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An Inward Journey

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Dedication



To the fathers of our soldiers, who eagerly await the
return of their sons.

and

To my father Mr Shaligram Tiwari
His kind words, strength, and guidance will forever
remain as a guiding light in my heart.

About the Author

Smita Tiwari holds a bachelor's degree in Electronics and Communication Engineering. She worked as a Technical Evangelist in Infosys Limited.

Despite her background in science and a successful career, Smita had always been captivated by literature. She left her full-time job to embrace motherhood and found herself drawn back to writing in her leisure time.

When she lost her father to the pandemic, Smita's writing found a new purpose — she sublimated her grief in lyrical prose. Her debut work beautifully weaves the universal themes of love and loss and celebrates the enduring connections that define our lives.

CHAPTER 1

My weary eyes glued to the narrow window adjacent to my cot, I dolefully contemplated the devastating scene before me. All the single- and two-storeyed houses were annihilated under the immense gravitational pull of Earth. As I witnessed the houses falling into ruin, I sank into a sea of agony.

I closed the wooden shutters of the window with a heavy heart and lay down on my cot. My legs were warmed by my old blanket, but my hands remained cold, clad as I was in a half-sleeved shirt. I pulled the fleece over my hands and the intense cold around me faded into a comfortable warmth. I grabbed the alarm clock kept beside the pillow with my left hand. The radium of the old-fashioned clock glowed in the dark, its hour hand poised between five and six. The clock had been my constant companion for the last nine years, was of the same vintage as my fleece. It didn't compel me to renounce the blanket's warm embrace. I quelled my agitated mind, as my eyelids grew heavy over my tired eyes.

The alarm rang at the scheduled time. It was six in the morning and as I glanced out the window, I realized that nothing disastrous had occurred. What I saw an hour earlier was an illusion or perhaps, a waking dream. It was not the first instance when such dreams deceived my mind. This grievous illusion had been a companion for long; it was almost part of me.

Toggling between dream and reality I managed to get up from my wooden cot. I folded my blanket, neatly made the bed, and slipped on my slippers. But before I begin with the daily routine of my mundane life, it is imperative

that you know about my past life.

The world, or at least, the people who had met me in these twenty-six years know me as 'Kabir'. I was born in one of the holiest cities of India, Varanasi, also known as Banaras or Kashi. The name closest to my heart is Kashi. The city is located on the banks of the river Ganga in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. My mother Ramya Devi, father Devendra, and elder brother Aniket were my immediate family. Extended family resided in different cities and villages nearby; we used to meet them at my native village, Chaurapur, 35 km from Kashi, at least once every year. That's where my grandparents and my father's eldest brother lived.

My father, whom I respectfully addressed as Pitaji, was the headmaster of a high school. His dedication toward his students made him work even after school hours. In the seventies, there existed no alternate means to resolve the queries that befuddled juvenile minds, other than seeking their teachers' help. With my father working diligently, my mother generously took care of all household responsibilities. I affectionately addressed my mother as Amma while my brother, approximately four years older than me and whom I called bhैया, adoringly called her Maa. My parents had ardently wished to be blessed with a daughter as their second child, but our wishes seldom align with what destiny has in store.

I was around seven years old when my mother told us how she named me Kabir. She would always narrate numerous fictitious and real stories to my brother and me, but for the first time, I was going to hear the story of how I got my name. We were sitting in the small corridor of our rented house, our mother adroitly cracking some whole roasted groundnuts. My brother did the same, using his strong thumb to crack the shell. Although I tried to emulate him, I failed miserably at the task. I even used my teeth but when that failed, I ate the nut along with its hard shell. Groundnuts with black salt were our most-

loved winter snacks; sharing it with loved ones enhanced the taste of the crunchy, salty treat. The serenity of the February evening was only disturbed by a few mosquitoes, but we were experts in dealing with these tiny, winged monsters.

Amma began to narrate the story. Sant Kabir Das was a fifteenth-century mystic poet whose thoughtful writings influenced all of humanity. He suggested that truth resides only in the heart of human beings who diligently follow the path of righteousness without discriminating on the basis of religion, caste, colour, or creed. The deepest philosophies of life found voice in his profound *dohas* (couplets), love songs, and mystic poetry.

Amma began her story with a Kabir *doha*:

Kabir man nirmal bhaya, jaise Ganga neer

Paache paache har phire, kahat Kabir Kabir

She then explained – Each one of us born on this earth has a hidden desire to be known and loved by all our fellow beings. But due to our ignorance, our ego grows along with us, and eventually, we find ourselves alone. The other vices that contaminate our minds are illicit passion, jealousy, anger, greed, fear, and procrastination. A disordered mind fails to nurture the flowers of love and compassion. Kabir focuses on the importance of a pure heart and a clean mind. He says that a person who has a clear conscience is loved by everyone and is much sought after.

Amma paused, as dusk fell, and gazed at the millions of stars that twinkled in the sky. Amid that tranquil darkness, Amma's words mesmerized my soul and aroused my curiosity. She cleaned the groundnut hulls around her and continued to narrate her experience of taking care of a second child, when the first one was just four years old. She explained how in this blissful state of motherhood, she was sometimes overwhelmed by the tedious task of child rearing.

In the first year of my infancy, it was an uphill task for

her to make me sleep. She tried several ways to calm me; the most successful tactic was to recite the verses of Sant Kabir. Amma routinely recited the verses from father's old Hindi book and was greatly relieved that I would fall asleep.

Out of love and innocence, bhaiya began calling me Kabir. Amma was a fervent follower of Sant Kabir and hearing her elder son address his brother with the same name, she was filled with joy, even as her eyes misted over. When Amma asked Pitaji to name me Kabir, he hesitated. It was not because he objected to the name; his hesitation arose from whether extended family would accept the name. The *naamkaran sanskaar*, our family tradition of naming a child, was splendidly organized. Religious beliefs dictated that a pandit would decide the letter with which the child's name would begin. Without his recommendation, it would have been inadvisable to name the child. Amma and Pitaji took a conscious decision to wait till the naming ceremony. Fortunately, this time, destiny aligned with my parents' desires. To Amma's surprise and delight, the letter suggested by the pandit was the phonetic sound of the consonant 'K'. Quickly, the family came to a collective decision to name the new member 'Kabir'.

My brother, who gave me my name, was my closest companion. Unlike me, bhaiya was decisive and a strongminded person and that made me rely on him. I followed him, or perhaps I should say that my life revolved around him. Sometimes, my dependence made him complain to Amma; he wanted her to set him free from his sibling responsibilities. Amma used to console bhaiya by applauding him for conscientiously fulfilling his duties as the eldest son. Although I was instructed by my mother not to bother him, my great affinity for him did not allow me to stay away from bhaiya for more than a day or two. Amma was grateful to the Almighty for the strong bond and great love between her offspring.

We lived an extremely ordinary life. A rented house with one living room (in those days, we used to call it the drawing-room) and one bedroom, one small kitchen, and an exceptionally compact bathroom. There was a small, confined space next to the kitchen, which could have been used as a storeroom, but Amma turned it into a *pooja* room (prayer room). The living room had two wooden chairs, which one could sit on but not relax. It was the same with the other furniture; the cot in the bedroom was sufficient to sleep in but not to laze aimlessly. Among these austere household amenities, the chair of our study table was the most relentless and unforgiving. It was a sturdy iron chair, warm in summers and cold in winters, and with no cushion to mitigate the discomfort. There was no television, washing machine, refrigerator, or dining table, as these were not considered necessities in those times. They were unaffordable luxuries.

Our lives may have been ordinary, but our mutual love and respect made it blissful. My childhood remains the most cherished days of my life. Once, bhaiya, who was mostly charmed by luxuries, begged Pitaji to sell his old bicycle and buy him a scooter. Pitaji humbly explained that he did not earn enough money to buy a scooter, and when bhaiya asked him about his salary, Pitaji replied pensively,

Sai itna deejaye, jaame kutumb samaye

Main bhi bhookha na rahun, sadhu na bhookha jaye

We should pray to the Almighty to give us enough to take care of our needs and to feed the needy and our guests decently. In India, a guest is considered God: '*Atithi devo bhava*' and so we pray to the Almighty to give us enough to treat the guest respectably. Any accumulation of wealth driven by greed is discouraged by Sant Kabir.

Our lives were decidedly influenced by the teachings of Kabir Das, the great poet Rahim, and Goswami Tuli Das. Although Amma was married at eighteen and could not pursue her graduation, her knowledge of Hindi

literature was exceptional and worth appreciating. Pitaji was a post-graduate in Hindi literature and an expert in his field. My parents' compatibility was not limited to their knowledge and education; their thoughts resonated on all aspects of life. Amma and Pitaji had great respect for each other. They appreciated each other's decisions, and graciously welcomed any difference of opinion that was courteously suggested by their spouse.

CHAPTER 2

As a rule, Amma and Pitaji woke up early in the morning; by 4:30 a.m. in summer and at 5:30 a.m. in winter. Amma always remained in bed for some time, singing *bhajans* in the praise of the Almighty. My brother and I knew that it was her loving way of waking us up. The *bhajans* that she sang most frequently were the verses of Kabir and of Rahim. She even explained these verses with beautiful real-life examples. On Sundays, Pitaji spent valuable time with us; he used to teach us Hindi grammar, the basics of Sanskrit, and elementary arithmetic. Of all the subjects, Mathematics was one that greatly fascinated me. Although I had no rational explanation for my attraction to mathematical theories, I was inexorably drawn towards it. Perhaps I knew, deep down, that Mathematics was the basis of life. If I begin to describe the beauty of Mathematics, it may be difficult to stop.

Pitaji would teach us and Amma cooked something special for us. Like any average family, this was our usual Sunday routine. If we managed to persuade Pitaji to take us to Ganga ghat, Sunday would be extra special. I remember, it was 2 December 1979, a Sunday, and Pitaji had arranged a family visit to Ganga ghat.

Ghats in Kashi are riverfront steps leading to the banks of the holy river Ganga. There are eighty-eight such ghats in Kashi, sacred for bathing and performing various religious rituals and ceremonies. The ghat which was nearest to our residence and our heart was the Assi ghat, situated at the confluence of the Ganga and river Assi. It marks the traditional southern boundary of Kashi.

This ghat is famous for several reasons; the one that I remember consciously is that the soul of the great poet Goswami Tulsi Das departed from his body at this sacred place.

Assi ghat was approximately two and a half kilometres away from our house. Pitaji, who was always eager to walk, could easily cover this distance, but Amma found it difficult. Since my mother's comfort and contentment was always Pitaji's highest priority, he always arranged for a rickshaw at our doorstep. Amma hurried to pack the meals which she prepared for the trip. Bhaiya helped her by packing the mat on which we would sit at the ghat. I filled the water bottle and placed it carefully in the same cloth bag in which Amma kept the food. In less than five minutes we locked the main door and were ready.

Bhaiya sat on Pitaji's lap, and I cherished the warmth of Amma's arms. This was the seating arrangement we usually followed for a relatively comfortable ride.

The sun was shining brightly, humidity was low, the cool breeze that heralded the onset of winter, all combined to raise our spirits. The happiness that arose from the open-air ride was partially diminished by sympathy for the physical agony of the rickshaw driver. Pitaji and Amma were always kind enough not to bargain with them, and I had witnessed them giving the drivers some extra money willingly. Although no amount of extra money could be sufficient recompense for these physically demanding duties. While our minds might fail to comprehend social differences, our compassionate hearts tried to lessen the disparity by donating our extra earnings to the needy.

On our way to the ghat, we had to pass the house of one of the city's most famous businessmen. The grandeur of the house was such that it could easily inspire envy in the hearts of viewers and arouse a desire to live in it. I was more interested in the resplendent garden at the front of the house, blooming with bright, colourful flowers and saplings. It was not easy to get a glimpse of the garden,

so I surreptitiously turned my head to catch sight of the alluring red roses just inside. The sight of those beautiful roses, indeed one of the finest creations of the Creator, ignited a series of thoughts in my innocent mind.

How rich the person must be who owns such a grand house, a beautiful garden, and not one but two big cars parked in his garage? A sudden jolt broke my reverie; the driver got down from his seat and scrutinized the iron chain around the wheels. I heard my parents talk to him. The driver consoled us by saying that there was nothing to worry about; the chain was misaligned, and he would fix it in no time. My ten-year-old heart was filled with remorse. Was my temporary avarice to be blamed for this glitch in our hitherto smooth journey? This was not the first time it had happened; whenever I became fascinated by worldly riches, something would always happen to pull me back to reality. Today's incident sparked a different train of thought in my mind, about the irony of human life – one person struggling to fix a misaligned iron chain; the other, the proud owner of an opulent mansion. To comprehend this irony, as always, my mind took refuge in Kabir's couplets.

Aaye hai to jayenge, raja rank fakir

Ek sinhasan chadi chale, ek bandhe janjir

Death is inevitable. Every being who is born must die one day, whether he is a king, a poor man, or a saint. The virtuous will ascend the throne of enlightenment and liberation, while others will be shackled by their sinful deeds. It is a man's deeds on Earth that decides his afterlife.

We had reached our destination, the magnificent Assi ghat. Pitaji paid the rickshaw driver and we headed towards the ghat. Lost in my thoughts, I stopped and looked back as if I was bidding adieu. Amma called me to stay close to her; she knew I was distraught and the ghats are a somewhat crowded place, especially on Sundays. Amma instructed bhैया to hold my hand and I was

pleased by his strong grip.

Amma wore a green cotton saree with a maroon border. She looked beautiful with her long, plaited hair and simple jewellery. Pitaji, slightly plump and of average height, looked elegant in his off-white kurta and pyjama. Bhaiya and I wore similar clothes: a striped, yellow T-shirt paired with dark brown pants; our feet protected by light brown sandals. Bhaiya certainly was more appealing in looks and elegance compared to me. This was my family, my most precious possession, and my reason to live. Suddenly my eyes caught something written on the wall near the gate – ‘*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*’, and I recalled that the previous Sunday, Pitaji had taught us this Sanskrit phrase which means ‘The entire world is one family’. I was struck with deep repentance for not following Pitaji’s teachings; with a heart filled with remorse, I convinced myself that each living being around me was part of my family and all of us are essentially connected.

With mixed feelings of joy and remorse, I walked down the steps of the ghat. I shivered at the thought of the chilly water and held my brother’s hand even more firmly. As we were frequent visitors to the ghat, we took a holy dip only on special occasions, like the full moon day, religious festivals, or when a relative visited our place. At other times we just touched the water, drank a small portion of the elixir, and touched our head with a wet palm to take the river’s blessings. After this small ritual, we sat on the stairs to enjoy the tranquil surroundings.

River Ganga is considered one of India’s most holy rivers. There are many religious beliefs connected with this sacred river – a dip in its holy waters is believed to cleanse one of all sins. It is also believed that if one drinks the holy water just before renouncing their physical body, the departed soul attains the highest order of liberation from earthly bondage.

If we closely observe the journey of the Ganga, which rises in western Himalayas and flows through the Indo

Gangetic Plain in Northern India into its neighbouring country Bangladesh where it empties into the Bay of Bengal, one would be astonished to learn that the Ganga is not a single entity. Instead, it is formed by the merger of several rivers. In Badrinath, situated in the Indian state of Uttarakhand, there is a glacier named Satopanth, from which emerges two rivers known as Dhauli Ganga and Vishnu Ganga. These two rivers descend and finally meet at Vishnu Prayag. The word 'prayag' signifies the confluence of rivers. When two rivers merge, the name of the river formed from their union will be that of the river with greater size and depth. When two rivers are of the same size and depth, then the newly formed river is given a different name. Dhauli Ganga and Vishnu Ganga are similar in size and depth; consequently, the river that emerges at Vishnu Prayag is known as Alaknanda. As the Alaknanda flows, it meets with the Nandakini at Nanda Prayag; the Pindaar at Karna Prayag; the Mandakini, which originates in Kedarnath, at Rudra Prayag, and then the Bhagirathi, originating in Uttarkashi, at Dev Prayag. The confluence of the rivers Alaknanda and Bhagirathi at Dev Prayag is the source of the Ganga. Vishnu Prayag, Nanda Prayag, Karna Prayag, Rudra Prayag, and Dev Prayag are together known as 'Panch Prayag' and hold great religious reverence.

In the words of Kabir,

*Kabira khai kot ki paani pive na koye,
Jaayi mile jab gang se to gangotak hoye*

Kabir says that no one ever wishes to drink dirty water, but when the trench meets River Ganga, then it becomes inseparable from the holy river. It is given the same respect as the pure water from Gangotri, which is the source of the great river. Through his thoughtful writing, Kabir draws an analogy of human life, which is a series of colossal sins committed knowingly or unknowingly, as analogous to the dirty trench, whereas the holy Ganga is analogous to the Creator. Each being that separates from

the Creator and assumes a physical body is gradually sullied by their earthly journey. When that journey ends, the besmirched physical body releases the soul. The released soul eventually merges with the Source, thus resulting in the reunion of one with One.

I treasured the time spent at Assi ghat with my family. Sitting with your loved ones in serene surroundings often makes you feel hungry, and we were no exception. What could be better than pooris, whole wheat flour seasoned with carom and nigella seeds, kneaded with a few drops of oil, water, salt and lots of mother's love? Rolled into perfect rounds and deep fried, the perfectly-puffed pooris shine a light golden-brown colour. To complement these round delicacies, thinly sliced potatoes are shallow fried in mustard oil with a few fenugreek seeds and seasoned with salt and turmeric. The delicious combination of poori and *bhaji* tickled our taste buds. To elevate that pleasure was my mother's halwa; semolina, pan-fried in pure ghee, loaded with sugar, and garnished with nuts and raisins. We enjoyed this scrumptious food and thanked God for giving us our daily meal.

As we packed the remaining food and stood up to return, I noticed a stray dog sitting on the steps, legs folded under him and his chin resting despondently on the ground. There were houseflies around its limbs, indicating an injury. I looked at the dog with pity. My happiness was clouded by sorrow at its plight. I looked at Amma, and she immediately understood. She grabbed some pooris from the bag and fed the dog. Though we did not stop walking, I turned back constantly to check if the dog was eating. Finally, I noticed it smelling the food, and then it began to eat. The dog must have been very hungry and could have devoured the food the moment it was served. But this did not happen. Perhaps with immense suffering comes great patience, an inner renunciation of worldly pleasures. At the nadir of affliction, perhaps one begins to attain control of the five senses so that reflexes are driven only by need

and not by greed. Perhaps this might be why great saints renounce the pleasures of a materialistic world and live a life of self-imposed asceticism, thus attaining complete control of their physical needs.

CHAPTER 3

We took a rickshaw and headed back home. Much to our surprise, someone was waiting for us at the gate. He was no stranger. Pitaji greeted him and introduced us to him. His name was Ram Das, and he came from our paternal native place. His physique was very similar to Pitaji, and even his attire matched my father's. Pitaji was extremely delighted to see someone from his hometown and greeted him warmly, but the visitor seemed lost. It was as if he were carrying a heavy burden and could only be relieved once he set it down. Amma instructed me and bhaiya to touch his feet, but he stopped us as we bent down and held us lovingly. Amma asked us to call him *chacha* (uncle). My delighted father and the forlorn visitor sat in the living room while Amma served the guest water and *rewari*, a sweet made of sesame seeds and jaggery.

Bhaiya went to the bedroom to finish his homework, but I waited there, next to Pitaji. For some unknown reason my heart was pounding. Pitaji insisted that chacha have the sweets, but he only sipped some water from the steel tumbler and then kept it back on the table. There was complete silence. Then my father broke the tension by enquiring about the reason for Ram Das's sudden visit to the city. Ram Das took a deep breath and said that he had something to tell our family. After a long pause, he sighed and said that Pitaji's father had passed away that morning. He almost broke down delivering the news. It certainly takes courage to deliver the news of bereavement to someone close to the late departed. By this time Amma entered the room with cups of tea. She

kept the tray on the table and stood next to me, a mute witness to the situation.

Ram Das chacha continued to unburden himself. He noted that my grandfather had not suffered from any ailment. It was a sudden demise, probably a heart attack. Once he stopped talking, there was complete silence in the room. Pitaji looked completely bewildered. I knew he was an introvert, so perhaps he was not sure how to react, or even how to express his deep sorrow in the presence of a distant relative. It's human nature to react intuitively to happier moments, but the sorrowful happenings in our life leave us stunned. Reactions to such incidents usually go through three phases - denial, belief, and acceptance.

I found it difficult to stay there so I silently left the room to sit beside my brother in the bedroom. I held his hands and leaned slightly towards him. He understood something was wrong, but without waiting for him to ask, I told him what had occurred. I realized that it was relatively easier for me to deliver the sad news to my brother. I wondered why Ram Das chacha found it so difficult.

I was ten, and my brother was fourteen. As a teenager, his reaction was very different. He began to panic and fired a volley of questions at me, none of which I could answer. I do not know what made me cry, but I burst into tears like a two-year-old. Bhaiya rushed into the living room, and I followed. Amma cuddled and consoled me, but my tears affected her as well. She began crying, covering her mouth with her *pallu*. My brother embraced Pitaji and cried feebly. Tears rolled from Pitaji's eyes. Ram Das chacha, who witnessed this expression of grief, uttered a few words of condolence. But his next words caught our attention. He asked us to pack and leave for our hometown immediately. The funeral was to be performed once we reached. Chacha's younger brother, Raghav, had gone to Jaunpur, 65 km from Kashi, to inform Bade Pitaji, my father's elder brother. Buaji, my father's

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