
CHAPTER ONE

Scion of the Hindu Kshatriya caste, I was destined by ancestry to be a “warrior,” but my earliest childhood memory goes back to me helping my parents with farm chores. Because of their emotional connection to the land, it was natural for them to choose a simple farm life in the nondescript village of Nagwa, population five thousand, in Ballia district, Uttar Pradesh. They were blessed with two sons, I, their first, having been born in the year 1838, according to my best estimate.

Our house of red-coloured baked mud and straw bricks, plastered over with mortar that came apart in places, was where our family lived. Overhanging the two-step stone stairs was an awning of rusted corrugated zinc, supported by the slender trunks of two jasmine trees.

All praise to my grandfather, who had the foresight to plant those two trees. Their sweet-smelling flowers of summer would remain with me throughout the year, causing poverty to stay far from my mind as I tried to cope with life in my boyhood years.

Mangal Pandey Rai, who was about my age but taller, spent most of his spare time at our home. With the other neighbourhood children,

we played marbles and *gilli danda*, a game where a short, oval-shaped stick, a *gilli*, is hit by a longer stick, a *danda*. *Could cricket have originated from gilli danda?* I always wondered.

Mangal went to a public school with other well-to-do boys; unlike me, he could afford the school fee of one rupee per month because he came from a military family, whose members were paid well and received army pensions, and that reached back to his great-great-grandfather.

Because of that service, all members of Mangal's family were allowed to use the suffix Rai at the ends of their names. It was a princely honorific title given by the British to Indians for past army service. Those who possessed that title had no difficulty finding jobs and securing interest-free loans to purchase quality seeds for planting crops.

As for our family, we were in the business of growing wheat and paddy for home use as well as to earn money for living expenses by selling the surplus to the Nagwa Wheat and Rice Marketing Board. The East India Company's policies, however, had forced a change in my father's agricultural practices.

One September day, well before the wheat-planting season, a company official knocked on our door. On that particular morning, the air was heavy with mist while dew was still fresh on the taro leaves and tufts of grass that had been spared by maundering cows.

"Babuji," the official said to my father, "I am your zamindar, Karim Chaudhuri. The government will pay you plenty of paisa if you switch from growing wheat and rice to opium."

"Opium. *He baap!* We can't eat opium. My wheat and rice seeds are ready for sowing in a month's time."

"Babuji, there would be no tax on your plots of opium. Besides, I will give you a low-interest loan when you make the switch."

Though I was just a child, something told me that opium was an evil substance that would poison the body. But a little boy had no say in

important matters. The government people were pressuring our family to grow a crop that would not provide us with food but was only for their benefit.

Pitaji was forced to comply since growing wheat and rice could mean the seizure of his lands as was the case with some families who had refused to conform.

After the zamindar left, I met Mangal Pandey outside his home. "Mangal," I said, "the government is forcing us to grow opium. My father is dead set against it."

"Sagar, I can see through their deception; the company wants to get wealthy on the backs of farmers." Mangal had called me by my childhood name.

"At the same time, they are threatening our very livelihood," I said, emphasising each word by extending my arms in front of me, palms facing up. I was surprised at the way I'd expressed myself. The little education I had would have come from socializing with Mangal.

"Do you think they care? Listen Sagar, money is not all there is to life, and there is dignity in poverty," Mangal tried to save face by biting his lower lip, perhaps to show his displeasure at being placed in a situation that required acceptance of benefits from an unpopular employer. "Despite our family's close connection to the company, I hope you will still consider me a friend."

"Always, Mangal. Always."

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Ghazipur, like Nagwa, both in the state of Uttar Pradesh, was the processing centre, where opium sap was turned into cakes, loaded onto fleets of government ships along the Ganges River to Calcutta for auction, and then smuggled by clippers into the port of Canton in faraway China. Every farmer for miles around was growing opium, the

new cash crop, because it meant having some money to buy a few cups of rice, wheat flour, and pulses, a major source of protein in Indian diets. The only problem was that those food crops were getting more and more expensive since they had to be transported by rail from Bengal.

I was only twelve, my brother five, when I first accompanied my parents to the poppy field. My job was to take care of little Riyan under a tiny thatched shed while they worked. One day, when he had fallen asleep, curiosity got the better of me and drove me to the poppy field.

On this particular afternoon, as I looked at the panorama that was presented to me—a kaleidoscope pattern of blooming red poppies on a green background against a cloudy blue sky—my eyes became watery from the sheer majesty of what I saw. How could something so beautiful be mixed up with something so evil!

I watched what my parents were doing, and after a bit of supervision, I got the hang of it. With the sharp end of a curved knife, I made a light slit on each of the unripe poppy seed pods to let the milky fluid ooze out and dry with the air and sun. The next morning, I used the duller curved portion of the knife and scraped off the semi-dried gum that had formed on each pod. This I placed in open wooden boxes. Proudly, I presented those boxes of opium resin to my parents.

They transported my contribution, along with theirs, on their padded heads to our home for further drying. Days later, Pitaji rolled the opium resin into balls and sold half of them to the factory at Ghazipur and the rest, for a quick turnover, directly from our home to a middleman.

“You’re a big help, Sagar,” Pitaji said. “You could never feed us by going to school.” He looked me in the eye before continuing, “I never went, anyway, and I’m no worse off than others who did go.”

In those days, infanticide was practised by some families to ensure there was food on the table. My parents did not have the heart to kill

their own children, so Riyan and I survived those early years. I could recall that when there was no food at home, and that happened often, Riyan and I would take to scavenging the rubbish heaps as we competed with cows and pigs for vegetable and fruit peels.

Riyan had a severe cough one morning. Since the nearest qualified doctor was one day's ride by bullock cart, my parents called in a quack doctor, who prescribed a cough medicine. That day, and several days after, I stayed home to look after little Riyan. Then, a week later, as I held him in my arms, I discovered that he was not breathing. According to the quack doctor, he had fallen prey to pneumonia. I could have said as much, but I put the blame on poverty prevalent throughout the region.

I took Riyan's body to the village cremation ground, where, with Mangal's help, I burned his corpse using unburned scraps of wood left over from other funeral pyres. As the flames consumed his body, I could barely afford a single teardrop.

Our family was paid less and less for opium, and so, with no rupees and only annas to purchase a bit of wheat, rice, and pulses, we were starving. That's when my mother turned to making rotis from the ground seeds of weeds to be eaten with fried ghoma leaves.

On one occasion, Mangal came over to our place with a thali filled with dal, rice, and whole wheat roti. "Sagar, this is from my mother," he said.

"Other families are worse off than we are," I said. Though my parents were happy for the food, I said, "Tell your mother thanks, anyway. But if we get to the point of starvation, I'll let you know."

"No need to have false pride," Mangal said. "You can come over and pick up some food any time. Whatever little we have, we can share with you."

Because of the policies of the East India Company, there was widespread famine all over the state. My village was not spared, and if one ventured out into the countryside, one would see corpses lying around, the result of people falling by the wayside in their search for something to eat.

The men and boys who were still alive had exposed rib cages, and though the women's bodies were covered, you could tell that their limbs were like sticks, the same as most of the men.

As for our family, we had all gotten very thin, for we were eating only one small meal a day.

We faced a real crisis when the old zamindar paid another visit to my father one morning. "Babuji," he said, "I've come to collect the tax you owe for your plots of opium."

"Sri Chaudhuri," Pitaji said, "so you were lying when you told me that there would be no tax if we switched to opium."

"Babuji, it is only a small tax. Besides, you still owe interest on the loan we gave you for the poppy seeds."

Pitaji got so upset he picked up a *choti chadi*, a small stick, and hit the zamindar. The blow landed somewhere between Sri Chaudhuri's forehead and his temple. I don't know how Pitaji found the strength to hit the zamindar, but he felled him nevertheless.

I poured a pail of water over Sri Chaudhuri's head, thinking that would revive him. Pitaji stood there, stunned, surprised at what he'd done.

Poor Sri Chaudhuri never recovered. Pitaji knew that the penalty for murder, especially of a tax collector for the British, was execution by hanging. There was already a gallows set up for that very purpose in the village square.

"Pitaji, what are we going to do?" I wrung my hands as my entire body shook with emotion. "You want me to tell the police that it was an

accident?" All around, there was dead silence. The koel did not sing as he always did. I couldn't see the sunlight that had previously showered its rays over our family compound, nor could I hear the humming of the soft breeze that rustled the leaves.

"Beta," Pitaji said after he'd found his voice, "I lost my temper." His tone of voice told me exactly what he thought—that the zamindar deserved what he got. Then he added, "Now that the act is done, I don't want you to lose your father, nor your mother her husband."

I wished Pitaji had weighed those things in his mind before he'd decided to strike the zamindar on the head. "Pitaji," I said, staggering away and not bothering to wipe the tear that ran down my cheek, "I am going to the police station to tell the superintendent of police that you had no intention to kill the zamindar." Those words came out of my mouth as a babble for I was sobbing uncontrollably.

"No, Beta!" Pitaji spoke as though he wanted to also cry. "They will hang me. It will be the end of our family."

"We will beg for mercy, Pitaji. It was an accident," I yelled over my shoulder.

On the way to the police station, a couple of miles away, I met Mangal, who, after I'd told him what had happened, asked, "Sagar, how do you know that the zamindar is dead? He might recover from the blow."

"Hmm . . . you could be right. Let's go check."

When we returned, there was no body, and Pitaji was missing. He did not return until late evening, after Mangal had already left for his home. "What happened to the zamindar's body?" I asked my father as soon as he arrived.

"Beta, I had help . . . we buried Sri Chaudhuri according to Muslim rites."

"Oh Pitaji! Did you check first to see that he was really dead?"

"We found no signs of life. He was not breathing."

"Pitaji, what are we going to do? We are in big trouble."

"Beta, I didn't intend to kill Sri Chaudhuri." My father rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. He was quiet for some time, and then he ventured to say, "Nevertheless, that man deserved what he got."

"Pitaji, I am worried about what will happen to our family." I was shaking all over.

I tried to comfort my father well into the night. During all this time, my mother stayed in the background and acted as though she had lost her voice. As usual, based on her words, she was supportive of Pitaji, who she believed was acting in the best interest of our family.

"Mr. Singh," Mangal said to my father when he paid us a visit the next morning, "We must inform the police about what happened."

"What for?" Pitaji said. "My friends helped me with the digging; from now on, the zamindar will not come to collect his measly tax."

Mangal shook his head and started walking away, obviously not wanting to be a part of what he'd heard. As he exited through the front door, my father trudged away through the back door. As soon as he was out of earshot, Mangal spun around to face me. "Sagar, I take the blame for not assisting your family enough," he said, unable to meet my eyes.

"No, you helped us more than we expected," I reassured him.

I stared across the open field until Pitaji's back was just a speck as he lumbered towards the opium fields. *How could Pitaji carry on as though nothing had happened?*

"Sooner or later, your father has to go to the police station," Mangal said, pulling me from my thoughts. "He must report exactly what happened, that he did not mean to kill the zamindar."

"I can't force him. Pitaji won't accept any advice or handout from you or your parents, so proud is he."

A few days later, I went around the village, scrounging for anything

edible. An old lady, supporting herself with a stick, had just come out the front door of her mansion when she saw me picking a few purple berries off her hawthorn hedge. "I left those for the sparrows, *chhota bachcha*," she shouted.

"I won't pick your berries anymore, madam," I said, with a pleading voice.

"Oh, very well, then . . . come through the gate, little boy. Why don't you tidy up the backyard for me, little boy? I can't manage such work since my husband passed away." A woman of means, she could very well have been an Anglo-Indian. I had seen such women shopping in the vegetable market with their children in expensive clothes tagging along.

I did as she said and reported to her. The old lady filled two containers with *dal bhat tarkari* for me to take to my family.

When I arrived home and climbed the stairs, I discovered Pitaji's body hanging from a ceiling joist. My world went blank, and all I saw was darkness. When I came to, I cut the rope around Pitaji's neck. The bench on which he'd stood was lying on its side.

Intense sadness overtook me. I went to the field to find my mother. "Ma, Pitaji is no more," I said. Her eyes looked very distant as she collapsed to the ground. I helped her up and supported her with an arm around her waist as we walked the short distance to our house.

Ma fell prostrate and lay alongside my father's body. She tugged at her hair and wailed most of the afternoon and evening. The lantern had already burned out by the time I took her to bed . . . for me the world had become a lonely place. Through all of this, I was just a little boy, a *chhota bachcha*.

"Sagar, I didn't know your father was in such terrible shape," Mangal said the next morning after I'd told him what Pitaji had done. "We are

also facing hardship from high prices for food, but not to the point where death is just around the corner.”

“Oh Mangal! What am I going to do? It’s getting worse by the day; even the stray dogs and cows are dying everywhere.”

“Sagar, to lose Riyan and now your father . . . I don’t know what to say.” Mangal embraced me in a comforting manner and then left to report my father’s death. When he returned, he went about gathering up wood for the cremation.

One week later, Ma did not return from the poppy field. When I went to check on her, I found her lying prostrate beside a tray of poppy pods oozing brown resin. My knees wobbled, and I fell to the ground next to Ma. I passed out for many minutes.

Ma had been dead for many hours by the time I picked her up and dragged her body to our house. Most likely, she had died of a heart attack brought on by grief.

I cried for my mother until sleep overtook me. My eyes were watery for days; I saw and heard nothing during and after the cremation, so great was my grief for her—I felt all alone in a world that was full of misery.

Pitaji and Ma had gone hungry so that their only child would have enough to stay alive. They had sacrificed themselves so that I would live. That bothered me, but it only made me more determined to find a way out of the situation I’d found myself in. Even at my age, I made up my mind that when I grew up, I would dedicate my life to right the wrong that had been done to them.

Why should life be so cruel that parents must give up their lives so that their son could live? Where was justice?

My instincts told me that if I could arm myself with a good education, I would be better able to take on the company, more powerful than I could ever imagine. As the months went by, I went about teaching

myself to read and write with free help from a teacher in the village school. Sometimes I would hang around the school and listen in to the lessons without drawing too much attention to myself.

Later, with assistance from that village teacher, I wrote a letter to my paternal uncle, Ranjeet, who lived in the neighbouring state of Bihar, in the town of Danapur, a suburb of Patna.

Almost a month had gone by before my uncle came with a bullock cart to take me away.

“What about our house, Ranjeet Uncle?” I asked.

“Don’t worry. I’ll sell it and use the money for your education.”

“Oh Uncle, you can’t imagine how much education and books mean to me. Thank you!” I said bouncing up and down with delight.

Ranjeet Uncle took me away to stay at his home. For years, he’d lived all by himself, and he was happy to have me as a companion. I helped him milk the two cows he had tethered to posts next to their feeding troughs. I’d feed them bits of freshly cut grass most days, while on other days I’d let them search for their own food at rubbish heaps.

I hopped around like a bird that entire first day when Ranjeet Uncle received a letter that I’d gained a scholarship to attend Kisan High School in Danapur.

“How did this come about, Uncle?” I asked.

“I wrote a letter to the principal stating that you’ve been left destitute due to the loss of your parents. In his response, he told me about a fund set aside for orphaned children who’ve been self-taught.”

After four years at this institution, where I’d headed the school’s debating club, I came to the attention of the masters. In fact, I’d made a name for our school since our team had won the National Debating Championship in Patna, the state capital.

Because I was an orphan and had high scores in competitive examinations, I became the recipient of an endowment scholarship

gifted by a wealthy entrepreneur and alumnus of Serampore College in Calcutta. Along with the proceeds from the sale of my ancestral home in Nagwa, I was financially stable enough to enroll in an undergraduate programme at the college, affiliated with the University of Calcutta. Because of my interest in dialects, the way a language could change over time, and how it is processed and stored in the brain, I chose linguistics as my major.

The stipend I received from the scholarship did not cover my total expenses, yet in my first letter to Ranjeet Uncle, I made no mention of money. So, I was compelled to work part-time to pay for my upkeep. I went into business for myself by renting a space at a bench in a stall opposite the Serampore District Court and turned to writing letters for lawyers in longhand during my spare time as well as correspondence for the general public. I even wrote letters for prostitutes who sent money home to their starving parents. When I saw their battered faces, I did not have the heart to take their money. But as for lawyers, I charged them one rupee for each page I wrote and even restructured sentences when it came to completing draft letters, not to mention rewriting complete paragraphs. Why I didn't enter the legal profession is a good question since I'd picked up a fair amount of the legal jargon and procedures, so necessary in the practice.

Despite focusing on my studies, I never ceased to blame the East India Company, the rulers of our country, for the destruction of my family. Simple peasants, they were trying to eke out a living from the land our ancestors had farmed for thousands of years. The company, under the guise of setting up a few so-called factories for trade, had taken over our entire country. "Down with the company" became my mantra.

And so, even in my student days, I had become politically active, participating in student discussions. Strangely, more than a few

supported the British, but when I dug deeper into their backgrounds, I discovered that in almost all cases their fathers had attended British private schools and had worked in the civil service. The end result was that I had set a goal to rid my country of foreign rule.

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