was charged with an unknown energy which led him at once to the bath-room.

Neelam had collapsed on the floor. Her mouth was bleeding. Her tongue was injured by getting stuck between her own dentures.

Ved took her into his arms and put her on the bed.

Within no time his mysterious power disappeared and his limbs started aching. His right leg was having an excruciating pain.

Since Neha was near around, she sprang into action immediately and called Ramnath. Ramnath called doctors.

Neha's condition was not very serious. She had her normal fit and within a day or two she was supposed to be all right.

But Ved's condition was worrisome. His weak bones had got disjointed once again. The plates on his leg bones seemed to have been damaged.

He might have to undergo immediate operation for which there was no provision in this city.

The patient required to be shifted immediately to Dayanand Hospital.

The sorrow-stricken family started preparing for its journey to Mayanagar.

For two days there was heated argumentation.

Quoting scores of Supreme Court judgements the defence tried to prove that the presence of the accused on the site of the incident or their involvement in it -direct or indirect – is not proved.

They contended that the crime had been committed by some *kala kachha* gang and such an incident had taken place for the first time in Mayanagar. The newspapers escalated the issue to incite the feelings of the scared people. To save its own skin, the police made very low profile criminals the scapegoats. Being a lawyer, Ramnath was familiar with the intricacies of law. With great cleverness, he implicated the names of Pankaj and Neeraj to settle personal scores with them. The case was filed by one of the three eye-witnesses. A careful study of the medical report revealed that Neha was not very seriously injured and at the time, the case was being registered, she was perfectly in her senses. Had she known the names of the accused, she could have mentioned them in the report. The supplementary statement was recorded after the accused were arrested. The veracity of supplementary statement, too, was questionable. The police had said in the statement that Dina committed rape with Neha. The statement of the doctor and Neha herself, had falsified this charge. That is why the Supreme Court emphasised time and again that only the facts recorded in the police report should be treated as truthful and the supplementary statements should be ignored. The accused could not be held guilty merely on the basis of supplementary statements.

Serious charges of murder and rape were leveled against the accused. If proved, these charges could lead them to the gallows. The court must examine the evidence made by the witnesses carefully and if there was any doubt in the authenticity of the story, the accused must be given the benefit of doubt. The police had failed to prove that this incident had been committed by these very accused. It had not bothered to arrange identification parade knowingly. The incident was a sudden development. The members of the family were beaten up while they were still asleep. There was no possibility of any of the

accused having been identified by the witnesses who must be in a dazed state of mind at that time. They could not identify them even in identification-parade. That is why the identification-parade was postponed under the pretext of their illness. The witnesses had resumed their daily routine since long. The four accused were still in the jail. Identification-parade could be held even after they had recovered from illness. But the intentions of police were not clear. The accused were photographed and the copies of photographs were supplied to the witnesses. The accused were brought before the witnesses many times. When they memorised well the identity of the accused, they were made to identify the accused in the court. The Supreme Court is well aware of this trickery. The statements of witnesses were not true. Their evidence too was not without suspicion. The accused must be given the benefit of doubt.

Pancham's lawyer gave a different argument. According to medical report, Pancham was less than twenty years of age. Even if the witnesses were to be believed, he could be sent to a juvenile reformatory for not more than three years. He could not be given any other punishment.

Singla gave the plea that when the prime-accused were not proved guilty, how could Pankaj and his brother be charged of inciting them for committing the crime.

In reply to the argumentation of defence, the plaintiffs came forward with their own arguments.

"The accused are professional criminals. They have been sent to jail several times on the charges of looting and dacoity. They commit crimes in the guise of *kala kachha* gang. That is why no such incident is reported to have taken place after their arrest. The recovery of blood smeared clothes, weapons and burgled property links them to the incident.

"The defence has given no proof regarding any of the *Thekedar's* visit to the factory, prior to this incident. The defence did not give any proof of any of the labourers having been supplied to this factory by the contractor. They also did not clarify the subject of telephonic conversation between the *Thekedar* and Pankaj. The *Munim* is their employee. He can be made to state anything that best suits his employers. The record

of Pankaj's factory is an ample testimony to prove their connivance with the contractor.

"The doctors did not appear in the court to prove Pancham's age nor was the plaintiff side given a chance to do so. Incomplete report cannot be relied upon. As such, he does not deserve any pity."

The judge adjourned the court for a day to make up his mind and deliver the judgement.

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Today was the day of judgement.

The case being two years old now, the people in common did not show any special interest in its hearing. After this incident, many other more serious issues had come up to arouse public interest and hit the headlines of newspapers.

The above fact notwithstanding, some media persons were interested in publicising the judgement of this case. They had not come to the court personally. They were keeping themselves in touch with the lawyers.

Pankaj and Neeraj did not bring along even one of their supporters. Sitting in advocate Singla's chamber they were awaiting a final decision on the case.

The *Thekedar's* entire family had reached the court. They were waiting for the decision very impatiently.

All other accused were alone, with not even a single supporter on their side.

The plaintiff side was represented by Ramnath and Neha.

There was no other activity throughout the day. The judge and his steno had been busy in dictating the decision and getting it typed.

The work was completed by 3 p.m.

The judge called the parties to announce his judgement.

After going through the file completely and hearing the arguments of both sides, the judge arrived at the conclusion that:

"The complaint registered immediately after the incident does not mention the names of the accused or any detail of their earlier crime record. It makes the whole affair suspicious. The

police has recorded the statements of witnesses on its own, which becomes clear from Neha's own statement. The statement recorded by the investigation officer mentions commitment of rape, while Neha disowns it. Whom should the court believe—the witness or the police? The benefit of doubt thus goes to the accused.

In case, the accused have been jailed earlier, they should naturally be aware of legal escape routes. Even the foolish accused will take care not to address his accomplice by name at the time of committing crime. Even if he does so, the injured cannot retain the name of the accused in his or her memory in the very process of being injured. This part of the witnesses' evidence is also not very convincing.

By not arranging the identification parade well in time, the police have ruled out all possibility of believing the witnesses. An identification parade arranged one year after the incident, has lost all meaning and importance. If the creditability of witnesses is observed within the parameters of law, the presence of the accused at the time, when the crime was committed, is not proved.

But the judge brushed aside this logic and recognised the helplessness of the police in view of the trauma and injuries received by the witnesses.

In the light of the statements given by witnesses the charges proved against the accused were as under:

Both the sides have admitted that four out of the five accused were accustomed to burglary and looting. The judgements attached to the file prove that they have already undergone imprisonment for three or four months under these crimes. The property stolen by them in the past included articles like a scooter or a television set while snatchings included a wallet or a gold-chain.

During this incident also, nobody except Pancham had any deadly weapon. Ved and Neelam were hit with an iron-rod which is not defined by law as a deadly weapon. The two of the accused were thus unarmed at the time of incident. Entry of five burglars together coincidentally in someone's house with an intention of theft does not prove a charge of dacoity against

them. In that case, the accused should have been armed with dreaded weapons. The absence of any such weapon proves that the accused had no intention to injure the members of the family. The rod was meant for breakings open the locks and almirahs. The injuries to the family members were a result of the scuffle which ensued between the accused and family-members that were awakened all of a sudden.

As a result, the charge of dacoity is not proved against the accused.

The fatal weapon was wielded by the Pancham only. It was he who had attacked Kamal. The others cannot be held responsible for the crime committed by him. There is no evidence on the file about the consent of the co-accused with Pancham for killing Kamal. Therefore, Pancham alone is responsible for what he did.

A report regarding Pancham's age exists on the file. According to this report Pancham's age is below twenty. The plaintiff side has given no proof to prove it as false. This plea carries no weight that the defence ignored this fact in the beginning and later the doctor's report was not complete in all respects. It was the responsibility of the court to protect the interests of juvenile delinquents. The judge cannot ignore the doctor's report albeit incomplete.

Pancham was held responsible for Kamal's murder and keeping in view his age was sent to juvenile reformatory for three years.

Pandit and Kalia also had the same fate. They had injured Ved and Neelam with a rod which is no deadly weapon. They were also sentenced to three years, imprisonment.

The charges of entering someone's house with an intention of theft, and recovering of stolen property were proved on all the five accused. Maximum punishment under these charges was five years. The court sentenced all the accused to three years' imprisonment.

While pronouncing his decision, the judge clarified that these punishments will go together i.e. all of them had to spend only three years in jail. There will be no totaling on the years as six, nine or twelve years.

When no charge of pre-contemplated murder or dacoity was proved on the prime accused of the case, then how those accused of conspiring the multiple crime could be convicted?

Pankaj and Neeraj were acquitted honourably.

After pronouncing his judgement, the judge got up and went in to his retiring-room.

Pankaj and Neeraj left the court silently.

Hearing imprisonment sentence for the accused, the contractor's family started weeping bitterly.

The other lawyers had not come for listening to the judgement. It was only the contractor's lawyer who was there on this occasion.

"Where is the punishment? No jail at all. He is acquitted. He is sentenced to three years imprisonment out of which he has already spent two years as under trial. One year has been condoned by the government. He will be back home by the evening, you see. Come on, give me my prize," the contractor's lawyer consoled the family as he gloated over his success at the same time.

A stunned Neha was trying to decode the pronouncement. She could not understand whether the accused were punished or acquitted.

Harish Rai, standing behind her, could see through her mind.

"The injured are lying in the hospital and the accused are going home," he said and explained the essence of the judgement to Neha by placing his fatherly hand of blessing on her head.

"Take heart, my child. This is not the final judgement. We shall challenge it in the higher courts."

To console Neha, Ramnath did say this realising well at the same time that nothing was different in the upper courts as well.

GLOSSARY

- Akali Party - A regional Political Party of Sikhs in Punjab.
A.S.I. - Assistant Sub inspector police
Akhara - Ring
A.P.P - Assistant Public Prosecutor
Abhimanyu - A character of Mahabharat
Arjun - A character of Mahabharata
Ahalmad - Clerk of court
Babu - Gentleman
Babuji - Father; a term of respect
B.S.F. - Border Security Force – a paramilitary organization.
Bhog - The last prayers
Benami - When property is purchased by one in the name of another
Beopar Mandal - Organization of traders.
Behan - Sister
Bidi - Inferior type of cigarette
Brother-in-law - Sister's husband
Beta - Son
Bhabi - Brother's wife
Bhai Sahib - Respected brother
Bhayyas - Migrant labourers of Bihar and Utter Pardesh
Bantias - An Indian community known for its business acumen like Jews
Beti - Daughter
Bhisham Pitamah - Patriarchal character of the epic Mahabharat
Chowki - Police post
Chacha-Bhatija - Uncle-nephew
Chowdhery - A sobriquet for a man of repute
Chacha - Younger brother of father
Comrades - Members of Communist Party.

- Congress - A political party.
C.R.P.F. - Central Reserve Police Force.
Chowkidar - Security guard
Challan - Final police report
Dhaba - Restaurant
D.A. - District attorney-chief public prosecutor
Dharna - Sitting in protest
D.G.P. - Director General of Police.
Dharmshala - An inn.
D.S.P. - Deputy superintendent police
D.I.G. - Deputy Inspector General of Police.
F.C.I. - Food Corporation of India.
G.A. - General Assistant
Goshwara - A tabulated report, statement
Garud Puran - A holy book recited on the occasion of last prayers
for the dead
Havan - A ritual of fire-worship among Hindus
Hawaldar - Head constable.
Holi - A festival
Hawala - Illegally transferred currency
Hanuman - Monkey-god of 'Ramayana'. as mythology goes,
Lakshman, the younger brother of Rama fell
unconscious in war against Ravana, the king of Lanka.
At that time Hanuman was asked to go at his
characteristic wind-like speed and bring Sanjeevani
Booti i.e. a life saving medicinal herb from the Kailash
mountain. Since Hanuman could not distinguish the
magical herb, he lifted the whole mountain where it was
planted and flew fast to the destination so that
Lakshman could be brought back to life as early as
possible.
I.P.S. - Indian Police Service.
I.O. - Investigation Officer
I.C.U. - Intensive Care Unit
IG - Inspector General
Janab - Sir.
Jat - An agricultural caste – dominating in Punjab.
Jathe bandi - Union; organization.

- Jathedar - Group leader.
Jawan - A constable; young man.
Jeth - Elder brother of sister's husband
Jija - Sister's husband
Khalsaji - A term of respect for a sikh.
Kothi - Bungalow.
Kurta-Pajama - Casual dress
Karyana - Grocery
Kaurav Sabha - Assemblage of Kauravs. It refers to the most dominant scene in Mahabharat, the great epic, where the Kauravs disrobe the wife of their own brothers after they had lost her with all their material property in a game of gambling. The irony of the situation is that the lady Draupadi is disrobed in the presence of the King and elders of her family
Kuram - Father-in-law of one's son or daughter
Kundalini - Dormant serpentine force
Kala Kachha Gang- A gang of criminal normals is noticed for committing robberies in the midnight. They keep their terrors bare and wear black under wears so as to avoid detection in the darkness
Lala - Term used for the business community.
M.L.A. - Member of legislative assembly.
Munim - Accountant.
Mama - Maternal uncle
Maulavi - A Muslim priest
Malkhana - Store where case property of the police station is kept
Munshi - (I) A post equivalent to a clerk
(II) A clerk of an advocate
(III) A post held by a head constable who is maintaining the affairs of the police station
Maya - Wealth, illusion
Munim - Accounts clerk
Mudasa - Scarf
Maasi - Maternal aunt
Naib Court - A constable rank police official assisting the PP in the court

Neem Datun - Twig of Neem tree
Nambardar - Village headman.
Panchayat - Village administration unit.
Patwari - Village level revenue official.
Pradhan - Chief ; president.
P.W.D. - Public Welfare Department.
P.U.D.A. - Punjab Urban Development Authority
Peti - (i) Wooden-packing
(ii) Code word for one lac
Parnas - A piece of cloth kept generally by farmers, labourers
and drivers to be used as a towel
Roznamacha - Daily Dairy Register
Sadhu - Saint
Sahib - A respectful address meaning 'Sir'
Sadh saati - A period of continuous troubles.
S.D.M. - Sub Divisional Magistrate.
Sansi - A backward caste.
Sardar - Sikh.
Satta - Speculation.
Satta wallah - One who runs a gambling betting ring.
S.P. - Superintendent of Police.
S.S.P. - Senior Superintendent of Police.
Supari - Contract to commit a crime
Sahukar - Money-lender
Salwar - A lower apparel of Punjabi ladies
Satsang - Religious congregation
Sarpanch - Village head
Thana - Police Station.
Thanedar - Police officer
Thekedar - Contractor
Tehsildar - Circle revenue officer
Ustad - Adept; clever.
Vakil - Advocate
Vaqalatnama - Power of attorney given to a lawyer by his client
Yuva Shakti - Youth wing