



Short Stories from the mountains

This little book has eight short stories. Written from experiences in and around the Dhauladhar mountain ranges, the stories are a reflection of the times we live in. These stories come from the worldview of a young man from the city who came to the mountains to find something, Here are the titles of the stories:

Ajitji's Dilemma

Panchakki

White Clouds, Dark Clouds

In search of humanity

Jogi in Manali

Handspun (by Nanhe)

The Here and Now

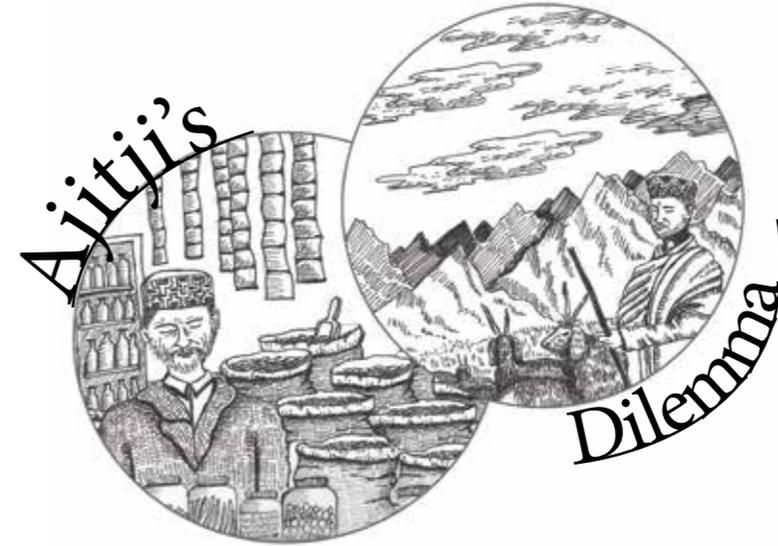
Guddu's Tree

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There is a buffalo running wild in the mountains at an altitude above 2000m. Mist and clouds have engulfed the surroundings. Ajitji is running behind the buffalo to bring it back. In the rocky terrain, his ankle twists and he screams out in agony. But he gathers himself and chases the Buffalo back to his temporary abode.

As he sits back with his mates to sip a hot cup of tea, he feels his ankle swelling up. Akin to the cattle that are swelling up because of all the fresh grass around. Gaddis, the semi-nomadic tribe head up to the mountains every year in monsoons for a couple of months with their cattle to fatten them up.

The living quarters are made of a few small stone houses- some for the cattle and some for the men. Their families are a few hours away in the safety of their permanent home. Higher up in the mountains, the air

is good, there is a natural sense of harmony around. But resources are limited. In the olden days, it was okay since one didn't have the deluge of modern goods in the markets. Wants have been becoming needs at an astonishing pace.

The view is beautiful but there is work to be done. The cattle needs to be fed grass which has to be cut and collected from the tiny pasture lands around.

Ajitji limps around for a couple of hours, cutting and collecting grass. His son, Lucky, is also there to assist him but he's worried about his phone's battery. He wants to head back home as soon as possible. They head down every four or five days to get some supplies. Lucky, more frequently.

The father-son duo has headed up the mountain, with their cattle, after

eight years. Earlier, this was life, but now their habits have changed. Ajitji had found a job at a provisions store, which paid him INR 5,000 a month and it was enough for his family. The store owners also had a piece of land which had ample grass for his cattle. It was much better than living on a day to day basis without proper shelter and depending on cattle for everything. This year they had to climb up to the mountains again in search of grass, since the land on which their cattle grazed was sold, and the new owner wouldn't let the cattle graze for free.

Sitting outside their little hut with a little drizzle which filled up their cups of tea a little bit more, Ajitji looks out into the clouds. With flies buzzing around his swollen ankle, he remembers his days at the store where he works in relative comfort. There is a fixed time and hardly any uncertainty.

A month into the ordeal, the sun has failed to make an appearance even once. It has been raining. Ajitji has fallen ill. Lucky is still bothered about his battery pack. He has grown up in times of rapid change. From the slow nomadic life to fast-paced mobile world, the change took less than two decades. In the new world, Lucky struggles for an identity.

The duo couldn't make it for more than a month and returned back to the solace of their relatively cozy house. Ajitji's wife engages in farm work for a good part of the day and has her work cut out. She had to nurse her husband back to health along with raising her granddaughter.

The family was back to drier territory, but still couldn't afford an off day. The six cattle needed care, their farm needed a lot of maintenance post the heavy monsoons and Ajitji had to report back at the store for work.

"Ajitji, can you go to the storehouse and get the rice please?"

"Ajitji, the garbage needs to be thrown."

"Ajitji, can you go and get the parcel from the post office."

Ajitji happily does it all, remembering his times up in the mountains. His ankle hasn't yet recovered but he carries loads of sacks. Ajitji is the spinal cord of the operations at the store- what is in stock, getting things packed, organizing the small storehouse, he is the human-computer at work. Although he is paid lesser than anyone else, he is a very crucial part of the engine.

Ajitji quietly goes about all the work and looks for more because his son is still not married. After 60 years of gruelling manual work, he still has one more responsibility. If only his son finds a job, they would marry him.

A few months on, the work pressure is mounting.

"Ajitji, can you repack those items?"

"Ajitji, the basement needs to be cleaned."

"Ajitji, can you quickly deliver these items."

Lost in the bliss of his bidi, he forgot one urgent task and rushed to see if he still had time. As he picked up the sack and turned, his ankle twisted and it made a cracking sound. He let out a cry of agony.

He collapsed to the ground and sat there with a tear rolling down his eye. In the distance, he could see the clouds and the mist and all his cattle quietly chewing the grass.



White Clouds

Dark Clouds

It was a cold, misty morning. Kishan and Supriya had set out for a hike via a route they hadn't taken before. Living in the mountains, they loved to go on random hikes and they usually asked the locals before heading out anywhere. While on the trail, Openstreetmaps was their companion. An open source

mapping platform, OSM app worked offline and was usually reliable.

The trail they were on that day wasn't far away from civilization, but in the mountains, predictability is often shrouded in clouds.

The duo was reasonably well prepared with good shoes and enough food for 3 days. The plan was to take this lesser known route to a village from where their trek across a pass would begin. Although not hardcore trekkers, Kishan and Supriya knew the mountains around where they lived fairly well. And hiking up the

mountains had never been a man v/s nature quest, it was more of a reverential pilgrimage.

This particular morning, the mist had something mysterious, ethereal about it. It happens often during winters and monsoons but you feel it even more so when you're out in the open, engulfed in it. Without the light inside, it can even feel scary sometimes. On the walk, they encountered many criss-crossing paths but they had a general sense of the direction in which they wanted to head and made steady progress.

The general direction helps but when the clouds get heavy, it's pretty much impossible to navigate unless you're adept at using the compass. For Kishan and Supriya, the clouds were playing

mischief but in that mischief, there were moments of clarity when they could see through the clouds into the valley they wanted to reach.

An hour into the walk, they came across a little lake and there was a tiny hamlet in the distance. Clear and blue, the lake was lined with cement and there were some plastic wrappers floating around. The hamlet seemed to have not more than fifteen houses made of mud and stone and they were all built in three terraced rows with some fields around. From the distance, they could hear some howling and barking. It must be the dogs of the village, they assumed.

Passing by the houses, the app told them they were on the correct

trail. Just then, a massive dog with a haunting growl came running from behind them. It seemed like a local mountain dog in a rather nasty mood. There was saliva dripping at the edges of his mouth.

Kishan turned around as he heard it coming. An electric current passed through his spine and he went cold. Supriya also gasped in terror. Both of them loved animals and considered them to be beings from the same life force; equally sensitive. Supriya often said that dogs and other animals invoke the same feelings that humans generate on encountering them. "They can sense what you're feeling," she used to say.

Once when Supriya was sitting by a river, she was in a state of immense harmony with the

nature around. After some time, she felt something stir a little and she turned her gaze towards the movement. The moment she turned, her heart plunged out of her chest and the snake which was sitting companionably on a nearby rock, jumped into the river.

Remembering that story in a flash, Kishan and Supriya tried to calm down. But the dog seemed adamant. It had stopped running since it was pretty close but was now growling with more ferocity. Following the cue, a couple of more dogs had also come in running and started barking. At this moment, Supriya let out a shriek in fear and clinged on to Kishan's arm. Kishan was also scared but he had Supriya's words in his heart.

He was calm. He kept Supriya in front of him and asked her to keep walking. The dogs were only a few steps behind. One jump and they could have sunk their teeth into either of the two's calves. Growling is what increases the intensity of the situation multifold. One hear dogs barking frequently but when they're growling, you know something's not right for sure.

In those few intense seconds, Kishan had already seen the dogs attacking him. He saw them tearing into his flesh and he didn't feel any pain. He was lying down in peace. The incident played out in his mind. The moment he snapped out of it, all fear had vanished. He only had Supriya to protect. Even if the body is hurt and bruised, the fire of truth and life rages on. Kishan had an

internal fire burning and Supriya had the truth in her heart. They were already bitten and no more harm could be done.

For that little period of time, when they held themselves and each other so tightly, the dogs had trailed off and stopped growling. Their barking didn't seem very dangerous any more. The dogs seemed almost disappointed.

Kishan and Supriya were spared; for the dogs were only protecting their territory. Within a couple of hours, they reached the village and went on to cross the pass next day.

Back to the safety of their homes, the incident remained etched in their memories. Something very beautiful and mystical had descended or ascended

within them which helped them overcome the situation. There was a certain kind of a longing that filled their beings. The longing for those moments when one completely surrenders; when transcendence happens.

A few days later, when Supriya was returning from a short travel tour, Kishan had gone to the bus station to pick her up. It was close to midnight and again it was cold and misty. Late nights in the mountains have a certain chill about them.

Kishan reached a few minutes earlier and was waiting under a streetlight. The light was filtering through the mist onto the tarmac beneath. Kishan rolled down the window to get a clearer view.

There was a dog in the distance. It was slowly walking towards the car. Another electric current passed through Kishan's spine. The dog came closer to the window. He was black and his hair were falling off.

Kishan looked at it, a little scared. The dog came further closer and tried to peep in through the open window. Kishan had goosebumps now and rolled up the window in a hurry. The dog was now staring at him. Kishan knocked on the window in order to shoo away the dog but in vain.

Kishan got a little agitated and knocked louder. This time, the dog turned around and started walking. A little further, the dog stopped, looked back and then walked on to disappear in the

distance. Kishan rolled down the window again, and sat there in contemplation. This time, he had a longing for the longing.

Jogi in Manali

Jogi, a man from the city of Hyderabad in South India worked at a multinational company. His work was satisfying and he had a smooth life. He had done his college studies in Delhi, the capital of the nation in north India. Those few years of exposure made him independent and he was also introduced to the vast mountain ranges, the Himalayas, that spreads across from North to the East of the country. A trip with his friends, for a trek, made him curious and he repeatedly made trips to the mountains, sometimes solo and sometimes with friends.

For a few years after college, the path was pretty clear, work at the

office, take a week off every couple of months and fly over to the mountains for some adventure.

His family also didn't have an issue since he was earning well and had good prospects. Marriage was also on the expectation list from his family but there was no rush. He had time. This continued till he was in his late twenties.

It had been a few years and the pull from the mountains was getting stronger. "The people are so nice there, no one haggles, there's no rush. Everyone is kind and pleasant," he used to think and discuss with his friends. And that was true to an extent,

the politics of an office life, the maddening rush of the IT (information technology) culture in Indian cities and a lack of sense of purpose can make one feel out of place.

The rut of an office life and taking off every couple of months as an escape wasn't a long term answer. "There has to be more meaning to all of this," thought Jogi. Something within him was telling him that there is a way out.

The shock point came when his landlord asked him to vacate the house he was living in and also refused to give back the deposit of INR 1,00,000 he had paid. Why?

He had not taken good care of the paint in the house.

He still had some savings left. He e-mailed his resignation and decided to travel for a couple of months. His family called him crazy but Jogi was far too independent to hear anything. He went to Manali and took up a guest house for a month. Jogi was free. Jogi could fly now. That was the best month of his life, light everywhere! His friends were jealous of him. His adventures became an aspiration for many in the coming few months. He was spending less, staying healthy and having a lot of fun!

All the assumptions about a city life and a beautiful village life were coming true. All his dealings were pleasant and he loved the people



around. He was also making a lot of new friends.

But his family was going nuts! "What are you up to! Have you gone crazy?" was the constant argument he faced and he didn't

have an answer. His relationships with his parents was going downhill.

After about six months, he felt like growing roots somewhere, he had found the answer. This is

where he'd build his life but he couldn't live in a guest house. His search for a place led him to the village Nasogi nearby. The tourism wave hadn't yet hit the village and it was still cut off. Over the next few months, his savings were running out and he had to turn towards some sort of an income source. He looked at the extreme low-budget travellers around but they also didn't have a solution for him. The internet connectivity was reasonable and he thought of bringing in little tourism to the village and taking up freelance projects.

There was still this niggle within him. The romance of the first year had worn off. He thought of shifting focus to work and building something in the village. He started subletting his house

and started a small hostel like space. He also picked up a freelance project which gave him hints of financial stability. Things will work out. The locals were also happy and worked with him to do more things. They added a couple of more rooms to the space and things were going great. He used to egg others on to follow their heart. He used to tell his story to many who came to Nasogi and show how the village was developing.

There were a couple of travellers who stayed on for a few months. One of them was from Mumbai and she intended to spend some time in the village. Her name was Jaya and she used to teach at government schools on a voluntary basis. She also painted sometimes. Jogi became good

friends with her and shared a lot of stories.

Jaya was happy to see the enthusiasm of Jogi and heard him out on a lot of things. Jogi was inching towards meaning in his life. He had found this person he could talk to and be himself with. He was always thinking about problems and solutions and doing things to keep up the tempo. With Jaya, he could just be.

Amidst this smooth flowing, the property owner came to Jogi and asked him to hand over the keys of the place. Jogi could stay on but they wanted control over their land and how things functioned.

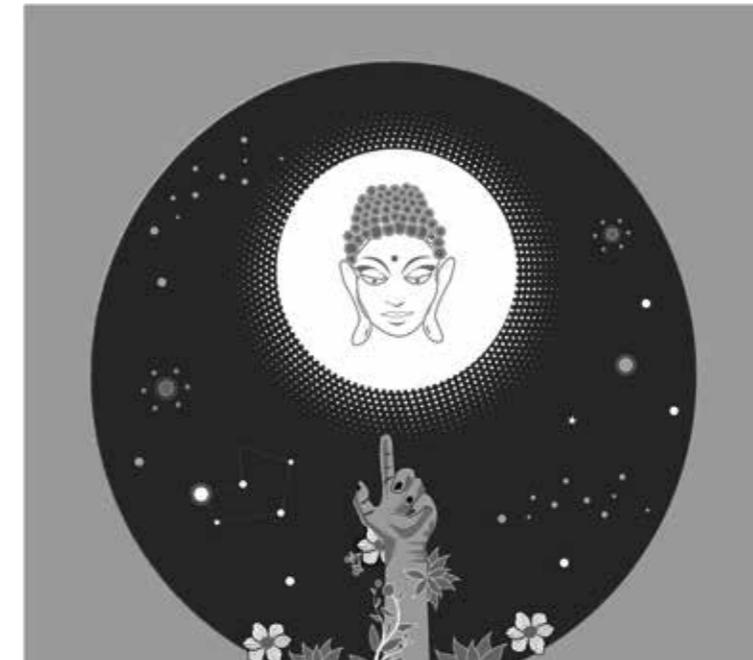
This came as a jolt. After two years of work, he was suddenly shown the door. The paint of the older

house in Hyderabad flashed by Jogi; what was he standing for all this while? He had made this his home. How could this happen? There is so much kindness and softness around then why this? Jogi didn't have an answer. His world had collapsed.

He went to Jaya and shared what had happened. Jaya listened to him with a gentle smile on her face and then took out her notepad. She took a few minutes and drew something. She then held up the notepad to Jogi.

It was the depiction of a Buddha pointing towards the moon.

She pointed her finger towards the window and over there they could see the moon rising from the mountains. Jogi had inched closer towards the moon.



The Here and Now

At 4340m above sea level, on top of the Dhauladhar ranges at the Minkiani Pass, a blizzard hit us on the 13th of June, 2017. We were far from prepared for what nature had in store for us. The two of us had a jacket each with a tee-shirt inside and cotton pants. Our shoes were a far cry from what the situation demanded.

We had reached Kareri Lake the day earlier and spent the night camping near a temple. On the 13th, we left by 6am, for Minkiani Pass. The man at the temple told us to be careful and not to go further if we encounter a lot of snow. Much later, we would come to know that we were attempting the pass a month before people usually do.

As the sun was out and the day looked clear and good for climbing, we steadily carried on. We had a sense of the general

direction; we had to hit one of the snow fields and take a left from there to reach the top. That's not very detailed by most standards. We hit the snowfield and took a left and kept moving up ahead. At points, we looked at each other and shared glimpses of surprise. This could not be the path but we carried on, it wasn't that arduous. We thought things were under control. The clear weather gave us more confidence.

We reached the top and it was breathtaking. In all senses.

We're were at the top, on the razor's edge. We walked over to the other side and the vast expanse that is the Chamba valley opened up to us. In the distance, we could see Kali dal and the massive Lam dal (dal stands for lake). In that one moment, we could see and feel the universe. Dark clouds, sunlight, hail, snow, rain, blue sky, clouds

forming, waterfall, boulders, vegetation, everything! It was the time we wondered if we were there or had we already stopped existing and become a part of the surroundings completely? We were the surrounding.

And then, in the time we were marvelling, clouds engulfed. We could hardly see each other. On our way up, we had noticed a cave pretty close by, we scrambled our way towards it and found some dry land. Pretty small, we could hardly stand but we settled for it in gratitude.

The next few hours, we witnessed something we couldn't even have dreamt of. Roaring thunder, lightning, clouds clashing, the sky was falling! It was hard to believe our own eyes. What on earth was happening? The path (or rather the semblance of a path) we had come through was in snow, it was white

everywhere. We could only see the edges of stones and the other thing we could see was inside us. This lurking fear that we might not see the light of the day.

Not seeing light is scary. In every which way. In our everyday lives, light is what we live for. The light of love, the light of beauty, the light within our hearts. Light is what we wanted but it was nowhere in sight. It also made us realise how very important the self still is. Preserving life had become most critical, the self was not ready to let go. It had a lot of fire and that's brilliant for the body. But it probably means the mind hasn't gained complete relief.

We waited in the small cave from 11am to 3pm, by then our phone batteries had also run out. We used the last bit to check out the time and based on that, we decided to move on. If we tried to stay the night, we were likely to freeze to death.

Once we stepped out, the feeling was good. Much better than inside the cave. Inside, there is anxiety, anticipation;

outside, we were in it, in the eye of the storm. Our bodies felt good, they wanted to go for it. We started walking, one step at a time. After around 15 minutes of slipping and finding ground, we landed on a row of stones which had a hint of order. This could be the path! The trail! Our morale boosted and we went on with the momentum.

But within 15 minutes, the trail ended into nothingness. On our left, was a massive glacier and straight ahead, a steep slope followed by a cliff. At this instant, our faces must have gone pale. This was the only time when we felt things could go horribly wrong. One course of action was to slide down the glacier, it would be the quickest path down. And probably also the quickest way straight up. At one juncture, we saw the glacier's thickness to be not more than half a feet, we couldn't risk that! Sliding down had to be the last resort.

We traced our way back to the trail. Now, going left wasn't an option, we started moving towards our right. Huge boulders stood in our way with no clue

about what lay on the other side. We jumped and struggled our way on the 70 degree incline across the mountain. After the boulders, we got a sight of the snowfield which looked like the one we had climbed from but it looked much larger now! It looked improbable for us to navigate through it.

We took a breather, had our dose of electrol and sweets and thought further plan. Our minds were still sharp, they were functioning to survive. It must be 4.30 or 5pm by then and the weather seemed like it was going to clear up. We could see some sun rays pouring in from the west onto the fresh snow turning it into slush. Walking would be harder but the sun was such a pleasant sight.

Earlier in the day, from the top, we had seen a herd of sheep going up the mountain further to our right. We thought of reaching there somehow. Our ray of hope were the little shrubs that dotted the mountain slope, all the way from where we stood, to the point where we wanted to reach. Knee height small shrubs, looking like a cousin of the

Rhododendron, with incredible strong branches on which one could swing. We had enormous trust in them. We started to make our way through dangling on to these trees. After about half an hour with a few cuts and bruises, we reached a point where we felt that death was evaded.

Huge boulders lay in front of us, navigating which we would be able to reach the proximity of our lake. We sighed and carried on. And by 8 in the night, we had made our way to safety. The first human face was that of a Gaddi

(the local tribe) who looked to the gods and said, "It's the mercy of Shiva that you're back safely."

Back at the campsite, we sat around the fire and had our dinner with the folks at the temple. What was meant to be a testing trek up till the pass, had become an experience of a lifetime. Questions around the meaning of life, what are we here for, what is death, what is fear, became all too real.

And this is what mountaineering

probably means to me. Getting a glimpse into the unknown, a glimpse into that nature of reality. The only question now is, how can we live in that intensity in our everyday life? How does one become that? Well, that's the journey we're all on. I'll keep walking, keep clawing, in a hope of not reaching somewhere but touching that deep thing within us which keeps us alive, which will allow us to transcend.



Phinnu lived in a remote mountain village in north India, on the foothills of the Himalayas. He had recently bought a smartphone and was excited about the things it could do. He uploaded the most dashing profile picture of his and sent

a friend request to his friend of seven years. This friend is Mansi, a young girl who is pursuing B.Com and alongside, has taken away Phinnu's sleep.

But there is a problem. The girl's

father doesn't approve the possibility of a marriage. Phinnu comes from a family that has been running a Panchakki (waterwheel/stone mill) from two generations and makes a modest earning. The panchakki is a beautiful invention present in most of the mountain villages in Himachal Pradesh. It is a water-driven stone wheel used to ground grains. With changing times, people have moved to the electric mill and the panchakkis look into a grim future.

Phinnu's father and his contemporaries are probably the last people to take pride in what the panchakki has to offer. In the older times, all villagers would bring their grains to the panchakki for grinding and would pay through a share of the flour. That's how the life rolled in the times when the people of the mountains lived off the land.

Phinnu didn't like the work

particularly since it was backbreaking, was slow and one would be covered in flour the moment one stepped inside the panchakki. This is what led him to other savvy occupations like driving a taxi or starting a cyber cafe. But he always had a soft spot for the panchakki because seven years ago, when he reluctantly sat on his father's seat, Mansi had walked in to get some grains ground. A brief exchange of the eyes had led to something beautiful which he cherishes to this day. The panchakki is also the reason why the marriage would not happen.

Mansi's father didn't think too highly of Phinnu. The young man didn't have a government job, had no secured income and hence, didn't have the capacity to keep his daughter happy. Running away was also not an option. Mansi's mother had passed away when she was young and if she disobeyed her father, she feared that

he might die of a heart attack! In search of a brighter future, Phinnu packed his bags for Chandigarh. He had been trying for a government job but nothing seemed to work out; the city looked like a possible way out. With ten thousand rupees in his pocket and memories of Mansi in his heart, he took up a job at an auto parts factory. He was excited about what the city had to offer; shining cars, big roads, fancy restaurants and a lot of glitter.

But the shine was short lived. Life was hard; long hours at the factory, expensive food and rent. The road to prosperity was long and arduous. In two months, he realized he was earning a bit more but his expenses were even higher. On the other side, Mansi told him that her father had lined up a queue of suitors and it was becoming difficult to resist the social pressure.

Phinnu was in a quandary. Nothing seemed to be working. The city was also getting to him since this was the first time for him and he had never handled this kind of heat and congested living spaces. He started missing his field, his panchakki. There was a deep sense of longing that filled him up every time he closed his eyes and remembered home.

Meanwhile at his place in the assembly line of the factory, he noticed a small 4 feet turbine that had come in. The factory had taken up a new project and this was a test piece that had arrived. He jumped in during the installation and was amazed how swift it was in cutting water.

His mind connected the dots and he could visualize this turbine inside his panchakki! For the first time, the work at the factory excited him. He

figured out all the details about how to make that turbine. Something had clicked. He wanted to install a small turbine at the panchakki and generate electricity.

Within a week, he had figured out the manufacturing of one turbine and quit his job. He put all his savings in getting that one turbine and other things he'd need to setup his plant back in the mountains. He asked Mansi to hold on a little bit longer and buy some time from her father. The whole setup was heavy but he somehow managed to carry it in the bus storage and took it home.

His father was terribly upset on knowing that Phinnu had quit the job but his anger soon dissolved. He shared the excitement Phinnu had with respect to the turbine on the panchakki. In a matter of a few days, Phinnu had gathered his friends and they had revamped the panchakki.

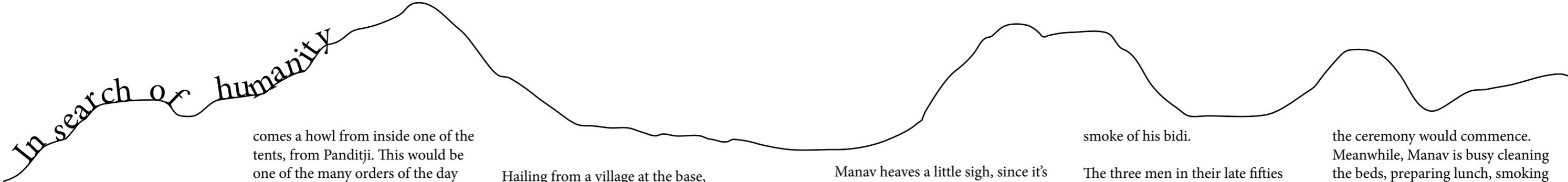
And the universe seemed to have sorted itself out when they first opened the flow that would hit the turbine. And in turn, a bulb went on! They were grinding grain and producing electricity!

The upgraded panchakki attracted many villagers and they had a few new customers too. In a couple of months, the panchakki was going at full steam and was bringing in much more money too. They could even supply electricity to three houses around and the panchakki had woken up to a new life.

Mansi brought along her father but unfortunately, he didn't see much progress. This almost devastated the young couple and pressures were mounting even further. But Mansi stood her ground. She kept rejecting all the suitors and her father didn't have the heart to push it further.

A couple of years passed, Mansi had graduated from college, but her job hunting wasn't yielding results. She used to remain busy on the farm and doing housework. Life didn't offer much excitement but her heart was strong. One fine day, while washing utensils, a spray of water splashed her face and the needle moved within her. She walked up to her father, took his blessings, and started walking towards Phinnu's house.

Her father couldn't understand what had happened but his body froze. Deep within him, he knew he couldn't force her to stay back anymore. He kept looking at Mansi. Firm in her step, she looked back and caught a hint of smile on her father's face. Everything was clear. The water had gushed out of the valve, had hit the turbine and the bulb had turned on!



In search of humanity

Sitting around a fire besides a high altitude lake, Manav is smoking a bidi and warming himself up. The temperature is close to freezing point and the sun, which is about to rise, holds the promise of more warmth. Manav gathers a few more plastic wrappers from around and stokes the fire. There is plenty of plastic around and that's his job-gather all the abundant plastic waste and burn it.

'Chotu, chai bana' (Chotu, make tea),

comes a howl from inside one of the tents, from Panditji. This would be one of the many orders of the day that would be hurled upon the young man. Manav is known by the moniker Chotu around the Manimahesh lake. Employed at probably one of the most scenic places on earth, Chotu's workplace is situated in district Chamba, Himachal Pradesh, high up in the Himalayas. The lake is situated at 4080m, which is the base of the sacred Manimahesh Kailash peak that towers higher up at 5653m. The peak, also considered to be lord Shiva's abode, is a revered site. The place has been Manav's home for four months every year, from the last five to six years.

Hailing from a village at the base, from where the 13km trek to the lake begins, Manav has been employed by a dhaba (shack) owner and Panditji (priest) at the lake. Unemployed for the rest of the year (but happier), Manav slogs his way through the months at the sacred lake.

Preparing tea for Panditji and the others at the campsite, he discards packets of empty Amul milk tetra-pack and Tata tea into the holy fire which is currently keeping him warm. He takes a sip from his cup, when three yatris (religious travellers) appear from the common tent.

Manav heaves a little sigh, since it's only three and not the thousands of pilgrims who make their way to the lake during the holy fortnight period every year. From Janmashtmi to Radaashtmi every year, more than half a million people visit the lake to take a dip and cast off their sins.

For Manav, the sins don't seem to go away anywhere for he has to be there and burn them all - the empty packets, discarded bottles, piles of shit in and around semi-existing toilets, scraps of clothes and footwear. He looks up at the peak in search of Shiva, but soon loses himself in the

smoke of his bidi.

The three men in their late fifties had taken the arduous 13km walk upto the lake to conduct a pooja (ceremony) and pray for their dear ones who have passed away. The Panditji is thus kept busy with the duty of conducting these rites, apart from his regular daily pooja. Looking at the mountain, the three men fold their hands in devotion and chant the name of Shiva. They then take out their iPads and click a few sunrise shots as Manav hands over piping hot cups of tea.

At the stroke of 9, the trio would take a dip into the holy lake and

the ceremony would commence. Meanwhile, Manav is busy cleaning the beds, preparing lunch, smoking bidis and burning the plastic. There is one more lady to assist Manav in cleaning up the surroundings but the mounds are so high that no amount of burning seems to matter.

'How are the two of us supposed to clean this mess created by half a million people?' asked Manav when two Israeli travellers asked him on arrival. The two women are travelling across north India after their mandatory two year army training. Fighting their own demons, all they want now is a good smoke. And Manav obliges. He takes them

for a little walk to a pristine place away from the lake which hasn't been touched by the pilgrims. Trampling over piles of garbage, the vista opens from a different angle and there is sheer beauty in the wide expanse in front of them.

'The lake and surrounding area is a landfill we've created,' says Manav as he passes along a joint to the women. They nod in agreement and take a deep puff to put the image of the lake behind them. They exchange pleasantries and share some life stories. Manav has picked up some english owing to the foreign tourists who frequent the place. And these are the conversations he longs for. Coming from a rather conservative family, these few interactions are a window into a more open world for Manav and more so, if these interactions are with the opposite sex. But at the end of the day, Manav very well knew that the meetings were

going to be brief. Fleeting moments of glee.

After the joint, he would have had to go back and catch up with the others at the camp. He had to clean up the dish pile, have his food and get back to burning the plastic. It seemed that the authorities had made up a job whose description was to make a hole in the ozone layer, and pilgrims made it doubly sure that the job stays. Manav's insides filled up with hopelessness and helplessness. He cleaned up the dishes thinking of the two new friends he made. If only there was a way out.

There was to be a special pooja that afternoon for which Panditji would be making kheer and offering it to god after which it'd be distributed as prasad. Manav made all the preparations for it and was looking forward to the evening when there would be a chance to spend an hour

or so of smoking with the Israeli women.

When the kheer was about ready, a solo Indian traveller entered the lake premises and enquired if it would be possible to sleep at the campsite. The owner of the tent showed him the way where he could settle in. Manav offered the new entrant a bowl of kheer which the man took with glee. Sipping spoonfuls of the sweet gruel, the man started circumambulating the lake with a camera around his neck. He was clicking pictures of the lake, the peak, and also the garbage piles. He seemed a little disturbed. Along with him, two more elderly men had made their way up with a guide but it was too cold for them to stay out. They quickly disappeared into the blankets.

During his circumambulation, the man saw Manav walking inside the lake (which was half dry and

one could easily navigate within) collecting coins that the pilgrims had offered to god when the lake was fuller. 'So, Manav is the god,' the man smiled to himself.

When Manav came over with a bidi in his mouth, to collect the bowl of kheer, he asked the man as to what he thought of the place? 'The place and the peak are amazingly beautiful. They are so powerful! But what we have managed to do to it, is even more shocking!' the man exclaimed. Manav replied, 'You're not the first one. Everyone says this. But these corrupt politicians! This gang incharge for cleanliness keeps filling their pockets.' Anger was boiling within Manav. The man could see his eyes flare. Manav went on, 'If ever one of these idiots makes his way to the lake, I will pull his guts out.' Venting out, some steam was released. They both fell silent. Manav took the bowl and went away to prepare dinner.

A tear rolled down the man's eye. He couldn't believe the struggle. The stupidity of mankind. He continued walking and as he neared the small temple on the edge of the lake, Panditji called him over. Inquiring about his whereabouts, Panditji gathered that he was from Mumbai and was on a research project in the mountains. Panditji said, 'Everything has been searched for by our rishis and munis. There is nothing new to be done. Man has to learn to live in contentment. Man has ventured too much in the material world, it's time to go within' and with that pearl of wisdom, he discarded the empty tetra-pack and a large empty packet of sugar inside the lake, for Manav to retrieve and burn or be drowned under 15 feet of snow, after a couple of months.



H A N D S P U N



My very dear Nana,

The other day we had gone looking for a house, we have been searching for a mud house to live in since forever. The house was not in a very good shape but as we were coming back, we met this old woman working on a khaddi (I think you would know, but just in case, I am talking of a basic loom). The Gaddi tribe here in Himachal Pradesh was semi nomadic and depended on livestock (mainly goats and sheep but livestock is not a nice word, it takes away the life force and things turn up dead). They would live off the milk, meat and wool of these animals, along with some vegetables and grains. They are now all settling down at one place to merge in with the rest of the market world.

Nana, imagine the mountains in all their glory, like the face of god, imagine them green and lush in rains and pure and pristine in winters, imagine the golden hue of sun, the cool and clear air, imagine the perennial crystal streams and with that the people and their

houses of mud, with tapering roofs of slates and the goats and sheep. The rhythm of all life forms, from trees, to people, to animals woven into a beautiful fabric. The system cognizant and respectful of the cycles of life. Winters were very wintery then (people say) and wool was a life saver. It still is. So every home would have a charkha, to spin the wool and a khaddi to weave it into blankets. Women would do charkha and khaddi, and men would do the takli (spindle) because men needed to be more mobile. It wasn't external work; it was part of living, of being.

By the way, I tried a charkha the other day and it is like meditation; a little more pressure and the thread breaks, a bit less and there is no thread, but when the granny was making it, it seemed so effortless. I am only now discovering these things, when they are like broken parts of an erstwhile functional machine, and they are so beautiful. I find my heart connecting with something very vast and transcendent when I engage with these things, even

as an observer. I have come into a time where we have to rediscover this living and being.

Everyone says these 'skills' are dying and I see that people don't do these things anymore because life around has changed and they don't know how to fit this in with the new sensibilities, the new life. I had gone to this place where they work with khaddi and all, but this rhythm wasn't there, it was very mechanical, so I know just creating that work won't do it. So should we let it die? But I so wish that the rhythm not be lost, how do we find it nana, how do we connect it, how do we weave it into the life now? Maybe it cannot happen in going back step by step. Maybe we need to discover new systems that sensitively and respectfully merge the old and new and bring things together in the rhythm of the khaddi and the charkha. There must be some way, a path that we will see when we see from our heart. I don't know.

Your Nanhe.



Guddu, a twelve year old boy, loved trees. Growing up in a tribal village in a forest, nature was an integral part of his life. He was a part of the forest and the forest was a part of him. His days were spent climbing trees, bathing in the stream, catching insects, making small model houses from things available around, eating some mud here and there, and other such activities. His parents were mostly busy with agriculture, maintaining the household and sometimes going to the town to engage in labour work.

For Guddu, the trees around were as much his parents as were his biological parents. He hugged them, climbed over them, slept in their laps, and ate food from their hands. He also loved the baby trees and took great care of them. One of his favourite activity was to plant saplings. He had done it with his parents but had gone one step further and planted saplings even if the season wasn't ripe. Throughout the year, he'd randomly go to places and plant these saplings.

As the years passed on, tribal villages lived in harmony with the forest but civilization was sprawling from all sides. One day, Guddu heard some sound of machines and he went running in its direction. There was a JCB there, excavating some land and a lot of sawing machines were there. Guddu had seen these monsters in town where he sometimes accompanied his mother. They didn't look like nice machines.

As he stood and watched, he saw the JCB turning in the direction of a tree he had planted when he was very small. It was a special tree for Guddu, he had gone and hugged her whenever he felt alone or sad. As soon as he realized what was about to happen, he ran towards the tree and stood in front of it.

The person in charge of the endeavour was a big guy with a potted belly and he always had paan in his mouth. He asked Guddu to move out of the way but Guddu didn't budge. He moved towards Guddu and gave him a strong push. Guddu fell towards the ground but regained composure and quickly got up and took the same position.

This man ordered his fellows towards the boy and four of them dragged away Guddu.

We are waiting to see what will happen next...



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