

# **Beyond Mediocrity: The LoneStar Odyssey**

## **A biography of Dr. Tarendra Lakhankar**

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## **Book Introduction**

This book embarks on an extraordinary journey alongside Dr. Tarendra Lakhankar, a Senior Scientist and Adjunct Professor whose life's trajectory has taken him from the humble village of Mundikota, a remote part of central India in Maharashtra state, through poverty, to New York, the bustling cityscape of America. As we explore his captivating story, we accompany him on his late-night train rides to school during his childhood, selling tea on trains and working in a flour mill. Through his experiences, we witness the transformative power of hard work, determination, and the indomitable spirit of a mother's love.

Aptly titled 'Journey of the Lonestar: From Village to USA,' this book traces the path of a man who faced and overcame challenges to carve his destiny. With a doctorate earned from the esteemed City University of New York and a post-doctorate completed at Colorado State University, Tarendra's academic achievements stand as a testament to his unwavering determination and relentless pursuit of knowledge.

This story explores how supporters and critics unknowingly shaped his resilience and contributed to his successful journey. This story reflects on the importance of knowing our roots, cherishing the sacrifices made by those before us, and honoring their memory. From the untiring efforts of his parents to provide for their family's basic needs to the guiding influence of a loving mother who encouraged her children to set positive examples, the Lakhankar family epitomizes the timeless values of hard work, dedication, and the preservation of culture.

The profound impact of his mother, Geeta Lakhankar, who was born to an ordinary farmer and embodied strength and resilience, fostered a sense of determination and cultural pride within her children. The pages of this book recount the joys, sorrows, triumphs, and setbacks that have shaped Tarendra's journey. It is a testament to the enduring power of family, the pursuit of knowledge, and the belief that hard work and determination can transcend obstacles in pursuing one's dreams.

Join us on the remarkable 'Journey of the Lonestar: From Village to USA' and discover the tale of Tarendra Lakhankar. Be inspired by his unwavering spirit, touched by a mother's enduring love, and reminded that pursuing a better life is a journey that knows no bounds.

## **Chapter 01: Move from Zero: Embracing Change through a Leap of Faith**

It was an overcast day in Mundikota, a remote village in Central India. The mid-afternoon sun played hide and seek behind patches of clouds. The air was humid. Young Tarendra wondered why the clouds were refusing to rain. What were they waiting for?

He was returning from school 1.5 km from home, trying to observe the men and women he passed. They appeared harassed, as life was hard on these people. However, on an overcast day, he has had a way of taking the edge off. They all looked fair and pretty in the mysterious light. It was strange how the gloomy nature brought out such fairness from people. Even the less attractive among them seemed ready for a photoshoot.

Tarendra's slippers softly clicked on the gravel road as he walked with a light, joyful step. The news of his success in the 4th-grade scholarship exam filled him with pride and excitement. A smile lingered as he reminisced about his teacher's learning of his achievement.

"Congratulations, Tarendra! Your hard work has paid off," his teacher had said, eyes shining with pride.

Tarendra had beamed in response, "Thank you, sir. I couldn't have done it without your support."

The news was that he would receive a monthly stipend of Rs. 10 for the next three years. This might seem insignificant to others, but it was a massive accomplishment for Tarendra, a boy from a small village and a poverty-stricken family in India. It wasn't a fortune, but in his heart, he felt unrestrained, soaring high in the sky. Tarendra couldn't wait to go home and share this good news with his mother.

Tarendra's home in Mundikota Railway Station village was one among twenty, showing signs of age with its faded colors and peeling plaster and a cow-dung-coated mud floor characteristic of traditional dwellings. But his house was different because it had a tea shop attached to it. Mundikota was a typical small village in India, where people faced many everyday challenges and worked together as a community.

The houses didn't have toilets, so people had to go to the fields. They didn't have running water in the tap, so everyone had to get water from a community well in the village. Electricity only came for a few hours daily, and the roads were just dirt paths.

Tarendra's parents managed the tea shop. It was always busy and famous for its delicious tea. But Indian snacks like Papadi, Chivda, and sometimes Onion Bhaji attracted customers. The shop was a village favorite, particularly with the workers from the nearby Bidi factory, which made cheap cigarettes using tendu leaves. Bidi is a traditional Indian cigarette made of tobacco wrapped in a tendu leaf. Village School teachers often visited, as did travelers returning from the nearby train station.

Tarendra looked up to his mother immensely. She was the strongest person he knew. Despite the challenges she faced as a farmer's daughter, she tackled them head-on with remarkable courage. Her dedication to the tea shop was evident in everything she did. She took great care in ensuring the quality of the items served.

Mindful of her customers' comfort, she even built a small tent in front of the shop to protect them from the sun and rain. Although there was another tea shop in the village, it was an unspoken truth: Tarendra's mother's tea shop was unmatched. Everyone left her shop satisfied.

The local train thundered past him from the far right. The behemoth vehicle seemed endless as its coaches kept on moving. Tarendra gazed at it until the last of its coaches left him in the dust. So many people the train carried. So many dreams; with that thought, Tarendra hurried home.

Tarendra climbed a few steps to enter his house. Right next to the window was his table, where he spent most of his time deeply engrossed in his books. On this well-worn wooden table, he neatly arranged his battered textbooks, which he regularly carried to school, alongside his nearly finished notepad and pens running low on ink.

Despite waking up early and staying in class until the early afternoon, Tarendra didn't feel weary. With the example of his mother's hard work before him, he was driven by a strong sense of purpose. Pausing momentarily to gather his thoughts, Tarendra then headed to the shop to see his mother.

Four customers were engrossed in heated conversations under the cozy shade of the canopy, lazily sipping their tea. Cigarettes between their fingers burned steadily, releasing misty white smoke that spiraled toward the ceiling. Papadi bowls sat between the men, which they picked occasionally. Tarendra didn't find his dad there; only his mother tended to the shop.

A bright smile bloomed on Mother's face when Tarendra appeared. "My son," she called affectionately, "did you just return from school?"

"I am, Ma. Where is Dad? I didn't see him in the house," Tarendra asked.

"Oh, you just missed him. Our tea leaves supply was running low. I sent him to the Taluka bazaar. Tea can't run dry in a tea shop, can it?"

"Guess what, Ma?" Tarendra smiled. "Your son got some good news at school today. I think you will be pleased to hear it!"

"Oh? What is it?" Ma looked excited.

"You remember that scholarship exam I took a month ago? The result just came in today. I passed!"

"Ah, that's such good news, Tarendra! I'm so happy for you." Ma looked at him with misty eyes. "You always make my day a little better, my son."

"It means a lot coming for you, Ma! I promise."

"I have seen how hard you worked for it. You deserve it, my dear."

"Wait, there is more! The teachers said that I would receive a stipend, too. Rs. 10 every month for two years. Isn't that awesome?"

Tarendra's mother greeted him with a warm smile. "See, what did I tell you, my son? Hard work pays off. God rewards those who persevere.

Just look at us now, and you'll understand the truth of my words," she said with pride. "We were a family of eight, barely scraping by. But I put my all into this shop and still do. I've continuously operated with honesty, never straying from my principles and always staying dedicated.

Tarendra often reflected on the invaluable lessons his mother taught him during his formative years. She sowed the seeds of ambition in him, encouraging him to dream beyond the apparent limitations of their modest life.

During those times, electricity was a luxury, often available for just a few hours daily. They would sleep outside under the vast, starry sky to escape the sweltering heat.

Lying there, Tarendra would gaze at the stars, contemplating the connection between his name, which means 'stars,' and those celestial bodies. Could he, too, one day shine bright like a star?

Meanwhile, his mother faced her own concerns, deliberating over the best educational options for Tarendra, aware that the local village school might not provide the quality education he needed.

The following day, Tarendra expressed his enthusiasm with a bright smile. "Ma, I'm looking forward to starting 5th grade. I promise to put in even more effort."

His mother, her smile tinged with a hint of secrecy, gently responded, "You might not be going to the village high school next year, Tarendra."

Tarendra was startled. "What! What do you mean, Ma?"

"Calm down, son." his mother chuckled. "I think you have outgrown your simple village school, that is all. It would be best if you moved up the ladder. You need a place that can truly nurture your talent."

Tarendra's brow furrowed in confusion. "But why, Ma? I still don't get what you're saying."

"Tarendra," his mother said, her voice calm and reassuring, "from next year, you'll be attending a new school in the nearest town, Tumsar." Tumsar is Taluka place, a subdivision of the Bhandara district in Maharashtra, India.

Tarendra was speechless. This was completely unexpected. He had never heard his mother mention Tumsar before. Where had this idea come from all of a sudden?

Tarendra was quick to object, "But Ma, Tumsar is so far away!"

"It's only fifteen kilometers from here," his mother replied, a comforting tone in her voice. "I've checked my son."

Tarendra's concern was evident. "But the commute will take so much time and be expensive! Why should I go through all that when I'm doing well here? Like my friends, can't I stay at our village school until grade ten?"

His mother paused, setting aside what she was doing to look Tarendra in the eyes. "Tarendra, you're my eldest. You know how hard things are for us. But I was hoping you could listen to me. To change your fate, you must be willing to leap of faith, even when it seems impossible or uncomfortable," she said, emphasizing her words with a lifted finger.

"Education is your path to a better life. Do you understand? You are talented, and I have no doubt you'll do great things. But you have to start somewhere, and this is your chance. As long as your mother is alive, you only have to worry about your studies. You can leave the rest to your Ma. I will figure something out."

Tarendra gazed at his mother, a mix of astonishment and admiration in his eyes. How could she be so resolute when he felt so uncertain?

"Ma, are you really sure about this?" he asked tentatively.

His mother's smile was reassuring. "Son, the dreams we have with our eyes open are the ones that become reality."

In that moment, Tarendra understood. His heart now pulsed with a newfound enthusiasm and determination. He nodded, a sense of resolve washing over him. "I get it, Ma. I trust you. I'll go to Tumsar if that's what you think is best for me."

"That's my boy!" His mother's eyes shone with joy and pride. "Now, come and help me with the shop. Go on, I'll start preparing lunch. You must be hungry after all this talking."

Sitting in the shop, Tarendra watched his mother enter the house. His thoughts were heavy, filled with apprehension and excitement about the coming year. He was on the brink of a significant change, leaving behind the familiar comfort of his village for a new life in a different town. He knew challenges lay ahead, yet he couldn't suppress his curiosity about the future.

On the day he left for Tumsar, a gloomy cloud hung over Tarendra's heart. As the train gradually pulled away from the bustling station, his gaze lingered on the familiar sights of Mundikota – the houses, streets, shops, and faces he knew so well. He realized he was leaving some of himself behind in these familiar settings. Farewells had been said to all his friends, with no certainty of when they might meet again. Such significant changes are often challenging for a ten-year-old.

As the train journeyed on, the world outside the window blurred, reminiscent of images on a spinning film reel. As minutes passed, his thoughts were adrift amidst the rhythmic sound of the train. Strangely, as he neared Tumsar railway station, the clouds in his mind dissipated, replaced by a growing anticipation for the new chapter about to unfold in his life.

After a brisk 20-minute train journey, Tarendra and his father reached Devadi, known to many as "Tumsar Road" Station. The next leg of their trip was a 5 km bus ride to Tumsar Town, which took an additional 15 minutes. As they disembarked at the Tumsar town Bus Station, Tarendra felt a rush of excitement and a hint of apprehension. If everything falls into place, it takes 35-40 minutes to reach school. However, this is a rare occurrence.

Tumsar town was pulsating with energy and chaos, a stark contrast to the quiet rhythm of their village. When Tarendra stepped into this bustling world, a wave of sensory overload washed over him; the air was filled with voices — people hustling, shouting, buses roaring to life, and the constant clattering of rickshaws, motorcycles, and bicycles. Everywhere he looked, there was movement: people weaving through the crowd, vehicles navigating the busy streets, all contributing to the town's vibrant urban symphony.

This was an entirely new realm for Tarendra, a young boy accustomed to the tranquility of rural life. He clung a little closer to his father, seeking comfort in his familiar presence amidst the overwhelming whirl of activity.

Sensing Tarendra's unease, his father leaned down and said reassuringly, "It's a lot to take in. But you'll get used to it soon."

Tarendra nodded, his eyes wide with wonder and trepidation. He was standing on the threshold of a new chapter in his life in a town that buzzed with possibilities and challenges.

## Chapter 02: Village to Town: Embracing the Excitement of Education

Tarendra's father skillfully made his way through the bustling chaos to reach the school  $\frac{3}{4}$  km away from the bus stop where Tarendra was to be enrolled. The prestigious Lokmanya Tilak Rashtriya Vidyalaya runs classes from 5<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, a name that carries a sense of distinction. As they approached, Tarendra couldn't help but be in awe of the building's grandeur. The school was massive, stretching long and wide across the vast field it was built upon.

The Lokmanya Tilak Rashtriya Vidyalaya stood in striking contrast to the modest building of Tarendra's old village school. Its grandeur and sheer size were almost intimidating, dwarfing the humble educational settings he was accustomed to. As Tarendra walked through the corridors, he couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement and anticipation for the educational journey ahead.

"Look at this place, Papa," Tarendra whispered in awe as his eyes roamed across the spacious classrooms outfitted with tables and benches—a stark contrast to his primary school in the village, where they sat on mats on the floor.

Walking beside him, his father smiled and replied, "It's a big change from your primary school. But you've earned your place here with your hard work."

Considering his academic performance, securing Tarendra's admission into the school was smooth. However, arranging his stay in Tumsar presented a more significant challenge. For a ten-year-old like Tarendra, the idea of commuting for almost an hour daily from Mundikota was not only impractical but also exhausting. This concern was compounded by the often unreliable local train schedules, notorious for their delays.

Realizing this, the only practical solution was for Tarendra to have a place to stay closer to his new school. Tarendra's father found a suitable room to rent. The decision was significant for Tarendra. He was about to leave behind his family, village, and friends – his entire familiar world. But he wouldn't be alone; his grandmother would move with him to Tumsar. She would provide the care and support he needed in a different town.

In Tumsar, Tarendra faced a new challenge: the attitude of the city kids towards a newcomer from a village. They often treated him with a sense of superiority, sometimes belittling him for his rural background. This treatment starkly contrasted with the camaraderie he was accustomed to in Mundikota.

Time flew, and five months passed in the blink of an eye. Tarendra was ecstatic to attend his new school and thoroughly enjoyed his time there. Half-yearly examination results came; Tarendra was in 3rd rank in the class of 70 students.

The teachers were highly experienced and were genuinely attentive to their students. Tarendra was surprised to discover how competitive his classmates were. Though initially strained in this new environment, Tarendra kept his mother's words in his heart and refused to give up. Soon, he found himself thriving.

However, all good things have a short lifespan. Tarendra's grandmother suddenly fell ill. Her health deteriorated midway through the year, a consequence of her advanced age and frailty. Tarendra found himself grappling with worry for her well-being. His grandmother, being in the later years of her life, was no longer in a state to look after him.

Recognizing the severity of her condition, Tarendra's father made the difficult decision to take her back to the village, where she could receive the constant care she required. This turn of events left Tarendra facing new challenges in Tumsar.

With his grandmother returning to the village due to her failing health, his stay in Tumsar seemed uncertain. As a young boy of only ten, the thought of living alone was inconceivable.

During this time of confusion and worry, his mother took the opportunity to sit down with him for a serious conversation.

"Ma, what's going to happen now?" Tarendra asked, his voice tinged with anxiety.

"Taren, my son," his mother began, her voice steady, "your grandma's health has gotten worse. She can't stay here with you any longer. That's why your dad is taking her back to the village. We must take care of her; she might not have much time left."

Tarendra's heart sank. "I'm so sorry, Ma," he said softly. "But what about me? I've only been here for six months. There's still half a year left. What will I do now?"

"Don't worry, Taren," his mother reassured him. "A boy from our village is studying in a senior college in Tumsar. He's in a different school, but maybe you could stay with him in his studio apartment for the rest of the year?"

"As a roommate?" Tarendra asked, trying to grasp the idea.

"Yes," his mother nodded. "He has a place here and agreed to let you stay with him. It's a temporary fix, but you can keep attending school here without major disruptions."

Tarendra was relieved and grateful to have a new roommate, especially since it meant he could continue attending his beloved school. His mother had skillfully arranged everything with the senior student in his final year of college.

This studio apartment was situated just across from the Saranga Talkies (a movie theater). From his room's window, he had a clear view of the theater and its large movie posters. Tarendra felt excited as he gazed at the posters, yearning to watch the films advertised. However, with limited or no pocket money to spare, his wishes remained unfulfilled.

Tarendra began assisting his senior with household chores such as washing and cleaning their room. As time passed, Tarendra continued to live with his roommate and eventually completed his fifth grade.

However, as often happens, this solution is temporary. At the end of the year, Tarendra faced a new challenge. His roommate completed his studies and left Tumsar, leaving Tarendra without a place to stay again. However, his mother was ready to step in with her support. This time, she came to him with an even more exciting proposal, a new solution to ensure Tarendra could continue his education in Tumsar.

Tarendra took a moment to discuss his situation with his mother.

"Tarendra, my son, how are your studies going?" his mother inquired softly.

"They're going well, Ma," Tarendra responded. "I'm excelling at school, currently in the top three of my class. The teachers are quite pleased with my performance. I have a good chance of becoming the topper next year." He paused and sighed. "However, that's only possible if I continue my studies in Tumsar. My



roommate has finished his studies and left for another city. And I find myself alone in Tumsar with Grandma no longer here."

Tarendra's expression was evident: a blend of pride in his academic achievements and worry about his living situation. As he shared his concerns with his mother, his eyes reflected the depth of his unease.

His mother, ever the source of comfort, replied with her characteristic reassuring smile. "Don't fret, my dear. I'm handling it. You won't have to worry about this. We'll find a solution," she said confidently.

His face brightened at her words. "Really, Ma?" he asked, his voice tinged with hope.

"Yes, Tarendra. I have a distant cousin who lived in Tumsar", she gently reminded him.

He looked slightly confused. "Yeah, but... what about her?"

"Well," it's been tough finding another roommate.," his mother began, "I'm thinking of asking her if you can stay with them. What are your thoughts on that, Taren? Continuing your education at Lokmanya school while living with them?" She looked at him reflectively.

The thought of living with his aunt sparked a new sense of hope in Tarendra. It seemed like a viable solution for him to stay in Tumsar and keep attending the school he had grown to love.

Tarendra felt a mix of apprehension and gratitude towards his mother's plan. He hadn't seen his aunt in a long time, and their relationship wasn't close. The thought of suddenly living with her was daunting, yet he recognized it as his only option to stay in Tumsar and continue his education.

He gave his mother a determined nod. "Alright, Ma. I'll stay at my aunt's place for my studies if she agrees," he settled.

The next day, Tarendra and his mother traveled to Tumsar to visit his aunt. His aunt's family owned a small piece of land and a couple of cows, relying on farming for their livelihood. Aunt had three sons, two of whom helped with farming, while the third worked in a factory. She also had a daughter a few years older than Tarendra.

Tarendra's mother explained his school and education situation and agreed to keep Tarendra. With a sigh of relief, Tarendra's mother thanked her cousin.

Turning to Tarendra, his mother said, "Aunt has agreed to have you stay with them at home. I need to know if you're okay with it." Tarendra nodded in understanding.

His mother looked at him seriously. "Remember, Taren, you need to behave yourself while you're there. No, causing trouble for her family, okay?" she cautioned.

"I get it, Ma," Tarendra assured her. "I'm not a little kid. I'll be on my best behavior, I promise."

"And don't forget to lend a hand around the house in your free time, between school and studying," she added.

Tarendra understood the importance of contributing to his aunt's household. He was ready to take on this new responsibility as part of his journey in Tumsar.

"Absolutely, it's the right thing to do," Tarendra replied, understanding his responsibilities.

His mother affectionately patted his head. "Thank you, Taren. You're showing so much courage. Now, let's get you settled at your aunt's house," she said with a smile.

After leaving Tarendra at his aunt's house, Ma hurried back to Mundikota. Back home, Tarendra's father juggled the shop, looked after the other children, and cared for Tarendra's grandparents.

Tarendra was greeted warmly by his aunt, but despite her kindness, he felt a lingering sense of unease about his new living situation. His aunt and uncle's home was located on the outskirts of Tumsar. They were farmers, owning a couple of cows and a pair of bulls, which significantly changed from what Tarendra was used to.

Adapting to life with his aunt's family was initially awkward for Tarendra. As the new academic year of 6<sup>th</sup> grade began, he immersed himself in his studies to adjust to the increased demands of the higher grade. His days were mostly spent at school, engrossed in his books, and in the evening, he dedicated himself to his studies. In between, he assisted with household chores at his aunt's place. Tarendra didn't mind the extra work; he felt it was a small way to show gratitude to his aunt's family for their hospitality.

But as time passed and Tarendra turned eleven, the feeling of being an outsider in his aunt's house grew stronger. Despite his contributions and efforts to fit in, an invisible barrier between him and his aunt's family seemed to exist. This sense of not belonging weighed on him, making his days feel longer and more challenging.

As the Diwali holidays approached, Tarendra grew increasingly restless. On the first day of the break, he eagerly boarded a train at Tumsar railway station, heading home. His arrival was met with sheer joy by his mother and the rest of his family, who were overjoyed to see him after a long absence. Immersed in the warmth of his family's embrace, Tarendra was filled with happiness.

However, the joy of the Diwali holidays passed all too quickly. The night before his return to Tumsar, Tarendra had a serious conversation with his mother.

Noticing his grave expression, Ma felt a pang of fear. She had never seen him look so solemn. "What's on your mind, Tarendra?" she asked with concern.

With a calm but firm tone, Tarendra said, "Ma, I have something important to tell you. I can't stay at Aunt's house anymore."

Ma was visibly taken aback, her eyes betraying her surprise, even though she tried to maintain her composure.

"Ma, it's nothing like that," Tarendra clarified, his voice steady despite his inner turmoil. "Aunt has been kind, but I don't feel like I fit in. I feel like I'm imposing on them, and that's not fair to anyone."

His mother listened intently, her eyes reflecting empathy. She suggested he give it a bit more time, hoping he might settle in. But Tarendra was firm in his decision.

Seeing his resolve, Ma nodded in understanding. "I see you're serious about this, Taren. It's a big step to voice your feelings and stand up for what you believe is right for you," she said, her voice soft but full of admiration. "If you're sure about not wanting to stay at your aunt's, then we won't insist. I'm proud of you for speaking up."

Tarendra's heart swelled with gratitude and relief. "Thank you, Ma. That means a lot to me."

Ma's worry was evident as she contemplated Tarendra's living situation. "I'm not sure what we can do about where you'll stay in Tumsar," she said, concern heavy in her voice. "It seems we're out of options."

Tarendra, however, had a thought. "Ma, I've got an idea," he said eagerly.

"What is it?" she asked, curious but apprehensive.

"I can travel to school from our village daily," Tarendra proposed.

Ma appeared anxious as she addressed Tarendra. "Please consider this, Taren. You need to catch the 8 am train from Mundikota and then wait at Tumsar Road Train Station or in the town or school, as school starts at 10:30 am." And after school ends at 5 pm, what will you do until the 8 pm train from Tumsar Road station? You won't be home until 8:15 pm. Every single day, you'll have such a long day – commuting, waiting around at the station in the morning for school, and again at the train station in the evening. It's going to be incredibly exhausting for you, Taren. It's a lot to handle every day!"

But Tarendra was resolute. "It's okay, Ma. I won't complain. I know it's hard, but I can handle it."

Ma sighed, torn between concern and admiration. "But Taren, you're still young. Traveling such a long distance alone every day isn't safe."

Tarendra's determination was unwavering. "I'm not scared, Ma," he insisted. "Please trust me. I can manage this. I don't want to be a burden or cause any trouble."

His plea was heartfelt, and Ma could see the earnestness in his eyes. She faced a difficult decision, torn between her son's safety and his strong will to continue his education without any hindrances.

Tarendra's mother, after a thoughtful pause, finally agreed. "Alright, Taren. I hear you," she said. "But let me think this over for a few days, okay? In the meantime, return to your aunt's house and continue your studies as usual. I'll come for you soon."

Relieved, Tarendra slept peacefully that night, feeling a great burden lifted off his shoulders. The next day, he returned to his aunt's house, awaiting his mother's decision, albeit anxiously.

Seven days later, his mother arrived, and Tarendra was overjoyed to return home to live with his parents again. With this change, he began a new chapter of independence and resilience. Tarendra would catch the early train to school daily, managing the long commute hours, school activities, and late-night study sessions.

Inspired by the tireless efforts of his parents, who often worked late into the night to provide for their family, Tarendra developed a strong sense of determination and endurance.

On a late evening, after a long day's work, Ma found Tarendra engrossed in his books, the lamp casting a soft glow over his studies. She approached and affectionately patted his head. Tarendra looked up and greeted her with a smile.

"Seeing you so dedicated to your studies warms my heart," Ma said. "But remember your father and I may not always be able to help with your schoolwork. You're doing well studying on your own. Just be careful and sincere in your efforts, alright?"

"Yes, Ma, I understand," Tarendra replied, his voice full of resolve. "My studies are my top priority."

Ma gently ruffled his hair, her eyes filled with pride. "That's my boy! And when you have time, could you help your siblings with their studies too? Your dad and I are swamped with work."

"Of course, Ma. I'll make sure they keep up with their studies, too," Tarendra assured her, ready to take on the responsibility of guiding his siblings and managing his academic commitments.

Tarendra embraced his role as the eldest sibling with a sense of duty and leadership. He took charge of his younger siblings' academic progress, ensuring they put in their best efforts. There was no distinction between the responsibilities of boys and girls in their household, a practice that differed from many traditional Indian families.

The siblings formed a close-knit unit, united in their self-reliance from a young age. They managed their meals independently, never waiting for Ma to serve them.

For Tarendra, education was a non-negotiable aspect of life. He saw how Ma tirelessly worked multiple jobs, sometimes up to fifteen hours a day, to meet the escalating costs of their schooling. Despite the grueling hours and the immense pressure, Ma never faltered in her commitment to providing Tarendra and his siblings with the best educational opportunities.

When new teachers arrived at Mundikota Village School, they faced a dilemma: unable to cook for themselves, they needed a reliable meal source. They knew Ma from her tea shop and soon approached her. "Mrs. Lakhankar, would you be willing to cook for us and provide tiffin service?" one teacher asked. "We can pay you fairly for it."

Seeing an opportunity, Ma agreed without hesitation. She started preparing meals for them, quickly gaining a reputation for her excellent cooking. Soon, occasionally, workers from the Bidi factory and the railway station also expressed interest in her meals. Ma, recognizing the demand, expanded her services to include them as well.

Thus, a new source of income was established, evidence of Ma's dedication and knack for recognizing and capitalizing on opportunities. Her sincerity in every endeavor added to her reputation and the family's financial stability.

As the year progressed, one of the most vibrant and joyous festivals of the Indian subcontinent arrived – the Festival of Holi. Celebrated as a festival of colors, love, and the arrival of spring, Holi holds a special place in the hearts of many. In Maharashtra, where Tarendra was, Holi had a unique tradition that set it apart from celebrations in other states.

An integral part of this festivity for children in Maharashtra was the wearing of 'Gathi' - a special type of edible garland. These garlands, bought from local markets or gifted by relatives and friends, were decorative and delightful. Made primarily of sugar, children would proudly wear their Gathis around their necks, nibbling on them throughout the festival. This sweet tradition added an extra layer of joy and excitement to the already colorful and exuberant celebration.

As Holi, the festival of colors, drew in March every year, Tarendra's mother embarked on a special endeavor for a month. She began the preparations for making Gathi, a traditional sweet garland, a full twenty-five days ahead of the festival. Aware of the enormity of the task at hand, she used to hire five to six women from the village who needed work, offering them a fair daily wage for their assistance.

The process of creating Gathi was both intricate and physically demanding. Tarendra's mother, alongside the village women, would toil for long hours under the relentless heat of the Indian summer heat. While a standard work shift for the women was typically eight hours, his mother often dedicated as many as fourteen hours to a total of two shifts each day.

She tirelessly worked beside a hot coal stove, expertly preparing the hot sugar paste. With utmost care, she poured the scalding mixture into wooden molds, shaping it meticulously. She handled each mold with

precision, acutely aware of the need to avoid spilling the boiling sugar on herself, a mistake that could lead to severe burns.

Tarendra observed this process with great admiration for his mother. He was always amazed at how Ma endured the strenuous and taxing nature of the work without showing signs of fatigue or defeat.

Tarendra was often left amazed by the entrepreneurial spirit of his parents. The aggressive determination they possessed to improve their lives flourished in many ways. Usually, retail sellers started coming to Ma two weeks before the Holi festival to purchase Gathi wholesale (varying from 25 to 100 kg). These were shopkeepers of all sizes from neighboring villages/towns. Ma would make Gathi in large numbers, and the quality of her Gathi was always high. But wholesale prices were much discounted, and it would result in a lot of effort for a reduced margin of profit. That's where father came in!

Tarendra's father was a high school graduate; he saw an opportunity with the Gathis to bring a significant profit. But the intermediaries' shopkeepers had to be knocked out of the way.

His father set up a shop at the weekly bazaar (Market in villages or Taluka places) in the different towns and began selling Gathi for the total market price. Whenever Tarendra or his siblings had free time, they would go to the bazaar and help his father to sell Gathis. They began profiting an extra one and a half rupees per kilo. (Note: Rupees is the currency of India; the current conversation rate is 1 US Dollar, equal to approximately 80 Rupees). This way, they benefited more than just wholesale sales. Gathi's business usually ends in March.

Tarendra's father identified a new opportunity to collect and supervise tendu leaves labor during the summer months of April to June. These leaves, essential for making Bidi – a less expensive alternative to cigarettes – were highly sought after by factories. The tendu leaves, flourishing in the forest during the scorching summers, fetched a reasonable price.

Embracing this chance, Tarendra's father took on this 2-month summer full-time job. He led and worked alongside a team of laborers in the jungle, braving the boiling sun for nearly two to three months. People often avoid such jobs in the summer months. His 2-month summer job rewarded him with five hundred rupees, a significant addition to the family's savings.

The Holi Gathi sales earnings and summer-time work were conscientiously saved for an emergency fund. This fund was beneficial when the tea shop saw fewer customers. It was a safety net for unexpected expenses, such as medical emergencies or other unforeseen costs. With her wise and careful management, Ma oversaw the family's finances, ensuring they were well-prepared for financial challenges.

During quieter hours at the shop, Ma pondered how best to use her time. Ma managed to acquire a used sewing machine and quickly took to learning how to use it, driven by her innate curiosity. Her newfound skill proved invaluable, allowing her to mend our clothing whenever it tore. With minimum prices, she could also offer the service to her neighbors, providing them with assistance.

With only two pairs of clothes each, Tarendra and his brothers depended on one pair being washed each day to wear the next. Owning an extra pair was a luxury reserved for special occasions, making the sewing machine an essential part of our household and helping us maintain our limited wardrobe effectively. Jitu and he slowly learned to operate the sewing machine and help our mother with the easy tasks of sewing.

Later, Ma decided to lease a plot of land near the Bidi factory, although it was known to be less fertile. Undeterred, Ma worked tirelessly on this land throughout the monsoon seasons (July-October) while Dad took care of the Tea shop.

Her persistent efforts transformed the once-barren land into a fertile area suitable for farming. The income generated from this endeavor was carefully saved in what she termed her 'farm fund.' In time, these savings enabled her to buy a small farm a little distance from the village at an affordable price. It was modest in size, but to Ma, it represented the realization of a cherished dream.

Even as a young boy, Tarendra could see his mother's powerful message: with unwavering determination and perseverance, one can achieve the seemingly impossible.

In addition to her tenacity, Ma's deep-seated warmth and generosity were unmistakable. Her compassionate nature shone through in her care for Tarendra's grandparents in their final years. She tended to her bedridden father-in-law with unwavering dedication for two years until he passed away.

Furthermore, Tarendra's uncle (the younger brother of his dad), who had been ill from an early age, also received her ceaseless care and attention until his final moments. These acts of selfless kindness profoundly influenced Tarendra, shaping his character and values. He learned from his mother that true strength lies in combining willpower with compassion and that such a combination can surmount any challenge life may present.

Tarendra firmly believed that where there's a will, there's a way. His mother was the living embodiment of this philosophy, a paragon of hard work and determination. Her life was the most apparent testament that it can be realized if one aspires to achieve something, even as grand as creating a universe from nothing.

In any family, occasional disagreements are inevitable, but Tarendra's grandfather always had a saying: "Every family plays the same tune." Tarendra had always observed his mother treating everyone with respect, never witnessing a moment of disrespect from her. From her, he learned the value of accumulating good deeds throughout one's life.

How Tarendra's mother led her life ignited the spark propelling Tarendra towards his remarkable achievements. Growing up in a modest neighborhood in India, he witnessed her unwavering selflessness, compassion, and dedication.

### **Chapter 03: Rhythms of the Rails: Tarendra's Mundikota-Tumsar Odyssey**

Tarendra had moved out of his aunt's house. His mother had then taken him back home. He will go to school in Tumsar from Mundikota by train from now on. That was his decision, and he had prepared himself to stick by it no matter what.

Usually, Tarendra's father ensures the eldest kids wake up at six to assist them in a tea shop. Tarendra swept the shop thoroughly while his dad finished his morning rituals and his mom packed his lunch box. Tarendra was not expecting to be able to return home until late at night, so he took his time while freshening up. There was still some time before Ma would start making lunch (In those parts of remote areas in India, people used to eat lunch around 9-10 am and dinner around 6-7 pm). When Tarendra was prepared to begin his day, he said goodbye to his family and left home. Twenty minutes were left until the passenger train would go Mundikota for the Tumsar station at eight o'clock.

The Mundikota railway station was about 125 meters from Tarendra's home. From their house, they could hear the unique and pleasant sound of the train's arrival bell. These bells, a charming part of India's railway history, signaled the arrival of trains at the station. It was a small station with just one platform and a little ticket counter at the far end.

The station has a bell system with three signals. The first bell indicates that the train has departed from the previous station and is on its way. The second bell warns that the train is approaching, while the third bell, run by the station master, signals that the train has arrived at the platform.

The train journey to Tumsar Road Devadi station takes 15 minutes. From there, state-operated public buses, which are scheduled to coincide with the train's arrival times, head to Tumsar Town. Usually, the bus timings are closely aligned with the train's schedule. These buses wait 15-20 minutes but depart if the train is delayed.

The journey from Devadi station to Tumsar Town takes about 20 minutes by bus. The distance between the school and the station was significant, and it was impossible to cover it on foot. From the bus stop in Tumsar Town, the school is about 1 km away, which requires a walk. Ideally, if the train and bus are on time, Tarendra can reach school in an hour, around 9 am. However, since school doesn't start until 11 am, he often waits about 2 hours at the school, the Tumsar Town bus stop, or back at Devadi Station.

Gradually, Tarendra mastered boarding a moving train, a common practice among local tea vendors. He observed them closely, learning the timing and technique required to jump onto a train as it started to move safely. This skill was essential for vendors catching daily trains to sell their tea. Tarendra practiced cautiously at first, building up his confidence and agility. Over time, he became adept at this task, hopping onto a moving train smoothly and getting down in Tumsar while the train was still moving.

To catch the front-row seat in the bus at Devadi Station to Tumsar Town, Tarendra began a risky routine. He would jump off the moving train, quickly cross the tracks, hop onto the platform, and rush out of the train station. There was an overhead bridge he could use, but that took slightly more time, and he risked losing a front-row seat on the bus. To secure these coveted seats, he chose this dangerous shortcut. Despite the risks, sitting in the front row of the bus filled him with a sense of pride and happiness.

One day, the local train paused at Mundikota station on a siding to let an express train pass. After a half-hour wait, it resumed its journey. Tarendra reached the Tumsar station at around twenty minutes past eleven when his class had started. He darted out of the train when it stopped on the platform and ran to the bus.

The occasional halts of trains at Mundikota station allowed Tarendra and his father to sell tea and snacks to waiting passengers.

He knew he would still arrive late for school. The journey to Tumsar would take an hour and a half, plus an additional fifteen minutes for the bus ride to school. No matter how quickly the train moved, on-time arrival was a distant hope unless, by some miracle, the train could fly to Tumsar.

Tarendra ran to school once the bus dropped him off at Tumsar town Bus stop. He bolted inside the school premises and ran to his classroom. Tarendra had missed the first period, and Nikhade sir's period had begun.

Tarendra was over forty minutes late to reach school at around eleven forty. But Nikhade sir waved him into his class without scolding him for showing up so late. The teachers all knew that Tarendra had begun commuting a very long distance to school, that he was taking the train, and sometimes the train was unreliable.

Settling into his seat, Tarendra, still catching his breath from the rush, was grateful he hadn't missed Nikhade sir's lecture. As he eagerly took notes, he felt a sense of accomplishment for making it on time.

Post-class, Umesh slid his notebook across to Tarendra, which was filled with notes from today's lesson. "Missed a lot, didn't you?" Umesh teased, understanding the hurdles Tarendra faced daily.

"Thanks, man," Tarendra responded, relief in his voice as he began to copy the notes.

The day flew by in a blur of lessons and note-taking. When the final bell rang, signaling the end of the day, Tarendra and his friends, including Umesh, Sushil, Pravin, Ganesh, and Manraj, lingered outside, sharing laughs and stories before heading their ways.

"Same time tomorrow?" Tarendra joked, already dreading but looking forward to the next day's race against time.

Tarendra boarded the bus to Devadi Railway Station, noticeably alone. He settled in to wait for the eight o'clock passenger train, while his friends had already reached their homes. The express trains, though frequent, didn't stop at Mundikota, leaving him with no alternative but to wait.

"The evening train's always late, isn't it?" a fellow passenger remarked, breaking the silence and looking knowingly at Tarendra.

Nodding, Tarendra replied, "Every single time. It makes you wonder why they even have a schedule."

As the clock ticked past the hour, marking time with its dusty, cobwebbed face, the frustration among the waiting passengers grew palpable. Tarendra, trying to keep his composure, couldn't help but feel the collective anxiety and anticipation building around him.

"Forty minutes now," he muttered, checking his watch against the station clock. "At this rate, I'll be home by midnight."

Around him, others shared similar sentiments, the air thick with the tension of delayed schedules and disrupted evenings. "They should do something about this," another passenger sighed, echoing the common sentiment of helplessness in the face of the railway's unpredictability.

In an attempt to alleviate his growing unease, Tarendra sighed deeply and slumped onto the station bench. He opened his book, seeking refuge in its pages, trying to distract himself from the reality that he would be



late for school again today. The words before him offered a temporary escape from the tedious wait and the slow ticking of the clock overhead.

Tarendra found an empty bench to rest while he waited. It was six now. He had two more hours before seeing the passenger train's divine face if the train was not running late. In 1980s India, it was naïve of you to rely on trains to be on time.

With such an unpredictable train schedule, Tarendra couldn't forge a solid routine he could stick to. He had to get his studies in whenever he could find time. Even if that meant opening his books and beginning to study in the sodium light of the train station. Tarendra had understood that making up excuses never solved anything. Procrastination only led to ruin. And tomorrow never truly arrived for those who kept delaying.

Suddenly, the train rumbled into the station at half past eight, jolting Tarendra from his concentration. The coal-powered train pulled in, billowing white smoke emitting a loud, metallic clamor. In his haste, Tarendra's books slipped from his grasp and scattered on the ground. He quickly picked them up, stuffing them back into his bag, and glanced at the overhead station clock. It read nine o'clock – the train was an hour late.

As the hustle to board the train peaked, Tarendra, with his slight frame, was jostled into a compartment by the pressing crowd. Securing a window seat amidst rapid heartbeats and a sweat-drenched forehead, he couldn't shake off a lingering unease despite his successful embarkation.

Arriving home at ten, the weariness of his day was evident. "You look exhausted," Ma noted, her arms wrapping around him in a comforting hug. "It was a long day," Tarendra managed to say, finding solace in her embrace, ready to face another day's challenge after a brief rest.

Luck smiled upon Tarendra the following day. Miraculously, the morning train pulled into the station precisely at eight o'clock, a rare occurrence that depended on pure chance. As the third bell rang, Tarendra bolted out of his house, a heavy bag bouncing against his back. He had to catch that train; missing a school day was not an option. He knew all too well the consequences of falling behind in his studies.

Since the village station had a brief 30-second stop, Tarendra sprinted along the platform as the train slowly began to depart. The last door of the previous carriage was fading out of view. Without hesitation, Tarendra leaped! He had no desire to contemplate the consequences of failure. Just in the nick of time, he slipped through the door right before it disappeared beyond the platform's edge. He breathed a sigh of relief and silently thanked every deity he could think of for ensuring he made it onto the train safely.

As he settled into a seat, a fellow passenger turned to him and said, "That was a close call, young man!" Tarendra chuckled nervously, replying, "Yes, indeed! It's a daily adventure to get to school on time." The two passengers shared a knowing smile, bonding over their morning escapade.

When the passenger train reached Tumsar's Devadi station, Tarendra had one and a half hours of free time before the class started. Instead of wasting this time, Tarendra found a bench and began studying. He could barely get any studying done at home, with his schedule as hectic as it was. So, cramming in the time he had in train stations was his only option.

Today, Tarendra was on time for school, so he didn't have to borrow the notes from his friends. As soon as his school ended, Tarendra left for the Devadi railway station. The teachers had assigned them a lot of homework today. Tarendra would have to go through them one by one at the station. He had a lot of hard studying ahead of him.

By the time Tarendra reached the Devadi station, found an empty bench to put down his books, and began studying, it was half past five in the afternoon. The passenger train would come at eight o'clock, so he would have about two and a half hours to finish his homework.

Occasional scuffles between the hawkers and the passengers would distract him, but he always saw the disputes resolved in a civilized way.

After moving out of his aunt's house, Tarendra's life consisted of his school, home, and the Devadi train station. He spent hours daily in the morning and/or evening at this station. Tarendra observed the people who worked there and understood that these peddlers were honest and good-natured people just trying to make a living. Many would still think of them as hooligans or hecklers and such, rough and tough on the outside, yet they had always treated Tarendra with nothing but kindness. Tarendra realized it was essential to have respect and consideration towards others; that was the only way to be more humane.

Witnessing the fervent efforts of the train vendors, Tarendra reflected on his parents, who toiled with equal intensity from sunrise to sunset. They had taught him a crucial lesson: You must exert great effort to steer your aspirations. Through relentless striving and persistence, you will reach your objectives and, ultimately, turn your dreams into concrete realities.

At eleven years old, Tarendra faced his own set of challenges, especially at the train stations. At Devadi, he could easily reach the door handle, but at Mundikota, without a platform, the task was more daunting, especially with a heavy backpack.

"It's a daily battle," Tarendra remarked one morning, struggling with his bag. "But it's a small part of the bigger journey. Like Ma and Pa say, it's all about persistence." His friend watched admiringly, noting Tarendra's determination to overcome these daily obstacles.

Facing the daily challenges of his commute, Tarendra chose to find joy in the small things. He befriended the station's tea, samosa, chana, and paan vendors, as well as the platform coolies.

"You know, these guys are like my travel family," he once told a fellow passenger. "They make this journey worthwhile."

He skillfully navigated the crowded platforms and often secured a coveted front-row bus seat to Tumsar town.

"Getting this seat feels like a small victory," he chuckled to a vendor friend. Despite the difficulties, Tarendra's positive outlook turned his routine train travels into a series of mini-adventures, filling his journey with moments of happiness.

## Chapter 04: Express to Enlightenment: Tarendra's Crossroads Journey

An express train began to roll out of the station. Baba Chanewala was preparing a packet of spiced chickpeas for a customer aboard the train. Now, as the train started to move, Baba hurried after it, running along the platform and barely putting the packet of chickpeas into the hand of the customer through the window and grabbing the money he was owed at the last second just before the train sped up too much for him to run alongside it.

“Chai! Chai! Does anybody want some chai?” Deepak strolled in, shouting, “I got samosa! I got biscuits! I got coffee! Does anybody want piping hot chai?” (Chai is a Hindi word for Tea).

Tarendra gazed at Deepak. Deepak was about six years older than him but tall and powerfully built. On one hand, he carried a giant vacuum tea flask, cups, and a bucket; on the other, he had a box full of snacks like biscuits and samosas. Deepak paused when he passed Tarendra.

“How are you, Chhotu?” Deepak’s voice boomed. He greeted Tarendra. (“Chotu” is a common term used in India to address younger boys, especially in informal settings, when their names are not known)

“I’m good, thanks!” Tarendra glanced at Deepak’s box. “You’re almost sold out. The business going well?”

Deepak shrugged. He glanced around. When he saw no one interested in his products, he sat beside Tarendra on the bench. Deepak put his flask, bucket, and box on the floor beside him. He exhaled deeply and wiped the sweat off his young, rugged face with the yellowing towel around his neck.

“It’s going all right. The damn day was so hot. I wish it would rain a little, you know?” Deepak said. “Did you see that? Poor Baba Chanewala almost went under the train trying to get rid of barely a handful of chickpeas. All for what? A measly rupee.”

Tarendra never knew how to respond when his friend spoke like that. It was a bizarre friendship he had with this young man. The age gap between these two was worlds apart, yet they treated each other like equals.

Society looked down upon people like Deepak, calling them ruffians, miscreants, and nasty labels. Yet Tarendra realized that Deepak was a complex working individual and a valuable member of society, even if his type was treated as an outcast. Deepak respected Tarendra because despite all that life threw at Tarendra, instead of walking down the path of emptiness and darkness, he was studying for a better and hopeful future. Deepak became Tarendra’s friend because Tarendra gave him hope. Tarendra became Deepak’s friend because Deepak reminded him of his parents, who worked hard every day.

“How’s your study going, Taren?” Deepak asked. “You are doing well in that fancy school of yours?”

Tarendra laughed. “Yeah, it’s going fine. I’d deny your accusation and say that the school is not fancy, but that would be lying.”

Deepak laughed, too, punching Tarendra on his shoulder lightly. “Looks like someone’s becoming a snob!”

Tarendra shook his head. “Nope! All my classmates are well off. I’m the only one from a low-income family who goes there. Honestly, I have more in common with you guys than them.”

“Look, Taren, it doesn’t matter whether you’re rich or poor,” Deepak said seriously. “What matters is what you’re willing to do to take yourself higher. Look how much hardship you will endure continuing to study

no matter what while your classmates are slacking off in their cozy homes. You're way better than those snobby classmates of yours!"

Tarendra felt joy at Deepak's words. He remembered what his mother told him once: *Don't judge someone based on their situation, son. A lotus will bloom in the mud.*

Deepak was certainly a lotus in the mud. All the so-called 'refined' people of this society would cast people like Deepak aside without a thought, refusing to acknowledge that people like Deepak were just human beings like them, only born with less privilege. Society was scared of these people, yet Tarendra would spend hours among them at night, alone, studying, feeling just as safe as he felt at home.

"Thank you for saying that, Deepak," Tarendra said. "It will inspire me to study harder."

"My brother, if you make it out of here, if you succeed," Deepak said sincerely, "it will be a victory for all of us. Watching you study so hard every day inspires all of us."

"I understand," Tarendra smiled.

Deepak brought a big samosa from his box and put it into Tarendra's hand. "Eat. You'll need strength."

"Oh, come on!" Tarendra protested. "You can't keep doing this. What about your business?"

Deepak laughed a hearty laugh. "Business," Deepak said uncaringly, "it's whatever. Every day's the same. What does it matter if I sold a samosa more or two? Besides, take this as payment for inspiring us, Taren."

Tarendra was grateful to receive the food. He was hungry. He quietly finished the samosa and went back to his studies. Deepak left, trying to sell out.

Work to earn. And earn to eat. The hawkers on this station had to work hard to make enough money for their families to eat. Even obtaining two meals a day was a struggle. These peddlers' livelihoods depended on whether or not they could sell their goods to the people at the station or on the train.

Young boys like Deepak were illiterate because education for a hungry person was a luxury. They were already shouldering the responsibility of providing for their families. Tarendra could only pursue education because of his Ma, her indomitable will, and her spirited vision for educating her eldest son.

The station clock rang nine times. The train was running late. It was supposed to have arrived at eight, but now it was nine. Tarendra had been studying for three and a half hours now. He had finished his homework an hour ago and even managed the extra study to stay ahead. Prolonged use of the brain burns up many calories.

The lids on his eyes began falling. Tarendra felt a drowsiness wash over him. He thought a little rest would recover his strength.

He packed his bag. He set the bag at the end of the bench, laid down on the bench, and put his head on the bag. As soon as he closed his eyes, his mind shut down. And without even realizing it, he drifted into a deep sleep.

Someone shattered Tarendra's sleep.

The numerous dazzling stars were the sodium lights fixed on the ceiling of the Devadi station. In front of him stood Deepak, bent over and looking at him with anxious eyes. He was saying something to Tarendra. Tarendra had never seen him so riled up before.

Tarendra's frozen brain registered none of his words. He let out a groan of annoyance as he dissolved back into the bench. Sweet sleep immediately wrapped his mind. Deepak's talking and the noise of the station crowd all faded into a background buzz.

Tarendra was being shaken, the aggressive way one might shake a medicine bottle. This shaking made blood jump to his head. Tarendra sprang off his bench. The vibration cleared up his head. Deepak's rugged face was laced with concern in the illumination of the yellow light. Tarendra stiffened. Suddenly wide awake. He looked closely, trying to understand what was happening.

"Oh my god, I can't believe I fell asleep!" Tarendra said. "What's going on?"

"Chhotu! Can't you see! Your train is leaving!" Deepak shouted at him.

Now, he registered the deep sound of the weighty metal grinding. He looked up and cringed when he saw the eight o'clock passenger train jogging out of sight.

"No!" Tarendra screamed. He snatched his bag off the bench and bolted towards the train.

Deepak ran after him. Tarendra sprinted across the platform as fast as his tiny body allowed. People jumped out of the way, seeing him hurtling ahead.

The last of the compartments was going out of sight of the station. It was just like morning. Tarendra had to jump to get on the train. He would have to jump again now. Devadi station was five times as big as Mundikota station. So, the train had already picked up speed while still inside the station. Tarendra wasn't sure if he'd make it inside.

But now wasn't the time to hesitate. Tarendra jumped!

He immediately felt a pair of strong arms wrapping around his chest. Tarendra was pulled back to earth. Panting, he looked back. It was Deepak. He'd stopped him from getting on the train.

"Why'd you stop me!" Tarendra demanded, shouting.

"You would have hit the train and slipped under it!" Deepak shouted back, then said softly, "Trust me, kid. I know train hopping better than anyone. You wouldn't have made it. I just saved your damn life."

Deepak let go of Tarendra.

Tarendra was stunned as he watched the train leave the station. The next one would not come until tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. What would he do now? He didn't have the money for the bus ride from Tumsar to Mundikota, and he had no one here with whom he could stay the night. What about food? What would he eat? He was so hungry.

Tarendra sank to the ground. Tears flooded down his cheeks. The dam burst, and hopelessness flooded out and swept him away. This eleven-year-old kid was extremely strained; this unexpected accident left him broken.

He sat there sobbing. The hand that saved him from horrible injury or worse reached down and clutched his shoulder. Tarendra looked up.

Deepak was smiling kindly. "Taren, you need a place to stay the night. Why don't you come with me? Think you can settle for a hovel to sleep one night?"

Tarendra was left speechless by such a kind offer.

“Are you sure?” he said. “I don’t want to be a bother to you-”

“Nonsense!” Deepak waved it away, laughing. “My family would be happy to have you as our guest. I’ve talked so much about you. Come on! Get off the ground and follow me!”

Tarendra wiped his tears and went after Deepak. It was ten o’clock at night. Deepak’s home was a hut made of bamboo and sheets not far from the station. It sat on a waste patch of land along with at least forty other cabins. Deepak’s mother greeted Tarendra inside.

“Ah, Deepak, who’s that with you?” Deepak’s mother asked, smiling. “Is that the boy you are always telling us about?”

“That is him!” Deepak laughed and patted Tarendra’s shoulders. “That’s Tarendra.”

“How are you doing, aunty?” Tarendra said politely.

“I’m fine, dear; come on in, sit down,” said Deepak’s mother.

Tarendra sat down on the bed.

“Tarendra missed his train,” Deepak said. “He will stay with us for the night.”

“That’s no problem, my dear,” Deepak’s mother said. “Although it’s not much, you’re welcome in our home.”

“I appreciate it, Aunty,” Tarendra said. “Thank you.”

“I was just about to cook us some dinner. Why don’t you boys freshen up in the meantime?” she said and went to cook.

“Chhotu! Why do you look so depressed?” Deepak said. “Cheer up, buddy! There’s nothing to worry about anymore.”

Tarendra nodded. “Thanks. I’ll try to relax.” He still looked pale.

Deepak sighed. “All right. I know what will cheer you up! Come on with me! Let’s go!”

Deepak left through the door without even explaining anything. Curiosity rose within him, and Tarendra got up and quickly followed him.

They came to Deepak’s home to find a delicious egg curry meal. It tasted even better in his starving stomach. Tarendra understood how much Deepak’s family struggled to survive, but their hospitality blew him away. They’d opened their home for him, sheltered him in a time of need, gave him food for when he was hungry, and lifted his spirit when he was down. Despite their humble situation, their hearts were immense.

After dinner, Deepak took Tarendra to a video parlor for the first time. It was a tiny room with an old TV, VCR, and uncomfortable chairs. But Tarendra had never been to one before and was excited.

They sat down to watch "Sholay," a famous movie about two friends, Veeru and Jai, who are kind of like outlaws. A retired policeman hires them to catch a bad guy named Gabbar Singh. The movie isn't just about chasing bad guys; it's mainly about how strong Veeru and Jai's friendship is. They stick together no matter what, showing how important good friends are. "Sholay" is more than just an action movie; it teaches a lot about friendship, right and wrong, and how people behave with each other.

Tarendra was moved by the movie's message. He was already the most challenging working twelve-year-old boy in the world, and the cinema renewed his passion for studying and erased the gloomy clouds darkening his mind's sky. The fluid acting on the screen and Deepak's trusted companionship all helped raise his spirit.

There were only two rooms in the hut. Deepak's mother and father- who worked as a small restaurant's chef, slept in one room. And Tarendra slept in the other room with Deepak and his two siblings. Tarendra was surprised to find profound comfort under a patched-together blanket and slept like a baby.

Luckily, the next day was a holiday, so Tarendra didn't have to go to school. He caught the morning passenger train back to Mundikota. Back then, there were no landlines or cell phones to let his parents know he was coming.

In Mundikota, his mother had spent the entire night awake, worried sick about Tarendra. When she saw him, she rushed out, tears in her eyes, and hugged him tightly. Tarendra waited until she calmed down and then apologized for worrying her. He told her all about what had happened the night before, but he left out the part about going to the cinema – for obvious reasons.

“Oh, thank God Deepak was there!” Ma cried. “You have a good friend, son! I’m so glad you came back home safely!”

“Me too, Ma. I hope you can forgive me for worrying you,” he said.

“Don’t worry, son. Accidents are part of life. And I have faith in you that you can take care of yourself in any situation. You’re strong and intelligent. Now go freshen up. I’ll make you breakfast,” Ma said.

As Tarendra grew into adulthood, his realization that education was the key to a better future matured. He persevered in his studies no matter how difficult they became. The fact that he missed his train that day instilled in him the value of being decisive in life; a man must be able to make the right decision at the right time.

Tarendra often struggled with hunger when his evening trains were delayed. He would consume his packed lunch during the school break and couldn't carry dinner due to the risk of spoiling in the heat. This left him hungry until he reached home, sometimes as late as midnight, without money to buy snacks or options for an evening meal. On some occasions, Baba Chanewala, who sold overnight-soaked chickpeas, would ask Tarendra to watch his stall while he stepped away, offering him a small bite in return, which felt like a special treat when he was hungry.

In India's rural regions, where poverty is common, Hindi cinema offers an escape into a world of dreams and hopes. These films, with their happy endings and themes of love conquering social barriers, captivate the hearts of many, including Deepak, Sewak, Ranjit, and other local vendors. They especially enjoy watching these movies on their release day.

Tarendra, sharing this passion, often skipped school to join them, constantly receiving a center seat in the cinema as a token of their affection. This childhood habit of watching first-day shows grew into a lifelong love for cinema.

"For me, movies are like a three-hour journey into another world," Tarendra would say, "I would immerse myself in the storyline, imagining myself as the hero (protagonist). I'd even associate the characters with people I know in real life. It made each movie a unique and personal experience."

Later, his enthusiasm for cinema remained undiminished. "I still get a kick out of watching films on their opening day," he reminisced. "There's something special about being part of that first crowd, sharing the excitement and anticipation with everyone else." For Tarendra, this childhood fascination with movies was more than entertainment.

Tarendra often said, "When you spend your money and time watching a movie, it's unwise to nitpick the acting or story. Instead, it's better to immerse yourself in the film." He believed in embracing the cinematic experience wholeheartedly rather than focusing on its flaws.

The railway vendors, always quick to adapt, found unique ways to entertain themselves during the frequent train delays. While waiting to sell food items and other goods, they often turned to music and danced to pass the time. Among them was an exceptionally charismatic vendor named Raju, but everyone fondly called him Mithun. This nickname was inspired by his admiration for the famous Indian movie actor Mithun Chakraborty.

Whenever the train was expected to be delayed, the owner of a small cafeteria in the station would start playing loud music. Raju, also known as Mithun, would then break into an impromptu dance, which would amuse the waiting passengers.

One evening, Tarendra sat on a station bench with a book in hand and couldn't help but notice Raju starting his performance.

Amused, a fellow passenger told Tarendra, "Look at Mithun go! He never misses a chance to show off his moves."

Tarendra smiled and replied, "Yes, he does lighten the mood. It's a welcome distraction from the wait."

As Raju danced, Tarendra mused about the similarities he had observed during his travels. Whether in India's train stations or the streets of New York City, he noticed how music often resonated in places marked by hardship or poverty. It seemed to Tarendra that music and dance were universal languages of resilience, offering a momentary escape and bringing joy and community to those facing challenging circumstances.

As days passed and months crawled towards the end of the school year, Tarendra became more committed to his studies. His textbooks became religious scriptures to him, and when he sat down to study, he engaged in worship. Just as Ma once said, hard work will be rewarded. Tarendra was seeing a gradual improvement in his grades.

But he had also become observant. He closely saw people from every background at home and the railway stations. He realized that there were good kinds of people in every walk of life.

As the 7th-grade scholarship exam approached, Tarendra faced a significant challenge. Passing this exam would mean receiving Rs 20 per month from 8th to 10th grade, a good help for his education. However, all his classmates had joined coaching classes with another teacher to prepare for the exam, leaving Tarendra in a problematic situation. He knew that passing the exam would be tough without special coaching, but the cost of these tuition classes was beyond what his family could afford. Faced with this dilemma, Tarendra realized he needed to find some assistance to help him prepare for the exam.

Tarendra's favorite teacher was Nikhade sir. He knew it would be from him if he had to ask for help. With nervousness and determination, Tarendra finally gathered the courage to approach his teacher. He went to Nikhade sir's desk and explained his situation, telling him about his family's financial struggles and inability to join the scholarship coaching class.



To this day, Tarendra vividly remembers that moment. It was a big step for him, filled with uncertainty and hope. He wasn't sure how Nikhade sir would react, but his fears were quickly put to rest. Without any hesitation, Nikhade sir offered to tutor him at his own home. Tarendra felt a massive wave of relief wash over him. This scholarship exam was crucial for someone in his situation – it could change the course of his life. With Nikhade sir's support, Tarendra had a real chance to succeed.

In fact, Nikhade sir's son, Umesh, was also in Tarendra's class. They were good friends, which helped Tarendra feel more at ease during the coaching sessions.

Tarendra began attending special coaching sessions at Nikhade sir's house in the mornings. To his surprise, on his first day, he discovered that a girl from his class was also there for the sessions.

His friends couldn't help but tease him. "Hey, Tarendra. It seems like there's a special connection between you two, huh?" one of them joked as they saw him leaving with her.

Tarendra laughed and responded, "It's only for coaching, guys. Plus, she's left-handed, just like me!"

At this, their teasing grew even more playful. "A left-handed duo, that's adorable!" chimed in another friend, eliciting laughter from the group.

But Tarendra was genuinely content. Nikhade sir's coaching was proving to be very effective. "Nikhade sir is amazing," he explained to his friends. "He makes me feel like I can pass this exam."

Another thing Tarendra was grateful for was not having to linger at Devadi station to study before and after school. "Now, I go straight to sir's house. It's so much better than trying to study at the station," he said with a relieved smile.

Nikhade sir's teaching extended beyond academics; he fostered a sense of belief and confidence in Tarendra and the girl. "You both have what it takes to succeed," Nikhade sir often said, encouraging them. His guidance and the shift to studying at his house significantly improved Tarendra's preparation for the important exam.

Tarendra always felt welcome at Nikhade Sir's house. Sir's wife, whom Tarendra respectfully addressed as "Madam," often brought him snacks and meals. Initially, Tarendra was hesitant to accept them, not wanting to impose.

"Please, Tarendra, you must eat something. You can't study on an empty stomach," Madam would insist gently, pushing a plate of food towards him.

Her kindness and affection made Tarendra feel comfortable and valued, a stark contrast to the chaotic and distracting environment of the station where he used to study.

Years later, Tarendra still remembered the support he received from Nikhade sir and Madam. Their encouragement played a significant role in his success; he excelled in the examination and secured the scholarship. Throughout his continued studies and professional life, Tarendra made it a point to visit Nikhade Sir.

"Look at you, Tarendra! I always knew you'd achieve great things," Nikhade sir would say with pride in his eyes, a statement that filled Tarendra with a sense of accomplishment.

Nikhade sir often shared Tarendra's story with others, proudly telling them about this student from a small village who made it all the way to America. For Tarendra, these moments were a testament to the positive impact he had made and the gratitude he felt towards his teacher and his family.

Tarendra disliked the idea of being a burden to others in his quest for education. However, as he had learned, no one is entirely self-sufficient; people need the support of others to progress. This was particularly true during mid-term and final exams. To ensure he was on time for these crucial assessments, Tarendra would travel to Tumsar a day early and find someone willing to let him stay overnight.

Given the unpredictability of the train schedules, he couldn't risk being late for his exams. Unlike regular classes, where a slight delay might be overlooked, arriving late for an exam was not an option. This reliance on others for accommodation during exam times was necessary, although he was reluctant to impose it upon others.

After finishing an exam, Tarendra's routine was to return to Mundikota quickly, have dinner, and then catch the evening train returning to Tumsar. His carefully planned approach was to ensure he could attend the next day's exam at 7:30 a.m. The first morning train from Mundikota to Tumsar left at 8:00 a.m., making it impossible for him to travel on the exam day.

Consequently, Tarendra had to find places to stay overnight in Tumsar. His accommodations varied—sometimes, he stayed at his father's maternal uncle's house, other times at his classmate Gadpayle's house, and occasionally even at Nikhade sir's home. Their kindness gave him a place to stay and contributed significantly to his personal growth and academic achievements.

Tarendra was fortunate to have a close group of friends during his school days. His circle included Umesh, Gadpayle, Sushil, Pravin, Ganesh, and Manraj. Together, they brought unbridled joy and fun to Tarendra's school life.

After his special tutoring and the scholarship exam concluded, Tarendra returned to his usual after-school routine of studying at the railway station.

A few days later, he received exciting news. Nikhade sir invited him to his office and announced, "Tarendra, your hard work has truly paid off. Congratulations, you've earned the scholarship!"

Tarendra expressed his gratitude, saying, "Thank you, sir. This is a significant achievement for me and my family. I couldn't have done it without your guidance."

As time went on, Tarendra grew taller, but boarding the train remained a challenge. Observing from the station bench, he admired the tea sellers' agility in jumping on and off moving trains, aspiring to master their skill.

Concurrently, Tarendra's love for reading, particularly stories of India's independence and Ved Prakash Sharma's novels, profoundly influenced his ambitions, nurturing a desire to achieve greatness akin to the heroes in his favorite stories.

His friend once noticed Tarendra signing a document as 'Taren the Great.' Curious, he asked about it.

Tarendra explained, "Characters like 'Vikas the Great' and 'Vijay the Great' inspired me, leading me to adopt 'Taren the Great' as my moniker. It's not just a name; it's a constant reminder to strive for greatness in all I do."

This adoption symbolized his belief in the transformative power of characters to inspire and shape one's self-belief.

Tarendra made friends like Deepak, Ashok, and Ranjit at the Devadi station. Through them, he saw the harmful effects of addiction. Despite his friends indulging in Paan, Kharra, and Bidi, Tarendra stood firm in his resolve. He knew his mother had immense faith in him, and he was determined not to let her down. With strong mindfulness and self-control, he steered clear of these temptations, choosing instead to lead a clean and healthy life.

One evening, as Tarendra and Deepak were hanging out, Tarendra's curiosity got the better of him. "Hey, Deepak, can I ask you something?" he inquired.

Lighting a Bidi, Deepak responded casually, "Sure, go ahead."

"Why do you use Kharra and smoke Bidi so much?" Tarendra asked, genuinely curious.

Deepak let out a laugh as he exhaled a puff of smoke. "Ah, you'll understand when you're older."

Tarendra wasn't satisfied with that answer. "No, really, I want to know," he pressed.

Deepak shrugged and replied, "It's a business thing. If I don't buy Kharra and bidis from those guys, why would they come to buy my chai and samosas? It's all about give and take, you know?"

Tarendra stayed quiet after Deepak's response. They both knew that Deepak's reason wasn't really valid. Tarendra wished his friends would take better care of their health and avoid such harmful habits, but he also understood that he was too young and different from them to change their ways. He resolved never to succumb to such temptations himself.

A significant incident in the eighth grade would forever alter Tarendra's life. One evening, while on the train back to Mundikota from Tumsar, Tarendra accidentally fell asleep. When he awoke, he realized he had missed his stop and was now at Gondia station. Gondia station is four local stations away from Mundikota, passing through Tirora.

Hurriedly getting off the train, he was unsure what to do next. That's when he saw a familiar face on the platform – a teacher from his Mundikota school who lived in Gondia and traveled daily to Mundikota. A hopeful Tarendra approached the teacher and explained his situation, only to be met with a cold response. The teacher, clearly annoyed, brushed him off and quickly left the station, leaving Tarendra alone and uncertain of his next steps.

Left alone at Gondia station, Tarendra felt utterly overwhelmed. The sudden turn of events left him reeling, struggling to grasp the reality of his situation. Without the teacher's help, he had no clear way to return to Mundikota. This predicament was all too familiar, reminiscent of that night at Tumsar station, except this time, he was in Gondia, where he knew no one. The questions raced through his mind: What now? How would he get food? Where would he spend the night, knowing the next train wouldn't arrive until morning?

Tarendra found himself alone on a bench, engulfed in shock and disbelief. "How could they be so uncaring?" he wondered aloud, grappling with the teacher's cold dismissal. This unexpected indifference from someone he respected shook him, leaving him feeling isolated and helpless.

The station master eventually noticed him, a lone figure in the quiet of the night. "Everything alright, son?" he asked, approaching with a concerned look.

Tarendra hesitated but then shared his story. Moved by his situation, the station master didn't waste a moment. He swiftly contacted Mundikota station, ensuring Tarendra's family would be informed of his whereabouts. "Don't worry. We'll make sure your family knows you're safe," he assured Tarendra, offering a comforting presence amid uncertainty.

As he spent the night at Gondia railway station, hungry and deep in thought, Tarendra began to reflect on human nature. He pondered the rarity of finding genuine compassion and humanity in people. That night marked a significant realization in his young life – not everyone was like Nikhade sir, Deepak, or Ashok. He understood that most people were indifferent to the plight of others. Tarendra learned that those who possess true humanity are rare and should be valued. The incident exposed him to the harsher, darker side of the world, teaching him about people's indifference and the necessity of self-reliance.

Embracing the need to be more self-sufficient, Tarendra started to accompany his friends who sold goods on the trains. He observed how they skillfully avoided the Ticket Collector (TC), thus saving the fare. The TCs, often, didn't bother much with the peddlers and hawkers on the trains. Learning from his friends, Tarendra stopped buying a train monthly ticket pass. He began to blend in with them, pretending to be a hawker, which allowed him to travel for free between home and school.

This new approach to commuting was not just about saving money but a step towards the independence and self-sufficiency he realized he needed to cultivate. Tarendra was learning to navigate the world's complexities, making strategic choices to support his education and journey toward self-reliance.

Tarendra soon found a practical and honest way to manage his commuting expenses. Instead of pretending, he decided to join his friends in selling tea on the train. This helped him earn some pocket money. On his daily trips to and from school, Tarendra used his free time to participate actively in tea sales with his friends.

Tarendra has found a more efficient way to leave school early and get home quickly: by taking the Janta Express Train from Tumsar. This express train doesn't make a stop at Mundikota but does stop at the next larger town of Tirora. However, this decision poses a dilemma for him because he needs to catch the bus from the city at 4:00 pm to reach Devadi station around 4:15 pm, which would require him to miss the last two periods of class.

Although it is a public school, sometimes, teachers don't show up in the last classes. Thus, he's confronted with a choice: either opt for an early return home by skipping the last two periods or attend all the periods and arrive home later by taking the local train.

If he decides to go home early, he plans to catch the Janta Express train from Tumsar Station at 4:45 pm, which would arrive in Tirora by 5:15 pm. However, this schedule leaves a tiny margin for error. If the Janta Express experiences a delay of even 15-20 minutes, Tarendra risks missing his connecting passenger train from Tirora to Mundikota, scheduled for 5:30 pm.

If his calculations go awry and he misses the passenger train from Tirora, he would have to take another express train from Tirora to Tumsar at 7:00 pm, typically arriving in Tumsar around 7:30 pm. Subsequently, he'd need to wait for the regular local train, departing at 8:00 pm from Tumsar to Mundikota. The drawback is that local trains are often prone to delays, adding to the situation's complexity.

Interestingly, Tarendra encountered another challenge as his monthly train pass was only valid for travel from Tumsar to Mundikota, rendering it unusable for the Express train journey. However, his resourceful friends Deepak, Ranjeet, and Sewak came to his rescue. They provided Tarendra with a bucket of cups, and

they held a large aluminum tea kettle, assuming the vendors' roles. Their ingenious plan was to convince the Ticket Collector (TC) that Tarendra was also a vendor, and as a result, the TC wouldn't request a train ticket from him. Remarkably, this clever trick proved successful, allowing Tarendra to board the train without any issues.

The evenings in Mundikota were serene, and for the first time in a long while, Tarendra honestly had the chance to appreciate his village's tranquil beauty, accompanied by his brothers and friends, and play with them. The village was beautifully situated amidst a mix of grazing fields and farmland. As the day drew close, herds of cows, buffaloes, and goats would return in orderly lines from their day in the rangelands. The gentle clinking of their bells created a harmonious melody that floated through the cool evening breeze.

Above, the sky was a canvas of birds, gracefully winging their way across the vast, dusky blue expanse to their nests. The leaves of the trees swayed gently, forming delicate silhouettes against the darkening sky. Tarendra was captivated by the stunning colors of the sunset – the rich crimson, deep azures, and gleaming golds – and he experienced a profound sense of bliss and peace in these moments.

Upon his return to the village, Tarendra would witness Mundikota gradually enveloped in a veil of ivory smoke. This was a daily ritual as the villagers lit their stoves, returning from a day's hard work to prepare their evening meals. The air was filled with the smell of wood or coal burning, mingling with the aromatic scents of spices cooked in various homes.

The fragrance of incense burning in the households drifted through the air, rejuvenating tired bodies. During these evenings, there was a certain enchantment in the air, a sense of community and warmth that Tarendra deeply cherished. It was as if the entire village came to life differently, more intimately, creating a magical atmosphere that he looked forward to daily.

Following the day's exhausting challenges, as he neared his house, visible on the horizon, it felt like a beacon of hope. A sense of relief and happiness would wash over him, bringing a gentle smile to his face. The thought of arriving home to the warm, welcoming atmosphere where a hot meal prepared by his mother and her affectionate embrace awaited him was a source of immense comfort and joy. This daily return to his loving home gave Tarendra the strength and encouragement to face each new day and its challenges.

Over the next four years, Tarendra overslept and missed his train ten to twelve times. Every time he found himself stranded in Tumsar Road Station, he knew he could rely on his friends. Deepak, Sevak and Ashok Panwala became like his second family. After all, it was easier to snap a frail stick but nearly impossible when it was in a bunch. People are most potent when united.

Those poor railway vendor friends and their compassion and generosity profoundly impacted Tarendra as he grew up to become a man. Even today, he would find more satisfaction in a simple home-cooked meal with love than in the fanciest restaurants. He had seen the great expression of humanity blossoming in a place he was not expecting to find.

As Tarendra grew older, he realized his life had taken a different path from that of his old friends, including Deepak, Ranjit, Sewak, and Ashok. These friends had previously helped him, but now their lives had changed due to accidents, illnesses, and legal troubles, even resulting in some of them going to jail. Tarendra contemplated how life can take various turns based on our situations and choices.

This realization stayed with Tarendra, especially when he traveled by train back to India. He would always make it a point to buy a cup of tea from one of the hawkers, not overly concerned about hygiene. He

understood the life of a tea seller, the hard work and commitment that went into it, and he held deep respect for their efforts.

These experiences taught him a valuable lesson: no matter what path one chooses, giving your best and respecting others who do the same, regardless of their job or social status, is essential. Everyone's effort and dedication deserve recognition and appreciation in whatever field they may be.

## Chapter 05: A Mother's Influence: Tea Shop Struggles and the Festival of Life

During the scorching summer months in the village, it was a common sight to see people dozing on wooden cots outside their homes, seeking refuge from the stifling indoor heat under the vast open sky. As the morning sun appeared, casting a gentle, warm glow, Tarendra slowly roused from his slumber. The delightful melodies of chirping birds and the resonant crowing of roosters filled the air. Wrapped in a weathered sheet, he lay on his cot, basking in the tranquil ambiance, his weariness from the week weighing him down.

Tarendra indulged himself with more sleep, allowing the accumulated fatigue to seep through his pores and dissipate into the atmosphere. In the background, the familiar sounds of his younger brothers' animated chatter and laughter played like a symphony. Their youthful voices danced around, infusing the morning with joy.

The sharper clinking noises and the lively conversations, seasoned with matured laughter, emanated further down the lane, beyond the family tea shop adjacent to his house. As Tarendra stirred, he couldn't help but wonder what was causing the commotion down there. He mused aloud to his brother, "I wonder what's happening at the tea shop today. It sounds like something exciting." His half-asleep brother mumbled, "Maybe they've got some special guests or a big event planned." They both shared a curious smile, their morning curiosity piqued by the distant hubbub.

His head was still swimming, and he swayed slightly as he crossed the room. He drank nothing to let caffeine enter his system. Yet, curiously, his body worked the same way. Tarendra would storm through the week, and the entire week's tiredness would catch up to him immediately at the weekend. He would take it slow today, let all the fatigue go through him, and let his body heal. The first splash of chilled water on his face awakened his senses. When he came out to the sunlit porch after freshening up, he felt a delicate pleasantness wash over him.

Tarendra stepped out to the tea shop and saw his mother engrossed in her work. She managed the shop with remarkable attention to detail, overseeing every aspect precisely. Her dedication to maintaining the quality of the tea was evident as she tirelessly brewed pot after pot, sitting beside the hot fire. Tarendra admired her commitment, yet he couldn't help but feel concerned. Watching her work so relentlessly, he wondered if there was an easier way for her to manage the workload.

He approached her quietly, ensuring his voice was low enough not to be overheard by the customers relaxing under the canopy. Tarendra had something on his mind, a suggestion, or an idea perhaps, that he believed could help his mother. He stood beside her, ready to share his thoughts in a hushed tone, hoping to offer a solution that could ease her burden.

Tarendra, with genuine concern and curiosity, leaned in closer to his mother and whispered, "Ma, why do you have to brew a fresh pot of tea for every order? Wouldn't it be more efficient to make a large batch and reheat it for new customers, especially when it's this busy?"

He was taken aback by the stern look that immediately appeared in his mother's eyes. She responded with a firmness that conveyed the seriousness of her commitment to quality.

"Taren, listen carefully. We never serve stale tea here. Every customer of our shop expects a fresh, refreshing cup of tea. Can you imagine their disappointment if they were served bland, reheated tea? They

wouldn't come back if they weren't satisfied with what they got. And think about what that would mean for our business," she explained emphatically.

Tarendra understood then that his mother's approach was not just about brewing tea but about upholding a standard of quality and customer satisfaction that defined their shop.

Tarendra nodded, understanding his mother's perspective, yet he couldn't shake off his concern. In his mind, her workload could be significantly reduced with his suggestion. He saw her insistence on making fresh tea for each customer as an example of her stubbornness. He silently disagreed with her approach with a slight shake of his head.

Sensing his thoughts, his mother gently nudged him. "Now, come on, my son," she said. "Why don't you sit by the stove for a while? I need to take care of the snack items for the day."

Though Tarendra might have had reservations, he knew better than to argue further. He quietly took his place by the stove, contemplating the values his mother held dearly – quality and customer satisfaction – at the heart of their family business.

"Alright, Ma, I've got this!" Tarendra confidently replied, taking his place at the tea station. He immediately started preparing the new orders: two regular and two milk teas. Tarendra knew that the locals preferred their tea with a substantial amount of milk – a rich, creamy mixture with less water.

However, in distraction, he accidentally poured only half the required amount of milk into the tea. Unbeknownst to him, his mother had been observing while sorting the goods from a distance.

"Taren, you can't serve those milk teas," Ma said firmly, catching his attention.

Tarendra was puzzled and a bit defensive. "What? Why? What did I do wrong?"

"You didn't put enough milk in them," she pointed out.

Tarendra, feeling a bit frustrated, responded, "So what? It's not a big deal. They probably won't even notice!"

Ma's gaze was unwavering, her tone steady yet firm as she addressed Tarendra.

"Taren, it's not about whether the customers notice the difference. That's not the point. Serving a cup of tea that I know isn't up to our standards would mean lying every time I claim our tea is the best in Mundikota. It's about being true to what you do, regardless of whether others recognize it. You must maintain your integrity. If you don't put your heart into your work, all the effort is meaningless. Settling for mediocrity and dishonesty defeats the whole purpose."

Tarendra stood there, feeling a mix of embarrassment and enlightenment. He suddenly grasped the depth of his error. His mother's dedication to ensuring every cup of tea was perfect was more than just about taste; it was about integrity, pride in one's work, and genuine customer satisfaction.

Tarendra's cheeks flushed with embarrassment as he realized the gravity of his mistake. "I am so sorry, Ma. I didn't understand how important this was to you," he said sincerely. Carefully, he added more milk to the tea, ensuring each cup reached the perfect consistency that his mother was known for.

His mother watched him correct the mistake and then nodded with satisfaction. "That's my boy! Good job, Taren," she said, a hint of pride in her voice.



This moment with his mother became a pivotal lesson for Tarendra, one he would carry for years. Whether in his studies or any personal endeavor, he committed himself fully. This lesson from his mother was crucial, teaching him the value of authenticity and commitment in every task, no matter how small.

The weekend brought a special treat from Ma, a reason for a small family celebration. The entire family gathered in the cozy kitchen, seated on the floor in traditional Indian style. The atmosphere was warm and festive. After enjoying lunch, Ma presented two new dishes, "Balushahi" and "Gulab-jamun." These sweets were typically reserved for grand occasions like festivals, but Ma had been experimenting with their recipes.

It was evident from their appearance and enticing aroma that she had mastered them perfectly. The rich, sweet fragrance filled the room, tantalizing everyone's senses. The family relished the desserts, complimenting Ma on her ability to create such professional, restaurant-quality delicacies at home.

Like many people, Tarendra and his siblings often felt nervous when trying new things. However, Ma had a different outlook. She welcomed new challenges and encouraged kids, reassuring him that feeling fear when facing something new for the first time was natural. Her guidance was to acknowledge the fear but to proceed regardless. This lesson from Ma inspired kids and instilled the courage to embrace and overcome new challenges.

Ma often shared words of encouragement and wisdom with her children. "It's okay to stumble and fall the first time or even fail the second time," she would say. "The important thing is to keep trying until you get it right. Always have faith in God."

Amid the challenging life in the less affluent parts of Maharashtra, cooking was Ma's passion and escape. Her culinary skills were remarkable; there was hardly any dish she didn't know how to prepare. And she did so with incredible finesse. Whether it was everyday sweets like laddoos and jalebis or preparing a feast for two hundred guests at a wedding or festival, Ma handled it all effortlessly. Her ability to measure ingredients perfectly for any dish showcased her exceptional talent and love for cooking.

In Mundikota village, Tarendra's mother became famous for her exceptional cooking skills. She was often invited to take charge of the cooking at major events like weddings. Working in the kitchen, her saree would inevitably become soiled, so she seldom wore expensive clothes. Her thriftiness and practicality were critical aspects of her character. She managed the family's finances with similar wisdom, ensuring they lived comfortably within their means. Her judicious approach to cooking and budgeting allowed the family to enjoy freedom and stability.

When the Navratri Festival arrived, the entire village of Mundikota was infused with a festive spirit. The grand statue of Devi Durga was set up near Tarendra's family tea shop, becoming a central point for the celebrations. Women, men, and children from the village gathered around the idol daily to perform puja and participate in the Aarti, immersing themselves in the religious fervor. The village air seemed to dance with the joy and vibrancy of the festival.

The joyful atmosphere of the Navratri celebrations in the village was suddenly marred when the local drunkard, known for his troublesome behavior, lurched into the scene. He was visibly drunk and began causing chaos in the pandal, particularly harassing the women with his offensive behavior.

"Hey, leave them alone!" shouted a woman in the crowd, but the man laughed off her protests and continued his antics.

The village elders, usually the ones to maintain order, hesitated to intervene, watching warily but keeping their distance. Tarendra's mother, Ma, witnessed this and was filled with resentment.

“This is unacceptable,” Ma declared firmly, addressing the women around her. “We can’t let him ruin our festival. Are you with me?”

Encouraged by her resolve, several women whom the drunkard had targeted rallied around her. “Yes, we're with you!” they agreed in unison.

With a collective strength, they approached the man. “You need to leave now!” Ma demanded, her voice unwavering.

The drunkard, taken aback by this confrontation, tried to argue, but the group of women was resolute. “Out of our pandal, now!” they chorused, their voices echoing with determination.

Together, they escorted him out of the village premises, their actions reminiscent of Devi Durga's mythical feats. Ma’s leadership had transformed them into embodiments of the goddess's strength and courage. As the man was led away, the villagers looked on in admiration. Thanks to Ma and the women's brave intervention, peace and dignity were restored to the celebrations.

As Ma's courageous act during the Navratri festival became the talk of the village, people started admiring her bravery. “She's like the Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi,” one villager remarked to another, “or even the Rudravatar of Goddess Durga.”

“She stood up to that troublemaker when no one else did,” replied another. “She always says, ‘If you want to be closer to your god, do good things for others.’ And she truly lives by that.”

With the conclusion of the nine nights of Navratri, the festive spirit in the village began to wind down. The excitement of the celebrations gradually faded as villagers returned to their daily routines. The festival, with its vibrant memories and Ma's heroic act, would remain a fond memory as they moved forward into the new academic year.

"The holidays are almost over," Tarendra said to his brother Jitu, his voice hinting at regret.

"Yeah, back to school soon. We need new uniforms this year," Jitu replied, thinking about the start of the new term.

Tarendra's younger siblings typically wore his hand-me-down clothes, but over time, even these became too worn to use. The family was facing financial difficulties, and money was scarce. Despite this, Ma decided buying Tarendra and his brother Jitu new school uniforms was essential. She took them to the Garment shop, selecting slightly oversized garments, thinking ahead. "You'll grow into them, and they'll last longer," she explained, her practicality shining through.

However, at the tailor's shop, they faced a setback. Ma had just enough money for one uniform set and hoped to arrange a deferred payment for the other. "Could we possibly pay for the second set later?" she asked the shop owner politely.

But the shop owner was unsympathetic and bluntly refused. "No, I can't do that. Pay now or no uniform," he said dismissively.

Tarendra felt a surge of disappointment as they left the shop, seeing the disheartened look on his mother's face. It hurt him deeply to witness someone treating his mother with such disrespect. He felt a mix of anger and helplessness, the reality of their financial struggles hitting him harder than ever.

Jitu, known for his quiet and introspective nature, had his challenges. Each day, he embarked on a long journey to a distant bazaar to procure betel nuts for their family shop. Their inability to purchase in bulk necessitated these daily trips. Over time, the physical toll of these journeys became apparent, with blisters on his legs and sunburn marking his skin.

Returning from Tumsar after school one evening, Tarendra couldn't help but notice Jitu's visible discomfort. "Hey, Jitu, those blisters look painful. Are they from your daily runs to the bazaar?" he asked with evident worry.

Jitu nodded slightly, attempting to minimize his discomfort. "It's okay. Not as bad as it looks. We need the betel nuts for the shop," he responded, dismissing his pain with a sense of duty.

Seeing Jitu's stoic acceptance and resilience, despite his discomfort, gave Tarendra a deeper understanding of the strength and perseverance required from each member of their family in the face of adversity.

One day, Jitu, having bought rice and vegetables from the local bazaar, had an unfortunate accident. He fell off his bicycle, causing the groceries to tumble into the roadside. Returning home, distraught and teary-eyed, Jitu relayed the incident to Ma.

"I lost all the food, Ma," Jitu sobbed. "It's all gone into the roadside."

Ma tried to console him, "It's okay, Jitu. Accidents happen. We'll figure something out."

"Life is full of unexpected turns," she said soothingly over the phone. "Sometimes good, sometimes bad. We have to keep moving forward."

Her following words left a lasting impression on Tarendra. "Remember, my sons, if your plate is empty today, it might be filled with more than you can eat tomorrow. Life is unpredictable. Stay strong."

But with their tight budget, buying more groceries wasn't an option. That night, the family had dinner with minimal food and water.

A few days later, on a hot day in summer, Tarendra's family tea shop received an unexpected but welcome visitor. Yogi Baba, a regular visitor to Mundikota who came from Jabalpur a couple of times each year, always made sure to stop by the shop when he was in town. His presence was a source of fascination for Tarendra. The yogi would share intriguing stories about his life, recounting his travels and experiences at the large Ashram in Jabalpur. These tales captivated Tarendra, stirring within him a longing to experience that world.

Seeing Tarendra's interest, and after a thoughtful discussion, Ma agreed to let him accompany Yogi Baba to the Jabalpur Ashram as Tarendra has a summer break from school. It was an opportunity for Tarendra to explore and learn something entirely new.

The ashram operated under strict discipline, beginning early each day. Inhabitants were expected to wake up at 4:30 am and be ready by 5:30 am for morning Pooja and Aarti, followed by breakfast at 7 am. This structured routine instilled in Tarendra the importance of self-control and discipline.

After the morning rituals, the ashram offered access to various religious texts, including the Ramayana and Mahabharata. During these two summer months, Tarendra dedicated himself to learning yoga, meditation, slokas, and stotras, guided by the ashram's gurus. Being amidst strangers in an entirely different environment gave him the courage and self-assurance to stay true to himself, no matter the circumstances. Soon enough, the two months swiftly passed, and on his next journey to Mundikota, Yogi Baba graciously accompanied Tarendra back to his home.

Winter had firmly taken hold, and along with it arrived November, heralding the commencement of the two-week yatra, or Religious Carnival, in Madgi village. Situated between Mundikota and Tumsar, this quaint village nestled on the banks of the river, approximately 8 kilometers away from Mundikota, served as the perfect setting for the annual fair. The event's allure was heightened by its picturesque location on the banks of the Wainganga River.

Tarendra's parents seized the opportunity and set up a shop in Yatra. They sold various items, including flowers, coconuts, pedha, camphor, and incense sticks. Their excitement about potentially making a good profit was palpable.

During the busy fifteen-day Yatra, Tarendra and his grandmother were entrusted with the critical task of managing and safeguarding their shop at night. They spent their nights inside the tent, which also served as their shop, keeping vigilant to ensure its security.

Back in the village, Tarendra's mother managed their tea shop, while his father would visit the yatra every morning, bringing in supplies necessary for the day's trade and then heading back home late in the evening.

The responsibility of night-time vigilance was both significant and demanding, requiring Tarendra and his grandmother to remain alert and watchful. Despite the difficulty of staying awake and attentive, they were committed to protecting their business, understanding the vital importance of their role in maintaining the smooth operation of the shop amidst the lively atmosphere of the yatra.

Fast-forward to today. Tarendra enjoys tent camping in the USA, albeit for a markedly different reason. Here, camping in the jungle or near mountains is an adventure, a means to connect with nature and detach from the daily hustle of American life. This transition from necessity to leisure in Tarendra's camping experiences mirrors the profound changes in life's journey, from the trials of poverty to the joys of success and stability.

The weekends, particularly Saturday and Sunday, were the most crowded during the yatra. These days, Tarendra's mother and siblings would visit the Yatra, providing much-needed additional help. With their assistance, Tarendra and his brother took the opportunity to set up another shop close by. This expansion increased their sales, offering a more comprehensive range of items like coconuts, religious artifacts, and sweets to the many visitors who flocked to the Yatra on weekends. The extra hands made it possible to manage the increased demand efficiently and maximize their business during these peak days.

The Wainganga River, with its blue and crystal-clear waters, provided a serene backdrop to their bustling days. It flowed gracefully, reminiscent of a great python winding through the earth. The river's warm and comforting waters were a balm to their souls. Tarendra and his siblings found respite in bathing in the river, rejuvenating themselves for the work at the fair. No matter how demanding the yatra became, they showed resilience, adapting to the situation and persevering through the busy days.

Tarendra had learned an invaluable lesson from his parents: never to shy away from work, regardless of its nature or scale. They had instilled in him the belief that all types of work were essential for the functioning of society. This mindset made Tarendra appreciate his efforts at the fair's shop, feeling a sense of pride in his work. He saw no shame and was delighted when his friends visited him at the fair. Together, they could enjoy the event for what it indeed was – a celebration of joy and community.

The experience, no matter how small it might seem, carried lessons for a better life for him as he navigated his journey. This idea was echoed by the renowned Marathi poet Bahinabai Choudhary, who wisely observed:

"The world is like a fiery oven,  
Reaching in, one seeks their gain,  
Yet, in the pursuit, one endures the pain,  
Such is the way to achieve life's bread."

## Chapter 06: Flour Mill Journey: Resilience and the Pursuit of Education

The tea shop was unusually quiet, with no customers in sight. The stove flickered with a low flame as Ma sat by the tea stove, her expression tinged with melancholy. She gazed distantly through the canopy's opening, watching a herd of goats meandering across the dry land, followed by a distracted child. Tarendra, sitting at the front corner of the shop, his legs swinging off the edge, was engrossed in a book. The silence enveloped the shop, aiding his focus.

This Friday morning was notably different. The shop, usually bustling and regarded as the most popular tea spot in Mundikota, was strangely deserted. All week, there had been an unusual lull. The empty seats were a mystery, as the shop had always been a haven for tea lovers, many of whom visited daily. The lack of customers wasn't due to any shortcoming of the shop itself. It appears the people of Mundikota had suddenly lost their interest in tea, a perplexing shift that weighed heavily on Ma. She sighed deeply, troubled by the sudden change and its implications for their family business.

Tarendra ignored the heavy atmosphere, not wanting to talk about the shop's unusual quietness. He remained focused on his book, but out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a figure approaching the shop. It was his father, dressed in a yellow-white shirt and faded khaki pants. Tarendra glanced up, noticing the unusual gloominess in his father's demeanor. His face was shadowed with concern, and his eyes seemed hollow, reflecting a deep sense of worry or trouble.

His father walked into the shop with a slow, heavy gait and sat on one of the benches. Ma turned her gaze towards him, her eyes filled with unspoken questions. There was a palpable tension in the air as she waited for him to speak. Sensing the expectancy, the father looked up at her, preparing to share whatever news or concern had brought this change over him.

"Make me a cup, dear," Father requested, his voice weary and dry. "I'm feeling thirsty."

Ma quickly responded to his request. She heated water in the kettle and carefully cleaned a glass teacup. She added sugar and condensed milk into the cup, then picked up the tea kettle, simmering on the stove's low flame. With a skilled hand, she poured a thin stream of tea into the cup in a circular motion, causing the contents to swirl and froth. She set the kettle down once the cup was filled to the brim. She then handed her husband the steaming cup of tea, the inviting aroma wafting through the air.

Father took a slow, contemplative sip, the warmth of the tea seemingly giving him a moment to gather his thoughts. Tarendra watched quietly, sensing that his father was bracing himself to share some unsettling news. The tea, while comforting, seemed like a small preparation for what was to come, a brief respite before delving into whatever was weighing heavily on his father's mind.

Dad's words hung heavy as he broke the silence, "The bidi factory's closing today. I was just there. They let go of all the workers a week ago."

Ma's expression turned to one of concern as she connected the dots. "Is that why we haven't seen any customers from the factory lately?" she inquired.

"Yeah, that's about it," Dad replied with a heavy sigh. "Everything unfolded so quickly. There was turmoil in the management, production took a hit, and now the owners are dealing with significant losses."

Tarendra, who had been listening intently, couldn't hide his shock. "They laid off everyone?" he asked, finding it hard to believe.

The factory was a significant employer in the area, supporting many families, including indirectly benefiting their own through business dealings. The sudden closure seemed unthinkable. "So many families depended on that factory," Tarendra thought to himself, realizing the gravity of the situation and the ripple effect it would have on the community.

Dad's slow nod confirmed the grim reality. "Yes, after today, the bidi factory is no more. They're packing up everything," he said with a note of finality.

Ma's response was tinged with bitterness, reflecting her concern for their livelihood. "That's it, then! That factory was our main source of income. With it gone, our earnings will be halved! How are we going to recover from this blow?"

Dad tried to sound optimistic, but his voice lacked conviction. "We'll figure something out," he said.

Ma, ever practical, immediately thought of their children's future. "I know we will, dear," she replied. "But we need to think about children's school fees. Whatever we plan, it needs to happen quickly. I can't let our children's education suffer."

After witnessing Ma's unwavering determination, Dad's demeanor changed, and a renewed sense of purpose ignited. His expression became one of firm resolve. "Thank you," he said with newfound conviction. "I needed to hear that. We might need to dip into the savings we've set aside from the Yatra and the Gathi sales. It seems the rainy day we've been preparing for has finally arrived."

Ma, always quick to devise a plan, chimed in with a decisive tone. "I'll talk to my younger brother Rishi," she stated. "He has a small plot of land in Tumsar town. I'll see if he's open to selling it to us. It might also be beneficial for us to relocate to Tumsar town gradually.

It would mean better educational opportunities for the children and potential business prospects," she explained. "Owning land there could work to our advantage."

Tarendra couldn't help but agree with his mother's plan. Being in ninth grade, his studies had become increasingly challenging, and the long commute was starting to affect his academic performance.

Upon hearing about the situation in Mundikota, Rishi, Ma's younger brother, stepped in to help. His gesture was generous and understanding. "Please, feel free to take the piece of land," he told Ma. "And there's no rush to pay for it. Settle in, get your finances in order, and you can pay me back whenever you can."

His offer was a significant relief and support to the family, providing them with a much-needed opportunity to improve their circumstances without the immediate pressure of financial repayment.

With the generous assistance of Grandpa and savings, Ma and Dad embarked on a new venture in Tumsar on the plot offered by Rishi. They constructed a modest two-room house, which became a home and the foundation for their new business.

Maternal Grandpa contributed further by helping them purchase a used flour mill, known locally in Maharashtra as "Atta Chakki." This mill was installed in their new house, beginning an unexpected yet promising business opportunity. They were unsure how much money they could earn from the new flour mill.

The family's financial situation didn't allow for the immediate construction of two houses and a complete move from Mundikota to Tumsar, necessitating a temporary separation. Grandma came to live with

Tarendra and his brother Balu in their new home in Tumsar. Meanwhile, Ma stayed back in Mundikota to manage the tea shop.

It took several weeks for the flour mill to gain a steady customer base. In the initial days, the footfall was meager, with only one or two customers showing up, occasionally a few more. Gradually, through word-of-mouth and their dedication to providing quality service, the mill started attracting more regular customers.

Dad was responsible for commuting daily between Mundikota and Tumsar to oversee the flour mill. He started taking the same trains that Tarendra used for his school commute. While not ideal, this arrangement was a practical solution for the family's circumstances. It allowed them to maintain their business in Mundikota while establishing a new one in Tumsar, albeit at the cost of temporarily splitting the family. This period was a testament to their adaptability and resilience in financial and logistical challenges.

The family's circumstances took a challenging turn when Grandma's health started to decline. Consequently, she had to return to Mundikota with Tarendra's younger brother, Balu. The family attempted to hire a worker to operate the mill in Tumsar, but this arrangement proved unsuccessful.

In the meantime, Jitu completed his eighth grade and began attending his new school in Tumsar. With Grandma and Balu gone, Tarendra and Jitu managed the mill while juggling their schoolwork.

It was a demanding period for the boys. Balancing academic commitments with the running of a mill was no small feat. However, Tarendra and Jitu were made of tough mettle. They were resilient and undeterred by their challenges, embodying the spirit of being 'beaten but never defeated.' Their parents' trust in them to run the flour mill was a testament to their maturity and capability.

Despite the weight of their responsibilities, Tarendra and Jitu found solace in the fact that they no longer had to endure the lengthy daily commute between Mundikota and Tumsar. Staying in Tumsar allowed them to attend their schools while managing the mill, streamlining their daily routines, and providing relief in their challenging situation.

Managing the mill proved more arduous than Tarendra and his brother Jitu had anticipated. The mill, being old and worn, had its share of problems. It was evident in its bent metal parts and a recurrent overheating issue. Every time they used it, the motor would roar to life only to stop abruptly after about fifteen minutes, bringing the grinding process to an untimely halt. To circumvent this problem, Tarendra and Jitu stopped the mill proactively after just ten minutes of operation, trying to prevent a complete breakdown during an order.

However, this precautionary measure didn't sit well with their customers, who often became impatient and frustrated when the machine stopped after only ten minutes. The situation worsened whenever the mill broke down unexpectedly, which meant Tarendra or Jitu had to fetch a mechanic from a kilometer away to fix it.

The brothers had to employ charm and patience to retain their customers and prevent them from turning to other mills. They knew they had to keep their customers satisfied and appease their frustrations. One advantage they had was their pricing - they charged less than other mills in the area, which was a critical factor in keeping their customer base despite the mill's frequent issues. This strategy and their efforts to manage the technical difficulties were crucial in keeping their new business afloat.



In their efforts to manage the overheating mill, Tarendra and Jitu devised a risky yet seemingly effective solution: They would place a wet cloth on top of the motor to cool it down and extend its operating time. Looking back, Tarendra realized the gravity of the risk they had taken.

“I can’t believe we used to put a wet cloth on the motor,” Tarendra told Jitu one day with a tone of disbelief. “We were literally putting water right above the electric motor.”

Jitu nodded, a hint of concern in his eyes. “Yeah, it was dangerous, but we were desperate, weren’t we? We needed the mill to work longer.”

It later became clear that the mill’s previous owner had offloaded the faulty machine on them. “He must have known about these problems,” Tarendra reflected with a hint of bitterness. “He just wanted to get rid of it and make some profit.”

“Looks like we were the ones who got tricked,” Jitu replied with a sense of resignation. “But what choice do we have now? We have to keep this mill running.”

Despite realizing they had been duped, the brothers knew they had to continue operating the mill. “It’s not just about the money,” Tarendra said with determination. “It’s about our education and future. We have to make this work, no matter what.”

Their resolve to keep the mill running, despite its flaws and the risks involved, was fueled by the necessity to support their family and their own educational goals. The income from the mill was vital, and they were willing to face the challenges head-on to ensure their family's well-being and prospects.

Following township labor laws every Wednesday, Tarendra and Jitu closed the mill for maintenance. This day was reserved for thoroughly cleaning the mill, a vital routine. They would diligently disassemble and clean each part, ensuring the mill's efficiency and compliance with local regulations.

Tarendra would often start the process. "Okay, let's get this done," he would say, rolling his sleeves. "If we don't clean it well, it won't work properly tomorrow."

The brothers would methodically remove every part, cleaning out all the accumulated dust and scrubbing the grinding plate until no trace of flour was left. This task used to consume several hours, but they understood its importance. Skipping this crucial maintenance could mean the mill wouldn’t operate properly the next day.

Turning on the mill after cleaning was always a challenge, and over time, the brothers began to view it as an art form. "It's almost like a puzzle, figuring out the best way to start it up," Jitu would comment as they reassembled the machine. As they honed their skills, their proficiency in managing the mill improved.

Years later, Tarendra looked back on those days with wonder. In an age where technology had advanced so dramatically, automating much of what was once manual labor, he found a newfound respect and appreciation for their hands-on work at the mill. Though demanding, the experience at the flour mill taught him invaluable lessons about perseverance, skill, and the value of manual labor.

Tarendra and Jitu, adapting to their tight budget, regularly bought Kani rice for their daily meals, a more affordable option than regular rice due to its broken grains. On special occasions, however, they allowed themselves the luxury of buying better quality seeds, fresh vegetables, and plenty of onions to whip up a special curry dish, turning these festive days into small celebrations.

Like many siblings, the brothers had their share of disagreements and scuffles. However, they were wise enough not to let these minor conflicts escalate into serious arguments.

They efficiently divided the responsibilities of running the mill and managing household chores. They alternated operating the mill every three days, ensuring an equal share of work. They also split other tasks like cleaning, washing dishes, and cooking.

The area of Tumsar where Tarendra and Jitu lived faced a significant challenge with its water supply system being out of order. They had to depend on the generosity of their neighbors to meet their water needs. Despite this additional hurdle, Tarendra and Jitu balanced their mill-work and household responsibilities. This cooperative spirit ensured that they could navigate the challenges of their daily life effectively, keeping their household functional and cohesive even in the face of external challenges like the broken water supply system.

Weekends were special for Tarendra and Jitu, as they brought a much-anticipated break from their routine. Their father would visit Tumsar and run the flour mill for the entire day. This allowed the boys a welcome respite from their responsibilities, allowing them to indulge in leisure activities like playing cricket, football, etc.

After saving money from their earnings at the flour mill, Tarendra and Jitu bought a used Cassette Deck, which required separate speakers for better sound quality. To enhance the bass, they ingeniously placed the speakers inside earthen pots (Matkas), a creative solution that significantly improved the audio experience and added entertainment to their lives.

Cricket, India's beloved sport, was Tarendra and Jitu's favorite escape from their daily grind at the mill. Whenever they had a chance, they'd head straight to the grassland at Bangalkar Primary School for a game. Tarendra, being left-handed, had a distinct advantage, especially when bowling. His leg spin deliveries, coming from a unique angle, often left the batters puzzled and struggling to respond.

As Tarendra took his position at the bowling crease, he felt in his element, dominating the game with his unusual style. During one particularly unforgettable match, they had the upbeat song "Hum Bhi Kuch Kam Nahi" playing from a music box. In sync with the music, they played exceptionally well, with Tarendra hitting an impressive series of six consecutive fours, a feat that left both them and their teammates exhilarated.

Their hard work and dedication didn't go unnoticed by the neighbors. They knew the boys' rigorous schedule, juggling work at the mill, attending school and college, and excelling academically. The community often expressed admiration for their commitment.

One day, one of the neighbors commented, "You two are setting a great example for the other kids here. We're all proud of you."

Their efforts and the neighborhood's support and recognition helped Tarendra and Jitu bolster their spirits, motivating them to continue striving for success.

While Tarendra and Jitu earned respect from many in the area, they also attracted the unwanted attention of local bullies. Some unruly kids began to mock them, throwing around the nickname "chakkiwala" in a derogatory manner whenever they saw them. This unwarranted negativity began to affect them, but they remained steadfast.

"Hey, Chakkiwala, grinding any flour today?" jeered a group of bullies as the brothers passed by one day.

Jitu, frustrated, whispered to Tarendra, "Why can't they just leave us alone?"

Tarendra, though equally annoyed, tried to stay calm. "Just ignore them, Jitu. We're doing honest work. There's no shame in that."

Amidst this challenging environment, a positive change occurred when the old neighbors moved out, and the Lede family moved in. The Lede family's son Krishna was in Jitu's school class. The two boys quickly struck up a friendship, providing much-needed camaraderie and support for Jitu.

"Hey, Krishna, want to come over after school today?" Jitu asked one day.

"Yeah, sure! I'd love to," replied Krishna, excited about the newfound friendship.

However, the bullying continued to escalate, becoming increasingly difficult to bear. Tarendra and Jitu, raised with solid values against violence, found themselves at a crossroads. They realized that sometimes, standing up for oneself was necessary.

One day, when the teasing became too much, Tarendra turned to the bullies and firmly said, "Enough! We're not going to take this anymore."

Tarendra, Jitu, and their new friend Krishna decided to confront the bullies. They chose an isolated spot to avoid unwanted attention. The confrontation ensued tensely, but Tarendra, Jitu, and Krishna stood their ground firmly. Ultimately, they emerged victorious, effectively communicating to the bullies that their harassment would no longer be tolerated.

"We're not going to let you push us around anymore," Tarendra declared firmly during the confrontation.

Jitu and Krishna stood by his side, their presence reinforcing the message. The bullies, taken aback by their resolve, backed down. After this incident, Tarendra and Jitu moved on without harboring any resentment. They were relieved that the bullying had stopped and held no ill will towards their former tormentors.

Living alone in a new town posed challenges for Tarendra and Jitu, mainly regarding personal safety. Jitu, keen on defending himself better, enrolled in Karate classes. Tarendra fully supported his brother's decision.

"Jitu, I think learning Karate's a great idea," Tarendra encouraged him. "It's important that you know how to protect yourself."

Their slender and small physiques had made them easy targets for bullies in the past, a vulnerability that was exacerbated by their family's underprivileged status. Tarendra knew all too well the helplessness of being unable to defend oneself.

"If you can stand up for yourself with Karate, I'll worry about you a lot less," Tarendra said one evening as they discussed Jitu's classes. "We're both not big guys, and we must be able to look after ourselves."

Jitu's decision to take up Karate was not just about physical defense but also about building confidence and resilience.

Tarendra was fortunate to have parents who instilled in him the courage to stand up against injustice and speak out.

While Jitu was learning to defend himself through Karate, Tarendra recognized the broader problem in their area: the presence of delinquent gangs preying on weaker teenagers. Remembering his own experiences with bullying, he empathized with these vulnerable youths.

Jitu reached out to the teenagers in their community, sharing his ideas and fostering a sense of unity and camaraderie. "We're stronger together," Jitu would often say to them. "Alone, we're like single sticks, easily broken. But together, we're unbreakable."

His efforts soon paid off as these teenagers banded together, forming a supportive group. This newfound unity among the local youths made them a formidable collective, less susceptible to intimidation and bullying.

The transformation among the teenagers, previously seen as weak, took the local punks and delinquents by surprise. Their perception of Tarendra and Jitu shifted significantly when they saw Tarendra uniting and leading these youngsters. The same individuals who had once taunted Tarendra with the nickname "Chakki" began to address him with respect, calling him "Bhaiyya" or "Bhai."

"Remember how they used to mock us, Jitu?" he said one day, a hint of triumph in his voice. "Now, they look at us differently. We've earned their respect."

The initial decision to confront the bullies had been daunting for both brothers, but the outcome was a positive and substantial change within their community. The once-vulnerable kids now stood up for each other, and the atmosphere of fear had transformed into mutual support and solidarity.

"It's amazing to see everyone standing up for each other now," Tarendra observed, watching the kids interact with newfound confidence.

The result of their efforts was not just a safer community but also a newfound popularity for Tarendra and Jitu. They had gone from being targets of ridicule to respected figures among their peers.

Playing chess was a cherished activity for Tarendra and Jitu as a mental escape from their daily millwork. Their games were intense and strategic, helping them unwind while nurturing a healthy competitive spirit. Over time, they had honed their skills considerably through these brotherly chess battles.

One day, an announcement over the local microphone caught their attention: Tumsar was hosting a city-wide chess tournament. The news instantly sparked their interest. "Jitu, we should enter this tournament," Tarendra suggested with a twinkle in his eye.

"Yeah, let's do it, Taren! It'll be fun to see how we fare against others," Jitu agreed enthusiastically.

To the surprise of many, the brothers excelled in the tournament, their countless games against each other paying off. They advanced through the rounds, eventually facing each other in the semi-finals.

Without seeing which brother could win the semi-final, Jitu walked over and conceded the game to Tarendra without playing. Jitu, ever the supportive brother, cheered Tarendra on. "You've got this, Taren. You can win the final!" he encouraged, demonstrating his belief in Tarendra's abilities, even as they were set to play against each other.

Tarendra felt a surge of determination, driven by his brother's unwavering faith in him. In a closely fought battle, Tarendra emerged victorious, advancing to the finals and eventually winning the tournament. Holding the trophy in his hands, he felt immense pride and accomplishment.

"Couldn't have done it without you, Jitu," Tarendra said, sharing the moment of triumph with his brother. "Your support means everything."

Balancing school and college and managing the mill in Tumsar was challenging for Tarendra and Jitu. Living alone in their room, they had no one to depend on for the daily meals that they prepared themselves. They often studied late into the night after long days at school and working at the mill. Their determination and conviction were the driving forces behind their ability to manage such a demanding schedule.

Ma and Dad constructed two additional rooms behind the mill room with some savings and successfully rented them out to a family. This rental income, combined with the profits from the mill, provided a steady additional source of revenue. This extra income was crucial in covering the costs of Tarendra and Jitu's education and living expenses in Tumsar, making their continued schooling and personal growth possible.

As Tarendra entered his twelfth year of science and Jitu his tenth, Tarendra faced a significant academic challenge. His friends enrolled in private tuition groups for critical subjects like Physics, Chemistry, and Math, receiving guidance from skilled teachers. Tarendra, however, was in a different situation. Due to financial constraints, he couldn't afford the high fees of these tuition classes. Instead, he took on the self-study task, dedicating himself to understanding and mastering the subjects independently.

"I wish I could join those tuitions with you guys," Tarendra mentioned to his friends one day, a hint of regret in his voice.

"Don't worry, Taren, you're smart. You'll manage," one of his friends reassured him.

As the final exams of the twelfth grade approached, Tarendra felt the pressure intensify. He noticed that many students, overwhelmed by the prospect of the exams, chose to drop out and attempt them the following year instead. This made Tarendra contemplate his readiness. He questioned whether he was sufficiently prepared and whether he should also defer his exams to the following year.

"I'm not sure if I'm ready for this," Tarendra confided to Jitu one evening. "Maybe I should wait till next year."

Jitu, understanding his brother's dilemma, offered support. "You've worked hard, Taren. Trust in your preparation. You can do this."

Tarendra was torn between the uncertainty of his preparation and the desire to achieve his desired grades.

Deciding against taking an additional year for preparation, Tarendra made the difficult choice to sit for his twelfth-grade science exams. The thought of spending another year operating the mill, a draining task, pushed him to take this step, hoping for a chance to move beyond the challenging work at the mill.

However, the exams proved to be a tough challenge for Tarendra. He often returned home disheartened, with only half of the questions answered on his papers.

But life had a surprise in store for him. Against all his expectations, Tarendra passed the twelfth standard in science with fifty percent marks. It was a bittersweet moment for him.

While he was relieved and happy to have passed, he knew that his scores, particularly in the "PCM" group (40%) – Physics, Chemistry, and Maths – were not high enough to qualify to apply for a career in engineering, a path he had aspired to pursue.

"I passed, Jitu, but it's not enough even to apply to engineering colleges," Tarendra said to his brother, his voice a mix of relief and disappointment.

Jitu, always supportive, reassured him, "You did your best, Taren. That's what matters. We'll figure out the next steps together."

Tarendra's mixed feelings about his results reflected the complexity of his situation. While passing was an achievement, given the circumstances, it also marked a point of uncertainty about his future career path.

The weight of regret hit Tarendra hard as he grappled with the reality of his situation. The possibility of a career in engineering, a dream he had harbored, now seemed out of reach.

Amidst this turmoil, Tarendra's only viable option appeared to be enrolling in an Industrial Training Institute (ITI), a route typically pursued after the 10th grade and considered much less prestigious than the path he had initially hoped for—the fierce competition for the limited seats in the ITI admission exam added to his worries.

"The ITI is my only shot now," Tarendra sighed to Jitu, feeling defeated. "But getting in won't be easy without proper preparation."

Jitu tried to offer some comfort. "You've always found a way, Taren. Don't lose hope now. We'll work through this together, just like we always have."

In a twist of fate, the former owner of the now-defunct Bidi factory, who owns the engineering college Gondia, emerged as a potential beacon of hope for Narendra. Motivated by this new possibility, Tarendra's dad made a trip to Gondia's engineering college, hoping to secure a spot for his son against the odds.

However, the college's strict admission criteria proved to be an insurmountable barrier. They required a minimum of forty-five percent marks for application, a threshold Tarendra had not met. This requirement extinguished the flicker of hope that had briefly illuminated their path, leaving them in darkness once again.

The sight of his father returning from Gondia, the disappointment etched on his face, was a crushing blow to Tarendra. At that moment, all his efforts, the long hours of work at the mill, and the sacrifices made seemed to have been in vain.

"It's over, Dad," Tarendra said quietly, the weight of defeat heavy in his voice. His parents, equally disheartened, could only offer a silent nod of agreement.

In this challenging time, Tarendra found unwavering support and understanding from his parents. They didn't criticize him for his results; instead, they offered encouragement and wisdom, urging him to accept the situation and continue to strive forward. Their perspective reframed Tarendra's setback not as a failure but as a minor obstacle in his more extensive journey toward success.

"Son, this is just a bump in the road," his father said, offering encouragement.

"Remember, Taren, every setback is a setup for a comeback. You have the strength to overcome this," his mother added, her faith in him unshaken.

Empowered by his parents' belief in him, Tarendra began to see a path through the fog of disappointment. He realized that while one door had closed, another might just be waiting to open. This realization reignited his determination, and he pursued a new direction and applied for a diploma course at a Polytechnic College in Sakoli.

## Chapter 07: Polytechnic Chronicles: Embarking on the Engineering Odyssey

Taking a deep breath to steady himself, Tarendra reached out and pressed the doorbell switch. The familiar ding-dong sound echoed inside, reminiscent of the Tumsar railway station's clock bell, albeit less imposing. He stood under the shadow of the extended building, its shape reaching into the overcast winter sky, stirring a whirlwind of memories.

This place, associated with living with his aunt's family and attending Lokmanya school in Tumsar, held a special place in his heart. Those days, now in the past, had shaped him in many ways. With a heavy sigh, Tarendra reflected on the journey that had brought him back here for an entirely different reason.

He was en route to Sakoli for possible admission into the Government Polytechnic College, carrying with him a mix of hope and anxiety. The fierce competition for a spot at the institute weighed heavily on his mind. The thought of not getting in and having to abandon his dreams of a career in engineering was almost too much to bear.

On impulse, Tarendra decided to visit his aunt, a decision driven more by instinct than planning. As he saw the gate swing open and his aunt's familiar face appear, beaming with joy, he felt a sense of relief.

"Tarendra! My boy! Oh, look how big you've grown!" his aunt exclaimed, her voice filled with warmth as she enveloped him in a tight hug. "How many years has it been since I last saw you? Time sure flies, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, you're right, Aunty," Tarendra replied with a smile, feeling comforted in her presence. "How are you? How's everyone at home?"

Tarendra couldn't pinpoint whether it was his aunt's effusive greeting or a warm hug, but he felt a noticeable shift in his mood as the heavy weight of worry in his heart dissipated.

His aunt led him inside, her grip firm yet comforting around his hand. The modest flat they entered was somewhat cramped for her family's size, but it radiated a cozy, welcoming atmosphere. She ushered Tarendra to sit at the dining table and quickly busied herself preparing a refreshing drink for him.

"So, Tarendra, tell me about everyone back in Mundikota. How's your Ma and Pa?" she inquired, pouring the drink with a practiced hand.

Tarendra began updating her, answering each question with detail and patience. His aunt listened intently, her eyes reflecting nostalgia and genuine interest.

As Tarendra shared his reason for being in the area, his aunt's reaction was heartening. "Oh, you're going for the Polytechnic admission? How wonderful!" she beamed, handing him the glass. "I've always known you were meant for great things. Don't you worry, my dear? I'm sure you'll get in. You have my blessings and prayers."

Tarendra felt a warmth spreading through him at her words. "Thank you, Aunty. Your faith means a lot to me," he replied, feeling renewed hope.

As he left her house and made his way to Sakoli, Tarendra carried with him not just the blessings of his aunt but a newfound confidence. The encouragement and belief of his loved ones had rekindled a spark of optimism within him. He boarded the public Bus to Sakoli, feeling more determined than ever, fortified by the notion that the support and blessings of elders added strength to one's endeavors.

As Tarendra checked the waiting list at the Government Polytechnic College, his initial optimism waned rapidly. His heart sank upon seeing that only five seats remained in the course he was aiming for. His name was eighteenth on the waiting list, a position that seemed too far from the coveted spots. He sat heavily on a nearby bench, his mind racing with 'what ifs.'

"If only I had studied a bit more or maybe taken that gap year," he murmured, the weight of regret pressing down on him.

But then, his aunt's words echoed in his head, bringing a sliver of hope. "You'll make it, Taren. I believe in you. Keep faith," she had said with such conviction.

Clutching onto that belief, Tarendra waited in the admission office. The tension was palpable as the available seats dwindled. He watched, his heart in his throat, as each name was called, each seat claimed. With just one spot left in the civil engineering course, Tarendra felt overwhelming dread and hope.

In a moment that felt almost surreal, Tarendra's name was called out. He looked up, disbelief and relief washing over him as reality set in. He had made it – he was chosen for the last available seat in the Civil Engineering Diploma course at the Polytechnic College. The college staff approached him to confirm his admission, explaining that his selection was due to the extra technical subjects he had studied in his eighth to tenth grades.

His mind tried to make sense of it – the polytechnic college was relatively new, having started just two years prior. Perhaps this was why many students had overlooked it, preferring more established institutions. Whatever the reason, Tarendra knew that this opportunity was a lifeline, one that he had almost not dared to hope for. He realized then that sometimes the most unlikely chances can lead to significant breakthroughs.

As he left the office, he felt gratitude and relief. His aunt's faith had been a guiding light in his despair, and now, it had led him to this unexpected victory. Her words had been more than just comfort; they had been a prophecy that had just come true.

As Tarendra made his way back to Tumsar, tears of gratitude and relief streamed down his cheeks. He was overwhelmed with emotion, firmly believing that his aunt's blessings had turned the tide in his favor at this crucial moment.

The thought that he had been chosen over many other candidates for the last seat in a course like Civil Engineering reinforced his belief in the power of elder blessings. It was a profound lesson in the impact of encouragement and faith, how a few reassuring words could infuse someone with positive energy and inspiration, akin to the comfort one feels after an encouraging visit to a doctor.

Upon returning to his aunt's house, Tarendra shared the good news. The joy lit up her face was akin to a beacon of light illuminating his world. In her radiant smile, he saw a reflection of his mother's happiness for her son's achievement. It was a profound realization for Tarendra, understanding that emotional encouragement and moral support were equally vital alongside financial support. They were like the fuel that propelled one towards achieving their full potential, a crucial half of the journey towards success.

Bursting with excitement, Tarendra rushed into his aunt's presence. "Aunty! Aunty!" he called out. "You won't believe what just happened!"

Aunty looked up with a mix of curiosity and concern. "What is it, my dear?" she asked.



"I got in! They chose me for the Civil Engineering course over the others on the waiting list!" Tarendra's voice was filled with disbelief and joy.

Aunty's face broke into a wide, proud smile. "That's wonderful, my dear," she beamed. "You deserve it! You've worked hard, and now it's paying off!"

"Thank you, Aunty!" Tarendra replied, his heart swelling with gratitude. "Your belief in me has made all the difference."

Tarendra reflected on the importance of kindness and good intentions in that moment of shared joy. He realized that harming others could never lead to genuine happiness. The scripture's words echoed in his mind: "Pure of mind, and pure of thought." This reinforced his belief in maintaining the purity of one's thoughts, for they were the windows to the soul and laid the path to finding humanity and God in the most unexpected places.

Embarking on the journey to fulfill his dream of becoming an engineer, Tarendra's first significant step was getting into the polytechnic. The day to leave Mundikota arrived sooner than anticipated, marking the beginning of a new chapter in his life.

With a heavy heart, Tarendra bid farewell to his family. His mother's tears, silently streaming down her cheeks, mirrored the mixed emotions of pride and sorrow, reflecting the uncertainty of when they would next see each other. Tarendra boarded the bus to Sakoli, each mile taking him closer to his new life at the polytechnic college.

Upon his arrival at the Sakoli admission office, Tarendra learned that the college campus was not in the town itself but in a nearby village called Sendurwafa. Surprisingly, some of his classes were to be held in a garage, an unconventional setting for an educational institution, as the college was building a new polytechnic building. After a brief campus tour, the reality of his living situation became apparent. The college had no dormitory, meaning he would need to find accommodation.

Fortune smiled at Tarendra when he met five other boys in a similar predicament. Realizing the strength in unity, they decided to band together. After some deliberation, they collectively agreed to rent a place. This decision not only solved their immediate problem of accommodation but also forged the beginnings of what promised to be lasting friendships, a vital support system for the challenges that lay ahead in their academic journey.

Settling their new accommodation in Sendurwafa was a cost-effective solution for Tarendra and his five roommates. With the affordable rent, they found a room that could accommodate all six of them. They divided the household chores among themselves.

The initial days at the polytechnic went smoothly until Tarendra and his friends first encountered the seniors. It happened just after their classes had concluded for the day. As they were walking back home, they had to pass through a bus station near the campus, a known hangout spot for the senior students.

As Tarendra and his friends made their way across the bus station, they were suddenly hailed by a group of senior students. The seniors greeted them with a seemingly friendly demeanor, but Tarendra, drawing on his past experiences with bullying, felt a twinge of suspicion.

"Hey, you guys are the new batch, right?" one of the seniors called out, a sly grin on his face.

Tarendra and his friends nodded hesitantly, exchanging wary glances.

"Come over here! Let's get to know each other," another senior beckoned, his tone overly friendly.

The initial conversation appeared casual, but Tarendra's instincts warned him of an underlying threat. He noticed the seniors' demeanor subtly changing, their voices taking on a more commanding tone. Tarendra's heart sank as he realized what was happening – they were about to be ragged.

The situation escalated when one of the seniors came up with an odd request. "I have a great idea for you guys," he said, "Why don't you stand by the roadside and fly a kite for us?"

Tarendra and his friends were taken aback. "Fly a kite? But we don't have one," Tarendra replied, trying to mask his confusion and growing concern.

The seniors laughed, "Oh, you'll figure it out. It's just a bit of fun!"

Tarendra exchanged glances with his friends, all stunned by the seniors' demand. They stood awkwardly by the roadside, their actions drawing amused looks from the amused seniors.

"Come on, guys, let's see those kites fly!" one senior jeered, egging them on.

Tarendra and his friends had no choice but to play with the bizarre demand to avoid further trouble. They lined up along the edge of the station, miming the act of flying kites. It was a ridiculous scene, and passersby couldn't help but stop and stare, some bursting into laughter.

A bus waiting at the station was soon filled with the sound of passengers laughing at the absurd spectacle. Tarendra could feel his cheeks burning with embarrassment.

"This is so humiliating," whispered one of his friends, his voice barely audible.

Tarendra, trying to maintain some semblance of dignity, responded quietly, "Let's just get this over with. The sooner we do, the sooner it ends."

As they continued their charade, Tarendra couldn't help but wish for the ground to swallow him up. It was a moment of utter humiliation, and he silently prayed for the ability to become invisible, to escape the mocking eyes of everyone around them.

Once the ordeal was over, and the seniors had had their fill of entertainment, Tarendra and his friends retreated, vowing to themselves never to be caught in such a situation again.

After the humiliating experience with the seniors, Tarendra and his friends walked back home in heavy silence, each lost in their thoughts. Their faces flushed with embarrassment; they avoided each other's gazes.

"I can't believe they made us do that," muttered one of the friends, breaking the silence.

"Yeah, that was... I don't know, just terrible," Tarendra finally spoke, his voice low. "But we have to move past this. We can't let this get to us."

A quiet withdrawal among the group marked the next few days. They became like shadows of themselves, retreating inward, barely speaking or interacting.

Then, one day, Tarendra decided to break the ice. "Guys, we can't let this keep us down. We're better than this. We're stronger."

His words seemed to lift a weight off their shoulders. Gradually, they started talking and laughing again. Though unpleasant, the incident had inadvertently brought them closer together, strengthening their bond and resilience.

Tarendra reflected on this change one evening. "You know, in a weird way, what happened with the seniors... it made us tougher, more united."

His friend nodded in agreement. "Yeah, it's like we've come out of our shells. We're not the same scared freshmen anymore."

Tarendra's experience with public humiliation unexpectedly became a catalyst for change. It broke down the walls of his fear and apprehension, allowing him to pursue things he had always wanted to do but hesitated to do because of fear.

The fear and uncertainty brought on by the ragging experiences at the polytechnic drew Tarendra and his fellow juniors closer together, forging deep bonds of camaraderie among them.

One day, friends gathered. Tarendra spoke, "Guys, being made fools in public... it was tough. But it's shown me something important. We can't let fear hold us back."

His friends listened, some nodding in agreement. "Exactly," Tarendra continued, "I've realized that being afraid of what others think only stops us from truly living. From now on, I'm not going to let hesitation stop me. It's time we all start embracing and learning from our failures."

In the following weeks, Tarendra and his friends faced several more instances of ragging. Each event, rather than disheartening them, bolsters their courage and resilience. They began to accept and confront challenges with a newfound boldness, transforming what could have been distressing experiences into opportunities for growth and strength.

This newfound outlook transformed Tarendra. He understood that overcoming fear and embracing failure was crucial to personal growth. It wasn't just about working hard or studying diligently but about developing the confidence to take those efforts forward.

Over time, Tarendra realized the value of building relationships with the seniors on campus. Although seniors were initially harsh on the juniors, later, they were helpful and vital to maintaining a vibrant campus life. They were the key to participating in exciting campus activities.

Tarendra saw an opportunity to reignite his passion for cricket when he learned about Captain Santosh of the Polytechnic cricket team, known for his excellence both on and off the field. Eager to return to the game, Tarendra discussed the idea with two friends.

"Guys, I've been thinking," Tarendra said one evening, "we should try out for the cricket team. Captain Santosh is amazing, and I think we can learn a lot from him."

His friends looked at each other, hesitant but intrigued. "Do you think we'll make the cut?" one asked.

"We won't know unless we try," Tarendra replied confidently. "We've got the skills and just need to show what we can do."

Tarendra approached Santosh with a hopeful look. "Hey Santosh, I was wondering if there's room for a couple of new players on the cricket team?"

Santosh looked up from his notes, a welcoming smile on his face. "Yes, we do have space for two more players."

Tarendra's eyes lit up. "That's great news! I have a friend who's also interested. We both love cricket and would love to be part of the team."

Santosh nodded thoughtfully. "Sure, bring your friend along. It's always good to have fresh talent and enthusiasm on the team. Just keep in mind that we work as a unit here. It's all about the team spirit."

"Absolutely Santosh. We're all in for the team," Tarendra replied with a grin, feeling a sense of excitement and opportunity. He was grateful for this chance to be part of something he loved and to contribute to the team's success.

One day, while chatting with Santosh, Tarendra expressed his admiration. "Santosh, your approach to teamwork, lightheadedness, and leadership is inspiring. It's more than just about cricket, isn't it?"

Santosh smiled with a hint of modesty in his eyes. "Thanks, Tarendra. It's true; cricket is a team sport. But the principles apply to life, too. It's about working together and supporting each other. No one, not even the greatest players like Sachin, can win a game alone."

Tarendra nodded in agreement. "That's a powerful way to look at it. And it's not just your skills on the field; your humble nature sets you apart. Everyone respects you, and that says a lot."

Santosh laughed lightly. "Well, I try to stay grounded. We're all here to learn and grow, right? Arrogance doesn't help anyone."

Under Santosh's skilled leadership, Tarendra learned the essence of teamwork and playing with integrity. Santosh emphasized the joy of playing, teaching the team that the outcome of a match wasn't as important as the experience itself. This mindset lifted a significant burden off the players, allowing them to tap into their true potential.

As a result, the team's spirit soared. They participated in a district-level tournament, competing against other colleges with a newfound vigor. Their unity and collective spirit shone through, leading them to dominate the tournament and emerge as undefeated champions. The victory was exhilarating, with the crowd erupting in cheers as their captain lifted the trophy.

The exhilaration of the cricket tournament swiftly faded as the students plunged back into their academic commitments. Tarendra, determined not to repeat his past academic mistakes, dedicated himself wholeheartedly to his studies. He aspired to rise above mediocrity and carve out a distinct identity.

Tarendra discovered a natural talent and profound enthusiasm for engineering drawing, a subject in his polytechnic course. His skill in this area, honed during technical classes from 8th to 12th grade, far surpassed that of his classmates, who often struggled and voiced their frustrations. Unlike them, Tarendra reveled in the challenges of drawing, finding unique joy in its precision and creativity.

A friend approached him as he meticulously completed a complex drawing one evening. "Taren, your drawings are incredible! I can't seem to get my right. Any chance you could help me out?" his friend asked, looking over Tarendra's shoulder at his work.

Tarendra, always ready to lend a hand, replied with a smile, "Sure, I can do that. But, you know, there's a price for my artistic services." He said it jokingly, yet his friend took him seriously.

"How about I treat you to a movie this weekend? And maybe throw in a meal at that new restaurant in town?" his friend offered eagerly.

Tarendra chuckled, "Deal! But let's make this a learning experience for you, too. I'll show you some tricks."

Soon, Tarendra was helping his friends with their engineering drawings and receiving various perks in return, including cash, movie tickets, and meals. He even managed to negotiate his way out of household chores!

As time progressed, Tarendra honed his study habits, focusing on efficiency. He learned to assimilate information much faster than his peers, absorbing texts that would take others a day to understand in just a few hours. This newfound efficiency in his studies allowed him more time to pursue other activities, seamlessly balancing his academic and creative interests.

Tarendra had always been captivated by the remarkable capabilities of the human brain and understood that success in exams was closely linked to the brain's efficiency in storing and recalling information. Tarendra realized the importance of optimizing how information is fed into the brain to excel academically. Further, this optimization increased the chances of remembering crucial information during exams.

Through his experiences, Tarendra explored various strategies for enhancing brain function. These included maintaining physical activity, practicing deep breathing exercises, and spending time in nature, particularly under trees with higher oxygen levels.

Another technique Tarendra found effective was visualization. By creating vivid mental images of the content he needed to remember, he strengthened his memory and improved recall. Additionally, he focused on keywords, using them to craft sentences or associations, which he found more effective than memorizing entire pages of text.

Tarendra ensured that he input information when his brain was most alert, like in the mornings or after short naps. He understood that optimal learning times might vary for different people. During his exam preparations, he often walked to Dhaba (roadside restaurant), 3 km from his room. On these walks, he would think about the keywords he had noted and try to form sentences with them, aiding his memory retention.

## Chapter 08: Echoes of Unspoken Love: The Tumsar Chronicles

While studying in Sakoli, Tarendra made monthly trips back to Tumsar to visit family and friends and collect some funds for his expenses. His reputation in the local area grew, as he was the only one from his neighborhood pursuing an engineering diploma. During these trips, he reconnected with his dear friends, Jai and Viru (Name changed). Having moved to Tumsar earlier, Tarendra had cultivated a deep bond with them, marked by endless hours of engaging conversations and shared activities, further solidifying their friendship.

Tumsar, with its rustic allure, was the perfect backdrop for their escapades. "You remember Jai when we sneaked for a midnight ride?" Tarendra reminisced, his eyes glinting with nostalgia.

Jai chuckled, "How could I forget? We roared through those sleepy streets, feeling like kings of the world!"

Viru joined in, "And those cricket matches in the old field. We were invincible as a team!"

These experiences deepened their camaraderie as they explored every nook and cranny of Tumsar, creating a bond that would last a lifetime.

In simpler times, Tumsar, a small town like much of India, had a unique charm that now seems lost in time. Tarendra's memories offer a window into that era and a testament to the enduring power of friendship.

Tumsar's close-knit community was the setting for Jai's entanglement with Gori, a young woman whose charm and grace captivated everyone. But as fate would have it, Gori did not reciprocate Jai's feelings.

"Ah, Gori was something else," Jai sighed, a hint of sadness in his voice. "But she never saw me the way I saw her."

Tarendra patted his friend's shoulder, "It's tough, Jai. But you know, we all learned something from those experiences."

Viru nodded, "True. And it wasn't just about love. Remember, Tarendra, how did you struggle with your studies too?"

"Yeah," Tarendra admitted, "Polytechnic wasn't easy. But I guess every challenge was a lesson in disguise."

Jai's unrequited love for Gori took a selfless turn. He wanted nothing more than her happiness, even if it meant setting aside his feelings. After Gori's gentle rejection, Jai resolved to ensure her joy, even from afar.

With a heart full of hope and selflessness, Jai turned to his close friend Tarendra. "You see, Tarendra, all I want is for Gori to be happy, even if it's not with me," Jai confided with a mix of resolve and sadness.

Tarendra, known for his academic prowess as he became the first person from that nagar (ward) to attend a Diploma in Engineering at Polytechnic and had a kind heart, listened intently to Jai's heartfelt plan. He understood this was Jai's way of fulfilling Gori's happiness, something he couldn't do himself.

After deep reflection, Tarendra agreed to take on the challenge of winning Gori's heart. "I hear you, Jai. It won't be easy, but I'll try, for your sake," Tarendra said, acknowledging the gravity of his friend's request. Jai looked at him, his eyes reflecting a blend of gratitude and melancholy. "I believe you're the one who can make her happy, Tarendra. You have the qualities she deserves."

With unwavering resolve, Tarendra embarked on this sensitive mission. He knew the path ahead would be filled with obstacles, but he was committed to not disappointing his friend.

"Listen, Tarendra," Jai said one evening as they sat under the starlit sky. "We've got a plan. It's all about the little things, you know? The details that matter to Gori."

Viru said, "Yeah, we need to show her your thoughtful side. Let's start with something simple, like her favorite flowers."

Tarendra, Jai, and Viru weaving a tapestry of effort and dedication, all aimed at kindling a romance between Tarendra and Gori. Their days were filled with intricate planning and heartfelt gestures, each one designed to showcase Tarendra's sincerity and charm.

"Tarendra, it's all about the little things," Viru insisted one day as they sat together plotting their next move. "Every gesture, every word has to reflect who you truly are."

Viru nodded in agreement, adding, "Exactly. We've got to keep this authentic. Gori needs to see the real you, the guy we all know and admire."

As time passed, Tarendra became increasingly drawn to Gori, her grace and charm enchanting him daily. The trio's hard work paid off, as Tarendra became a beacon of charisma, and his authenticity started impacting.

Tarendra was in the second year of his Polytechnic College. He used to come home once a month to visit family and friends. While at home, he used to lend a hand to his brother and run the floor mill. Several in the neighborhood admire his hard work and study for an engineering diploma.

The winds of change were blowing. Tarendra's imminent departure to Sakoli after a break loomed over them, casting a shadow of uncertainty on their budding romance.

Tarendra mustered the courage to reveal his true feelings to Gori in a moment that seemed to stand still. His heart pounded as he began, "Gori, there's something I've been wanting to tell you," his voice quivered, betraying his inner turmoil.

Gori, caught off guard by his sudden seriousness, listened with rapt attention. Tarendra's words flowed, laden with the weight of emotions he had long harbored.

"I... I need some time," Gori replied after Tarendra finished. Her soft voice reflected the turmoil of emotions that his confession had stirred within her.

As Tarendra prepared to leave for Sakoli, the uncertainty of Gori's response hung heavily in his heart. The days in Sakoli were agonizingly long, filled with a tumult of hope and fear. His mind was consumed with thoughts of Gori's decision. Would she accept his heartfelt proposal, or would it lead to the end of their budding romance?

Determined to face whatever answer awaited him, Tarendra cut short his stay in Sakoli, deciding to return to Tumsar after just two weeks. The journey back was fraught with apprehension, each mile bringing him closer to the moment of truth.

In the small towns of India, the concept of arranged marriage reigned supreme, with love affairs being a rare phenomenon compared to the bustling cities. In these close-knit communities, even the simple act of girls conversing with boys was viewed with skepticism and caution.

Once Tarendra returned home, he found himself in a world where such interactions were scrutinized. He longed for the opportunity to meet Gori, even if it was just a fleeting moment as they passed by each other.

The constraints of their traditional society meant that every chance encounter, every brief exchange of glances, held a deeper significance. Tarendra awaited these moments with a mix of anticipation and nervousness, knowing well the societal norms that dictated the bounds of their interaction.

Tarendra eagerly assisted his brother at the flour mill in his home, secretly hoping that Gori would come by with wheat or rice to grind. His anticipation wasn't in vain. After some time, Gori arrived with a pot of grain, igniting a wave of nervous excitement in Tarendra.

Amidst the mill's routine hustle, Tarendra and Gori seemed lost in a silent conversation. Each was waiting for the other customers to clear the area, a tension of unsaid words hanging between them. Finally, as the last customer departed, leaving them in a brief pocket of solitude, Tarendra gathered the courage to break the silence.

"Do you want to say something?" he ventured, his voice a mix of hope and hesitation.

Gori responded with a hint of expectation, "I thought you would have understood by now?"

Tarendra's heart was a maelstrom of conflicting emotions, beating rapidly as he stood there, trying to decipher Gori's feelings. Despite the chaos in his mind, his exterior remained a picture of serenity, a calm façade masking the torrent within. He waited, almost breathlessly, for her to speak again, clinging to the hope that her following words would herald the beginning of something new, something beautiful in their lives.

With a hesitance that belied the depth of her emotions, Gori finally spoke the magic words Tarendra had longed to hear. Her voice, barely above a whisper, carried the weight of unspoken dreams and silent yearnings.

"In these fleeting moments we've shared," she began, her eyes meeting his, "I've found something... something I didn't know I was looking for."

Tarendra, his voice steady but imbued with emotion, replied, "And in every glance, every brief exchange, I've felt a connection that goes beyond words."

Their confessions hung in the air, a testament to the growing love that had silently blossomed between them. The days they had spent exchanging furtive glances and brief words as they passed each other on the road had laid the foundation for this moment. Unnoticed by the world, their affection had taken root, growing stronger with each shared glance and word.

Tarendra, his weekend visit drawing to a close, felt a pang of reluctance at the thought of returning to the Polytechnic. As he prepared to leave, he noticed Gori walking toward his house. An urgent need to speak with her before departing seized him. He quickened his pace, a multitude of questions swirling in his mind.

Tarendra's voice held a note of earnestness as they came face to face. "Gori, I have to return to the Polytechnic, and I can't stop thinking about how we'll stay in touch. Will you... will you write to me? Share your thoughts and feelings through letters?"

Gori looked at him, her eyes reflecting a mix of apprehension and hope. "Yes, Tarendra, I'll write to you. Letters may take time, but they'll carry my feelings across the distance," she replied, her voice tinged with the bittersweet reality of their situation.



Though brief, their conversation was laden with an understanding of their challenges. In an era where long-distance communication was limited to postal mail, their words and promises held a new significance, binding them across the miles with the anticipation of handwritten words and shared emotions.

Every day, Tarendra eagerly awaited the postman, hoping for a letter from Gori. His heart would leap at the sight of the familiar figure in the distance, and he'd find himself running toward the postman, driven by a blend of hope and anticipation. On days when he received a letter, joy would wash over him as he unfolded the pages to read Gori's words. These letters were their lifeline, a deep connection bridging the physical distance with heartfelt expressions of love and longing.

However, on days when the postman arrived empty-handed, Tarendra felt a sharp sting of disappointment. The absence of Gori's words left an aching void, a stark reminder of their separation.

During one such afternoon, as Tarendra read Gori's latest letter, he murmured to himself, "Your words, Gori, they bring you so close, yet the distance feels so vast."

In her letter, Gori wrote, "Each word I write is a step closer to you, Tarendra. Hold onto them until we can bridge this distance."

Their exchanged letters became more than mere correspondence; they were a testament to their resilience and the enduring power of their love. Each envelope carried words and a shared journey of emotions, binding them across the miles.

Tarendra and Gori's love story unfolded against the backdrop of a society deeply entrenched in tradition and caste consciousness. Their pure and unwavering love faced the harsh reality of societal norms that threatened to tear them apart.

"I never knew love could be so complex," Tarendra confided in Jai one evening, his voice laced with worry. "It's not just about us. It's about our families, our community... everything seems to be against us."

Gori, equally torn, shared her fears with Tarendra during one of their secret meetings. "Tarendra, I love you, but the pressure from my family is unbearable. They can't see past our castes."

As Tarendra pursued his studies, he realized that his love for Gori was not just a mere college romance but a profound connection that transcended societal barriers. However, the harsh reality of their different caste backgrounds cast a long shadow over their relationship.

"Can our love overcome all these obstacles?" Gori asked Tarendra one day, her eyes searching his for an answer.

Tarendra, holding her hands, replied with conviction, "Our love is stronger than any social barrier. We'll find a way, Gori. We have to."

The challenge was daunting. Tarendra, still a student and without a stable job, struggled to convince Gori's family. Their love was a beacon of hope in a society that often frowned upon such unions.

"I will stand by you, no matter what," Tarendra promised Gori, his determination unwavering.

But the murmurs and disapproval of the community were constant. Gori's family, under societal pressure, remained steadfast in their opposition, complicating the path to their union.

Despite these overwhelming odds, Tarendra and Gori's love continued to flourish; in the small town of Tumsar, where traditions and societal norms were deeply rooted, Tarendra and Gori's love story faced the

stern test of India's caste system. Despite the miles and time that separated them, their bond deepened through heartfelt letters. The anticipation and longing only added to the intensity of their feelings.

One day, Gori, accompanied by her friend, unexpectedly visited Sakoli, where Tarendra was studying at the Polytechnic. Her arrival, a pleasant surprise to Tarendra, quickly became the talk of the village and even reached the nearby town of Tumsar. In a community where every event was a subject of interest, Gori's visit to see Tarendra sparked a flurry of conversations and speculations.

During those times, having a girlfriend was a status symbol among boys. In the Polytechnic, Tarendra's friends were equally intrigued. "So, this is the famous Gori we've heard so much about," one of his friends commented with a smile as they passed by. Tarendra could only respond with a bashful grin, feeling pride and shyness.

Tarendra, holding her hand, replied, "Your being here, seeing my world, it means everything to me." Their time together in Sakoli, brief as it was, strengthened their bond.

The couple found themselves at a crossroads, caught between their deep love and the unyielding barriers of societal norms. Tumsar, a town steeped in tradition, was not kind to lovers who dared to cross caste lines. Gori's family, under societal pressure, stood firmly against their union, fearing the backlash from the community.

Tarendra, still completing his education and without a stable income, faced an uphill battle. Given the weight of societal expectations and the risk of ostracism, he knew convincing Gori's family would be arduous.

"I don't know how we can overcome these barriers, Gori," Tarendra expressed his concerns during a clandestine meeting by the riverside, "But I promise you, I'll do everything in my power to make this work."

Gori, torn between her love for Tarendra and her family's expectations, felt the gravity of their situation. "I love you, Tarendra, but the thought of being ostracized by our community terrifies me," she confessed, her voice trembling with emotion.

The tale of Tarendra and Gori in Tumsar became a poignant narrative that echoed through the town, a love story that braved but ultimately succumbed to the unyielding societal norms. Sensing the escalating tension and fearing the consequences of a union outside their caste, Gori's family intervened.

One sad day, Gori, accompanied by her brothers and relatives, went to Sakoli, where Tarendra was studying. Gori's heart was tumultuous, and each step towards Tarendra was filled with dread and sorrow. In a meeting that would seal their fate, her family stood before Tarendra, the weight of tradition casting a long shadow over them.

"Gori's happiness is our priority, but we cannot ignore our traditions and the backlash from our community," one of Gori's brothers solemnly addressed Tarendra. Gori stood silently, her eyes a wellspring of unshed tears.

Tarendra, facing Gori's family, felt the gravity of their words. "I understand your concerns, but my love for Gori is true," he replied, his voice steady yet laden with emotion.

Gori's family persisted, emphasizing the societal turmoil their union would cause. "We must think of the larger picture, the harmony of our community," they implored.

Caught in an impossible situation, Gori made the heart-wrenching decision to uphold her family's wishes. In a moment laden with unspoken words and stifled sobs, she and Tarendra parted ways. Once so vibrant, their dream faded into the shadows of societal dictates.

Tarendra has to return to his studies, carrying the burden of almost love lost. Bound by the chains of tradition, Gori entered a marriage arranged by her family, her heart forever entwined with Tarendra's.

In the evening after Gori's departure, Tarendra's life spiraled into profound despair, clouded by an unrelenting gloom. His friends at Sakoli College, who shared a modest apartment with him, witnessed his descent into sorrow, a once vibrant spirit now dimmed by the heartache of lost love.

Tarendra's ordeal took an even more harrowing turn when a group of toughs, known in the area as "Gundas," stormed into their apartment. They demanded information about a young woman who had visited Tarendra the previous day. Perplexed and protective of Gori's privacy, Tarendra attempted to deflect their inquiries, but his efforts were in vain.

The situation escalated rapidly. The harsh blare of police sirens shattered the tense atmosphere as Police arrived, plunging Tarendra into a nightmare. In a whirl of confusion, he was taken to the Police Station, accused of being involved in a mysterious case he knew nothing about.

In the cold, stark confines of the police station, Tarendra learned the alarming reason for his arrest. The authorities were on the hunt for the daughter of a notorious mafia figure, mistakenly believing her to be the woman who had visited Tarendra.

Jai and Viru, upon hearing about Gori's visit and her brother accompanying her to Tarendra's place, rushed from Tumsar, fueled by concern for their friend Tarendra. They feared that the unusual event might lead to unforeseen troubles for him. Their apprehension turned to shock when they arrived to find the police taking Tarendra away. Confusion and concern rippled through Tarendra's circle of friends, who gathered in solidarity outside the police station, firmly believing in his innocence.

The situation escalated quickly, drawing the attention of Tarendra's college authorities. The lecturer and principal, upon hearing of the incident, promptly intervened. A large gathering of friends and students from college came in front of the Police Station to support him. They spoke to the Senior Police Inspector, presenting a clear picture of Tarendra's character and the circumstances as understood by his friends. Their intervention proved pivotal. The police, after understanding the situation better, released Tarendra but requested the presence of all individuals who had visited him that morning the next day for further clarification.

When Tarendra stepped out of the police station, he was relieved and surprised to see Jai and Viru. After a brief exchange in which everything was explained, Jai and Viru immediately set off to Tumsar to bring Gori and her brother to Sakoli, aiming to resolve the misunderstanding.

The long night stretched on for Tarendra, each moment a heavy burden on his soul. The day's events played repeatedly in his mind, a relentless cascade of emotions ranging from heartbreak to fear, embarrassment to despair. In Sakoli, a place where everyone knew each other and where community opinion held significant weight, his recent ordeal with the police was not just a personal tribulation but a social stigma that could linger for a long time.

The thought of his family learning about the incident filled him with dread. He could almost hear the whispers and see the judgment in the eyes of his neighbors and friends. The prospect of facing his family, explaining the misunderstanding, and living down the incident seemed insurmountable.

Amidst this turmoil, darker thoughts began to creep into his mind. The overwhelming sense of humiliation and the fear of being ostracized led him down a path of despair, where thoughts of suicide momentarily seemed like an escape from the relentless pressure and shame.

As dawn broke, the situation took a turn when Gori's brother, who was accompanied by a couple of local political leaders, arrived at the police station. They came prepared, bringing photographs of Gori to clarify the misunderstanding. Their arrival and explanation shed light on the confusion that had led to Tarendra's unjust detention.

The mix-up originated from two neighborhood witnesses - a rickshaw driver and a shopkeeper. They had informed the local ruffians and, subsequently, the police about a young woman and man - presumed to be Gori and her brother - visiting Tarendra's apartment. This sparked suspicion and led to Tarendra's wrongful apprehension.

Upon viewing the photographs of Gori and her brother, the witnesses confirmed their identities. As the interrogation progressed, the police officers realized their mistake. It became clear that the person who had visited Tarendra was indeed Gori, and there was nothing illicit or suspicious about her visit.

With this revelation, Tarendra was released from police custody, and his innocence was unequivocally established. However, the relief of his release was tempered by the incident's emotional and psychological impact. Tarendra returned to his apartment, no longer just a student but a young man who had experienced firsthand the erratic nature of fate and society's quick judgment.

The incident left a lasting impression on Tarendra. The ordeal was a harsh lesson in life's complexities and challenges, a reminder of how quickly circumstances could change and how society's shadows could cast prolonged and unexpected shadows over even the most innocent of actions. Once buoyed by youthful optimism and dreams of love, Tarendra now navigated a world more complex and daunting than he had ever imagined.

But in these moments of utter vulnerability, a spark of resilience flickered within Tarendra. Despite the engulfing darkness, he realized that succumbing to these thoughts was not the solution. He needed to face the challenges head-on, clear his name, and work towards rebuilding his reputation.

Tarendra's ordeal through societal judgment and personal heartache had left him deeply wounded, emotionally scarred by the indifference of a society that seemed to overlook his struggles. In his solitude, he nursed these wounds, but this period of introspection also sparked a newfound determination.

In the quiet of an evening, Tarendra reflected, "I've been underestimated and sidelined. But that ends now. I will prove my worth."

This resolve ignited a fierce drive in Tarendra. He enthusiastically threw himself into his studies, recognizing education as his most powerful tool against prejudice and misconception. His pursuit was not just about disproving naysayers; it was about reshaping his identity, about crafting a future unfettered by societal constraints. This incident transformed him from a disheartened young man into a purpose-driven individual. Each step he took was laden with determination and clarity of purpose. Reminding himself of moments of doubt, he thought, "My past will not define me. My future will."

## Chapter 09: New Horizons: Tarendra's Ascent at Nagpur Polytechnic

Amidst the tumult of recent events, Tarendra found solace in focusing on his academics at Sakoli Polytechnic, pouring his energies into excelling in the final exams. His goal was clear: to earn high marks and move beyond the negative scrutiny that followed the police incident. However, Sakoli's limited resources and faculty shortfall stifled his quest for knowledge, propelling him to seek a more nurturing academic environment.

His sights turned to the Government Polytechnic in Nagpur, a prestigious institution known for its robust educational framework. "I need a place that challenges me, that helps me grow," Tarendra remarked to a friend over a cup of chai. "Sakoli's constraints are holding me back."

Encouraged by his mentor's advice, "For your potential, Nagpur Polytechnic could be your launchpad," Tarendra applied for a transfer. The day he received the acceptance letter, a new chapter began. He shared the news with his family and said, "I'm going to Nagpur Polytechnic. It's a chance to start afresh and chase my dreams."

This shift to Nagpur promised academic rejuvenation and a much-needed escape from the oppressive perceptions of his hometown, which aligned perfectly with Tarendra's aspirations for growth and excellence.

Leaving Sakoli was a bittersweet experience for Tarendra, especially parting ways with the friends he had grown close to. These farewells were emotional, each goodbye more heart-wrenching than the last. But with a heavy heart, he made the transition from Sakoli to Nagpur. As he finalized his admission process at the new college, Tarendra felt the weight of the opportunity before him. This was more than just a change of location; it was a rare chance to begin anew. With a mix of anticipation and determination, he was ready to fully embrace this fresh start, eager to see where this new path would lead.

Nagpur's environment was a stark contrast to Sakoli's. Here, the setting was more urban and affluent, a thriving suburb than Sakoli's more rural and modest atmosphere. The students Tarendra encountered were predominantly from wealthy backgrounds, their lives marked by bikes and upscale homes.

This disparity was a far cry from the humble circumstances to which Tarendra was accustomed. The polished demeanor, sophisticated attire, and overall affluence of his peers only amplified his sense of alienation, making him acutely aware of his different upbringing. Tarendra grappled with feelings of not fitting in this new world of privilege and sophistication.

In the boys' dormitory, often referred to as a hostel in India, Tarendra found a more diverse and welcoming environment. The dorm housed students from various engineering branches and academic years, including seniors and juniors, who hailed from different regions. This diversity made the dormitory a melting pot of cultures and experiences, somewhat easing the process of making new friends compared to his classroom setting.

Tarendra's transition to the Nagpur Polytechnic was graced with a stroke of good fortune when he discovered that Umesh, the son of Nikhade sir and his old school friend, had also transferred from a different polytechnic to Nagpur. To Tarendra's delight, Umesh became his roommate in the hostel.

"Umesh! Is that you?" Tarendra exclaimed, hardly believing his luck as he entered their shared room.

Umesh, equally surprised, responded with a wide grin, "Tarendra! I can't believe it's you. What are the odds?"

Their joy at being reunited was palpable. They spent hours catching up, sharing stories of their respective journeys since leaving their hometown, and discussing their hopes and plans for their time at Nagpur Polytechnic.

Within the hostel, the barriers of class and sophistication that seemed so pronounced in his classes were less evident. The shared experiences of hostel life, from communal meals to late-night study sessions, fostered a sense of camaraderie among the students.

Tarendra understood that earning respect and building friendships at his new campus would present significant challenges. His slim physique, modest appearance, and limited financial resources for better clothing and other expenses added difficulty in gaining respect.

Furthermore, the entrenched social hierarchy and the tendency to overlook students from underprivileged backgrounds were obstacles he couldn't ignore. Despite these hurdles, Tarendra's experiences have shaped him into a resilient and resourceful individual, equipping him to face these new challenges.

Undeterred, he began actively engaging with other modest students like his background, approaching conversations with genuine interest and charisma. Yet, he quickly realized that being sociable wouldn't suffice to break into established social circles. He needed to stand out to earn their respect through his actions and character.

Tarendra's dedication to his studies was unyielding. He mastered his daily assignments and proactively studied the upcoming day's topics. This approach significantly boosted his confidence in class and enhanced his ability to engage with lectures. Both teachers and classmates noted his exceptional commitment, and Tarendra began to build a strong reputation in his class.

Gradually, the students from affluent backgrounds, who initially overlooked him, began to respect Tarendra. His rise from obscurity was a direct result of his persistent efforts. Yet, Tarendra was puzzled by his fellow students from similarly disadvantaged backgrounds who lacked the drive to overcome their challenges. Despite their intelligence and education, they seemed resigned to their circumstances.

Determined to make a difference, Tarendra reached out to these students, who were often relegated to the back benches. He observed their shyness and insecurities - about their appearance, height, weight, and skin color. Realizing they were hampered by self-doubt, Tarendra encouraged them to speak up and assert themselves.

Tarendra understood that these students, having grown up in villages or poverty, had missed crucial academic nurturing during their formative years. As a result, they struggled with the college's advanced lessons, teetering on the brink of academic failure. This situation deeply troubled Tarendra. He recalled his mother's wise words about the importance of helping those in need, reflecting on how he had once been in their shoes and had benefited from the kindness of others. Inspired by his mother's advice, Tarendra committed himself to assisting his struggling classmates, embodying the spirit of paying forward the kindness he had once received.

He emphasized the importance of embracing vulnerabilities.

"We all have flaws, but how we handle them matters. If we let our imperfections become our weaknesses, they can break even the strongest among us. But they can become our greatest strengths if we acknowledge and work on them."

Tarendra dedicated himself to supporting his classmates with their practical projects and tutoring them in their theoretical studies. To his delight, he discovered that this process deepened his understanding and knowledge of engineering subjects. He realized that teaching was a reciprocal tool, enhancing both the student's and teachers' grasp of the subjects.

"I can't believe how much clearer everything is now that I'm explaining it to others," Tarendra said to one of his friends, reflecting on his newfound understanding.

The transformation in his classmates was profoundly satisfying for Tarendra. Witnessing these once-timid students emerge as strong under his guidance was heartening.

In their group, Tarendra naturally assumed the role of leader. His peers looked up to him with deep respect and admiration, almost as if he were a prominent authority figure.

"Thanks to you, Tarendra, we're not just surviving in this college; we're thriving," said another friend, gratitude evident in his voice.

Tarendra felt a sense of accomplishment. "It's all about lifting each other," he replied humbly.

The iconic Indian actor Shahrukh Khan, widely known as King Khan, released his new romantic comedy, 'Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman,' in 1992. Tarendra and his friends were determined to watch it together. Excited, they headed to Nagpur's best "Smruti Cinema" theater. Upon arrival, they were greeted by a long queue and realized that getting adjacent seats would be challenging.

After purchasing their tickets, they found themselves scattered throughout the theater. Tarendra, unwilling to let this spoil their group experience, took action. "Guys, wait here. Let me see if I can sort this out," he said, approaching the theater staff.

He persuaded them to rearrange the seating, ensuring they could all sit together. "You did it, Tarendra! Now we can enjoy the movie as a group!" one friend exclaimed, relieved and excited.

Watching the movie together, they reveled in the shared laughter and commentary, making the most of their time together. It was a simple yet memorable outing, reinforcing the importance of cherishing moments with friends.

The annual college science exhibition was on the horizon, and Tarendra was excited to participate. Initially, his friends seemed hesitant, but Tarendra, with his characteristic enthusiasm and persuasiveness, managed to rally them into forming a team. He took the lead, ready to harness their collective talent and drive.

"Guys, we have a real shot at this," Tarendra said to his team, his eyes shining with conviction. "Let's think big; let's be innovative!"

One brainstorming session led to another, and finally, they settled on an ambitious project – a miniature model of an "Automated Electric Bridge." Tarendra's cousin Ravi, who has a knack for mechanics, pitched a clever idea. "What if we salvage the motor from an old tape recorder to power the bridge?" he suggested.

The team worked tirelessly, and their camaraderie and shared goal fueled their late-night sessions. There was a sense of anticipation and excitement as they pieced together their creation.

Their model stood proudly on exhibition day, drawing a crowd. The intricate design and functionality of the electric bridge caught everyone's attention. Professors and students surrounded their booth, marveling at the team's ingenuity.

"This is incredible work," one of the professors exclaimed, examining their model. "The precision, the creativity – it's exceptional!"

The applause and admiration were overwhelming. Tarendra and his team were elated as they received their first award together. It was a moment of triumph and recognition.

News of their success spread quickly across the campus. Tarendra, once an unknown student from a small village, was now a celebrated figure in the college. "You're the guy who built that amazing bridge model, right?" students would ask him in awe.

"Yes, that was our team's work," Tarendra would reply modestly, smiling.

This achievement signified a significant turning point in Tarendra's life. From a simple village boy, he had become a leading figure in his polytechnic college, admired and respected by all.

As Tarendra's time at the Polytechnic College in Nagpur came to a close, he made a strategic decision. Instead of waiting until graduation, he resolved to start his career early by securing a job in a construction company. He understood this would give him a head start in civil engineering and provide invaluable real-world experience.

Meanwhile, back in Tumsar, when Tarendra moved out to Polytechnic College, Tarendra's brother Balu had stepped up to assist Jitu with the flour mill operations. Their father made regular trips to Tumsar to ensure the smooth running of the mill, allowing Jitu to focus on his studies. However, the mill was plagued with frequent technical issues, often halting operations and necessitating urgent interventions. Jitu would have to rush from college whenever their father called for help with the mill's malfunctions.

After completing final exams from Nagpur Polytechnic, Tarendra turned to his uncle Sharad Dhabale, a former military man living in Nagpur, for guidance. His uncle's experience and connections in the city were resources Tarendra hoped to leverage in his job search.

"Uncle Sharad, I've graduated now," Tarendra said during one of their meetings. "I'm looking to start my career in civil engineering. Do you have any advice or contacts to help me land a job?"

Sharad, who had always admired Tarendra's determination and work ethic, was more than willing to help. "Let me see what I can do, Tarendra. I know a few people in the construction industry here. I'll put in a good word for you."

Sharad took him on a bicycle ride, covering a distance of ten kilometers, to meet the owner of a construction company. This meeting, facilitated by Sharad's recommendation, proved to be a pivotal moment for Tarendra.

Sharad introduced Tarendra with high praise, "This is my nephew, Tarendra. He's just graduated from polytechnic and is eager to apply his skills in the real world. I believe he would be a great asset to your company."

The owner, impressed by Tarendra's qualifications and Sharad Uncle's endorsement, offered Tarendra a position as a "Construction Site Supervisor." Immediately, Tarendra found himself on a construction site within a couple of days, assuming the supervisor role, managing laborers, and providing guidance according to the site plan.



Two months after Tarendra's final exams, his journey took an exciting turn when he received the news that he had passed his diploma with flying colors - securing First Class with 67% marks. This excellent performance filled Tarendra and his family with immense joy and pride.

## Chapter 10: Engineering Degree: A Voyage of Academic Excellence

Tarendra found himself wondering where the three years had disappeared. As the administration announced the results, Tarendra's heart raced with anticipation. He scanned the gazette list and finally found his student number. His joy was boundless - not only had he passed, but he had achieved a sixty-seven percent score.

After the celebrations, Tarendra and his friends sat together, reflecting on their journey. Tarendra began to seriously consider his future in this quiet moment of contemplation. He realized that while a diploma in engineering was a significant milestone, it was not the end of the road for someone with ambition. He needed to aim higher to excel in the job market and fulfill his aspirations. This realization led him to set his sights on pursuing a bachelor's degree in engineering, a decision that marked the next chapter of his educational journey.

Tarendra gathered with his friends, brimming with thoughts about his future. Eager to discuss his aspirations, he shared, "Now that I've earned my diploma and secured a job, I believe it's crucial to plan for the long term," he stated with determination and foresight.

His friends, always supportive, listened intently. "What's your plan, Taren?" they inquired, their curiosity evident.

"I'm thinking of pursuing a bachelor's degree," Tarendra responded, his eyes shining with determination.

Dnyaneshwar, one of his closest friends, hesitated before speaking, "That's a great goal, Taren, but there's something you might not have considered." Tarendra looked at him quizzically.

Dnyaneshwar continued cautiously, "To get into a government program for your bachelor's, you'd need a much higher score. I know that at least eighty percent is required for a free seat in Government Engineering College."

Tarendra's face fell, his enthusiasm dimming. "Are you serious? But I only scored sixty-eight percent..."

"Yeah, Taren," Dnyaneshwar replied sympathetically. "It's a tough requirement, and with your current score, you're falling short."

Tarendra felt a wave of worry wash over him. He had to reassess his plans. The reality of his situation was harsher than he had anticipated. With a twelve percent deficit from the required score, his dream seemed more distant than ever. He needed to find another way.

Tarendra, unwavering in his resolve, faced yet another obstacle on his path. Despite being a transfer student from Sakoli Polytechnic College, his final year mark sheet from the Mumbai Technical Board, which conducted the examination, was delayed. This hiccup posed a significant challenge as the marksheet was essential for obtaining his college Transfer Certificate (TC), a vital document needed for his application to a bachelor's program.

Tarendra's anxiety grew as every attempt to resolve the issue seemed futile. Nagpur Polytechnic College, where he had graduated, was of little help, suggesting he should deal directly with Mumbai Technical Board if he needs Marsheet urgently.

Facing this bureaucratic maze, Tarendra realized that resolving this administrative error would be a daunting task that required him to journey to Mumbai, far from the security of his familiar surroundings in Nagpur and Sakoli. Despite the uncertainty and the growing time pressure, Tarendra resolved to tackle this challenge head-on, knowing it was the only way to keep his academic and career ambitions alive.

The absence of his marksheet placed Tarendra in a precarious position, as the college refused to issue his Transfer Certificate (TC) without it. This predicament threatened to derail his admission prospects entirely. Desperate for a solution, Tarendra pleaded with the college authorities for a photocopy of the gazette page listing his name and marks. After verifying his identity, they obliged, stamping and signing the photocopy to attest its authenticity. With this document, Tarendra could validate his academic records during the application process.

However, resolving his issue required a journey to Mumbai, a considerable distance (900 km) from Nagpur. But before embarking on this crucial trip, Tarendra needed to visit his family. He approached his uncle with two requests: firstly, for a ride back home on his motorcycle, and secondly, to inquire if his uncle could accompany him on the vital journey to Mumbai.

Tarendra knew that navigating the bureaucratic maze of the State Polytechnic Board of Education in Mumbai would be challenging, and having his uncle by his side could provide both moral support and guidance.

Tarendra greeted his Uncle Maroti with enthusiasm. "Hey, Uncle Maroti! How's everything with you?"

Uncle Maroti, a youthful man in his late thirties, beamed at Tarendra. "Doing great, Taren! What brings you here?"

After Tarendra had detailed his struggles with the mark sheet and transfer certificate, he inquired about Uncle Maroti's business. "How's the electronics repair going? Could you spare me a few days to visit Mumbai?"

Uncle Maroti laughed heartily. "For you, anything! But you know, my work is pretty hands-on. If I step away for a week, my clients might move on to someone else."

Tarendra looked concerned, but Uncle Maroti reassured him with a chuckle. "Don't worry about it. I'm not going to let you navigate this alone. We'll head to Mumbai together. My clients can wait."

Tarendra's relief was evident. "Thank you, Uncle. You're a lifesaver!"

"It's no big deal, Taren," Uncle Maroti said, patting him on the back. "Family first, always."

Tarendra's face lit up with gratitude when his uncle responded, "Thank you so much, Uncle! You have no idea how much this means to me."

Uncle Maroti waved his hand dismissively. "Ah, don't mention it. Family comes first, always. Besides, a trip to Mumbai isn't the worst thing in the world. We'll manage just fine."

Tarendra smiled, feeling a weight lift off his shoulders. "I promise I'll make it up to you, Uncle."

"Your success is all the repayment I need," Uncle Maroti said with a smile. "Now, let's plan this trip and get your paperwork sorted. Mumbai, here we come!"

With his uncle's support, Tarendra felt a renewed sense of hope. Together, they would face the challenge of navigating the bureaucratic hurdles in Mumbai, bringing Tarendra one step closer to achieving his dreams.

After a heart-to-heart with Uncle Maroti, Tarendra gained a deeper insight into his uncle's life and work. Uncle Maroti, a dedicated radio mechanic, balanced his time between mechanic shops and house calls for electronic repairs. Despite his tight schedule, he was ready to set aside a week for Tarendra's sake.

However, Tarendra's conscience wouldn't allow it. He couldn't let his uncle sacrifice a week's earnings. With a heavy heart, he decided not to involve his uncle in his Mumbai plans. He mounted his uncle's motorcycle, ready to journey back to Mundikota.

Their ride took them through the bustling streets of Nagpur, across Bhandara, and through Tumsar, finally reaching Mundikota by nine in the evening. Tarendra's unexpected arrival brought immense joy to his Ma, especially in an era when telephones were a luxury.

As they settled in for the night, Tarendra opened up about his aspirations for further education. His family listened intently, their faces a mix of concern and pride. He spoke of his dreams and the hurdles he faced, seeking their advice and support for the challenging path ahead.

As Tarendra shared his future plans with his family, he looked at his mother, seeking her opinion. "So, now that you've heard my plans for the future and what I intend to do, what do you think about it, Ma?" he asked tentatively.

With her unwavering smile, Ma responded warmly, "There's nothing to think about, my son. You've come so far, and this is just the beginning. If you believe this is the right move, you have my support. Remember, there's no turning back. Just stay committed to your education. That's all that matters to me."

Tarendra felt a wave of gratitude wash over him. His mother's words were like a beacon of encouragement. She even handed him cash before he left the next day, moving him nearly to tears. "Thank you, Ma," Tarendra said, his voice choked with emotion. "I won't let you down."

The next day, Tarendra and Uncle Maroti embarked on their journey. As they rode the bike towards Nagpur, Uncle Maroti shouted over the wind, "You're doing the right thing, Taren! This journey is going to shape your future!"

Reaching Nagpur around noon, Tarendra quickly headed to Nagpur Polytechnic to get the necessary photocopies. Then, they rushed to the railway station with all his documents. As they waited for the Vidarbha Express, Tarendra turned to Uncle Maroti, "I can't thank you enough for this, Uncle."

Uncle Maroti clapped him back, "You just focus on your goals, Taren. That's all the thanks I need." As the train pulled into the station, Tarendra took a deep breath, ready for the next phase of his journey in Mumbai.

Uncle Maroti and Tarendra reached the bustling Nagpur Station, where Tarendra made a beeline for the ticket counter. Money was tight, and he chose the most economical option - the general coach, costing him a mere Rs. 100. Despite the modest fare, he braced himself for the long journey ahead. By 3 p.m., the Vidarbha Express rumbled into the station, marking the start of Tarendra's trek to Mumbai.

Finding a spot by the window in the packed compartment, Tarendra settled in. Soon, the coach was overflowing with passengers, a testament to India's dense population. The air was thick with the mingling aromas of sweat and spices, and the constant hum of conversation filled the space. Even with the breeze from the window, the long night ahead seemed daunting.

Mumbai greeted Tarendra the next day after a grueling 15-hour journey, its chaos starkly contrasting to the smaller towns he was used to. As he stepped off Kalyan Station to take a local train to Badlapur station, the diverse cultures of India's largest city were immediately apparent. Memories of his previous visit with the Nagpur college team came flooding back. Before moving to a hotel, he stayed with a teammate and classmate, Tushar Deshmukh, in Badlapur. The city had left a lasting impression on Tarendra, and now he was here to carve out his path in this sprawling metropolis.

Tarendra felt relief washing over him as he stood at Tushar's doorstep, greeting him with a familiar and friendly face. "Tushar, man, I can't tell you how good it is to see you," Tarendra said, a genuine smile crossing his face.

Tushar, equally surprised and pleased, clapped Tarendra on the back. "Tarendra! What a surprise! What brings you here all of a sudden?"

Tarendra sighed, "It's a long story. I'm in a bit of a bind with some college administration issues. I needed to come to Mumbai urgently, and well, I didn't know where else to go."

Tushar's expression shifted to one of concern. "That sounds tough, buddy. But hey, you're always welcome here. Don't even think about it. My home is your home."

Tarendra hesitated, "I really appreciate it, Tushar. I just don't want to impose..."

Tushar waved away his concerns. "Impose? Nonsense! You'd do the same for me. Let's not waste any more time. You must be exhausted after your journey. Come in, make yourself at home."

Tushar's generosity was a lifeline for Tarendra. In a city as overwhelming and unfamiliar as Mumbai, Tushar's guidance was invaluable. He helped Tarendra settle in, showing him around the city and aiding him in his mission to tackle the administrative hurdles he faced. Tushar's assistance and friendship made navigating the complexities of Mumbai a little less daunting for Tarendra.

Tarendra and Tushar arrived at the Sardar Patel College of Engineering in Andheri to submit an application form for Engineering admission, with Tushar guiding Tarendra through the bustling streets of Mumbai. Tarendra's heart raced with a mix of hope and anxiety as he clutched the application form and the attested copy of the results gazette in his hand.

Upon reaching the admission office, Tarendra quickly filled out the form and approached the clerk's desk with hope. However, the clerk's stern face soon dashed his hopes.

"This is incomplete," the clerk remarked, eyeing the application form skeptically. "Where's your Transfer Certificate and mark sheet?"

Struggling to keep his calm, Tarendra responded, "The Technical Board of Education hasn't yet sent my mark sheet to my college, so they can't issue it to me. But here, I have an attested copy of the gazette. It shows that I passed my exam, including my name and scores."

The clerk glanced at the document but shook his head. "That's not how it works. We need the original documents."

"But please understand," Tushar interjected, trying to support his friend. "He's traveled all the way from Nagpur for this. Isn't there any way you can make an exception?"

After a prolonged discussion, the clerk at the admissions office finally yielded to Tarendra and Tushar's persistent requests, albeit with a firm condition.

"Alright, I'll accept your application," the clerk said, still stern, "but you must bring your marksheet and TC on the day of the admission process. That's in three days. Understand? No documents, no admission, even if you're selected."

Tushar stepped in, "Don't worry, sir, we'll ensure he has all the necessary documents. Right, Tarendra?"

Tarendra nodded, relief washing over him, "Absolutely. I'll have everything in order by then. Thank you for understanding, sir."

The clerk gave them a final nod, and Tarendra left the office, feeling a glimmer of hope amidst the overwhelming challenges.

Tarendra and Tushar headed to the Technical Board of Education with dwindling hope the next day. Tarendra grappled with the reality that even if he obtained his marksheet, the absence of a Transfer Certificate (TC) still loomed as a significant obstacle. The uncertainty of the situation weighed heavily on him as they approached the Board's office.

The officer at the Board of Technical Education office informed Tarendra that they didn't issue marksheets directly there. He explained that such documents could only be collected from the Polytechnic itself.

After spending the entire day outside the Technical Board of Education thinking, Tarendra and Tushar were on the verge of giving up hope.

As evening approached, Tarendra noticed a familiar face - one of his lecturers from his college - passing through the office. He and Tushar rushed over to him.

"Sir! Sir!" Tarendra called out, catching the lecturer's attention.

The lecturer turned, recognizing them both. "Tarendra, Tushar, what are you doing here?" he asked in surprise.

Tarendra quickly explained the predicament of his mark sheet and the need for a Transfer Certificate.

After listening, the lecturer's expression turned thoughtful. "Come with me," he said, leading them to the office of a senior officer.

Inside the chamber, the lecturer explained Tarendra's situation. The senior officer scrutinized the attested gazette copy and nodded. "I can issue you a duplicate marksheet," he said.

Tarendra's heart leaped with hope. "Thank you, sir!"

With the Marksheet now in his possession, Tarendra faced a new dilemma. The admission process was scheduled for the day after next. If he took a train to Nagpur that night, he would only arrive the next day and must secure his Transfer Certificate (TC) before 3 pm.

This tight schedule would barely give him enough time to catch a train back to Mumbai for the admission process. Additionally, Tarendra was concerned about his final exam score of 68%, significantly lower than the previous year's lowest admission score of 80%.

Tarendra, wrestling with the tough decision, ultimately opted not to travel back to Nagpur for his Transfer Certificate. He was left with no choice but to anxiously await the release of the candidate list.

When the list was finally published, Tarendra's heart sank upon seeing his name at number 180, starkly contrasting with the mere 80 available seats for direct second-year admission in Eight Government Engineering Colleges across Maharashtra State after having a Polytechnic Diploma. The reality of his slim chances, given the necessity for high marks to secure admission, weighed heavily on him.

At the admissions venue, Tarendra noticed his friend Madankar and other classmates from Nagpur were also present for the admission process. Sensing his disappointment, Madankar approached him with a supportive smile.

"Don't let this get you down, Taren," Madankar said, clapping a hand on Tarendra's shoulder. "Remember, we've seen tougher times. This is just another hurdle."

Tarendra managed a weak smile. "I know, Dnyaneshwar, but it feels like a dead end this time," he admitted.

"Nonsense," Madankar replied confidently. "You've always found a way. Who knows, something unexpected might happen. Keep your hopes up, my friend."

Tarendra nodded, drawing strength from Madankar's words, even though the odds seemed firmly stacked against him.

Tarendra paced nervously, watching as the available seats dwindled one by one. The weight of his potential failure pressed heavily on him. "What if I don't get in?" he murmured to himself, acutely aware that private engineering universities were beyond his financial reach.

Madankar, ever the supportive friend, stood by his side. "Don't lose hope, Taren," he encouraged. "You've always found a way."

As the selection process progressed, 120 students were already called, and 75 seats in the Civil Engineering program across the state were filled. Only five seats remained, specifically in the "Civil Water Management" branch at the SGGGS College of Engineering in Nanded, a branch closely related to Civil Engineering.

Tarendra sighed, "But the odds aren't in my favor, and only five seats are left, and still 60 students ahead of him to be interviewed. What if this is as far as I go?"

As Tarendra waited anxiously for his turn, a ripple of concern spread through the parents and guardians assembled in the waiting area. They were discussing a critical piece of information that had just come to light: graduates of the "Civil Water Management" program at SGGGS College of Engineering in Nanded were not eligible to sit for the MPSC exam, effectively barring them from securing government jobs. This revelation caused a stir among the crowd, with many debating the implications of this limitation on their children's future career prospects.

Whispers turned into hushed but urgent conversations as parents weighed the options. Securing a government job, often seen as a lifetime guarantee of stability, loomed large in their considerations. Tarendra, overhearing these discussions, realized the potential impact this news could have on his chances.

As the buzz of concern over the eligibility for MPSC exams swelled in the waiting area, Tarendra sensed an opportunity. He quietly leaned towards Madankar, whispering his thoughts. "This could be our chance, Madankar. It might increase our odds if others are worried about the MPSC issue."

Madankar caught on quickly and nodded in agreement. "You're thinking smart, Tarendra. Sometimes, you need to grab the chances life throws at you."

Tarendra's eyes were resolute as he looked around the room. "I've always been about making the most of every opportunity. This is just another step." He straightened up, a quiet determination setting in.

Their subtle strategizing paid off. The parents' concern grew, and families began stepping out of the line one by one, opting against the "Civil-Water Management" program due to its perceived limitations. The once-crowded space started to clear, bolstering Tarendra's chances of admission. Tarendra had never been fixated on pursuing government jobs; instead, he aspired to secure admission to an engineering college.

Tarendra's heart raced as he heard his name called, signaling his turn for the interview. Stepping into the room, a sense of relief mingled with anticipation washed over him. The once-distant possibility of securing a spot in the Water Management program now seemed within his grasp.

As he faced the interview panel, Tarendra drew on his inner reserves of confidence. He knew the last spot was within reach, his moment to grab.

The admission desk's flat refusal to process Tarendra's application due to the absence of his Transfer Certificate (TC) hit him like a bolt of lightning. His aspirations to become an engineer seemed to be crumbling before his eyes. The culmination of his relentless efforts was teetering on the edge of futility.

Desperate, Tarendra explained his unique situation to the officers, imploring them to make an exception for his case. His voice trembled with emotion as he recounted the bureaucratic hurdles he had faced and the lengths he had gone to secure his marksheet.

Finally, after a tense and prolonged discussion, the admission committee consented to accept his application and provided provisional admission under the special circumstances. They asked him to bring TC and tuition fees to the SGGGS College Nanded after five days. Relief washed over Tarendra as he stepped away from the desk. His dreams, though hanging by a thread, were still alive.

As Tarendra pondered his recent struggles and triumphs, a quote from Shahrukh Khan's movie resonated deeply within him: "The universe conspires to help you achieve what you truly desire, but you must not stray from your path." This thought became a guiding beacon for him, reinforcing the belief that life's most reliable teacher is one's own experiences. These experiences, Tarendra realized, are the building blocks of wisdom.

Upon their return to Nagpur, Tarendra, carrying the precious marksheet from the Board of Technical Education, made their way to the Government Polytechnic Nagpur. Upon inspecting the mark sheet, the officials had no further qualms about issuing Tarendra his Transfer Certificate. With this final documentation, Tarendra now had everything he needed for admission to SGGGS College of Engineering, Nanded.

The journey home to Mundikota was filled with anticipation. Upon arrival, Tarendra's family was overjoyed at the news of his admission to the engineering college. Their pride was palpable; Tarendra was the first engineer in his family and the first from his village.

Back in Tumsar, while Tarendra was in his final year at the Government Polytechnic in Nagpur, his brother Jitu made a strategic decision. He took a gap year to thoroughly prepare for his twelfth-grade exams, a move that Tarendra wholeheartedly supported, wishing he had done the same.

Jitu's days were filled with managing the mill in the afternoons and dedicating his spare time to studying. This rigorous routine paid off remarkably as he scored an impressive eighty-eight percent, securing the top rank in his examination. Learning from Tarendra's hurried approach, Jitu had taken his time to prepare, which clearly showed in his results.

With his excellent scores, Jitu had a range of options for higher education. After carefully considering their financial needs, the family decided that he should join his brother at SGGGS Engineering College in Nanded, opting for the Computer Science Department. Unlike Tarendra, Jitu's admission process was smooth and straightforward, thanks to his high marks.



However, with both brothers attending college, the financial burden on their family became a pressing concern. Tarendra knew it would be a challenge to fund two college educations simultaneously, but he was determined to find a way to make it work. The sacrifices made by their family had always been a driving force for both him and Jitu, and he was committed to ensuring that both could continue their education.

Tarendra faced a significant challenge with the total admission fees for him and Jitu amounting to 8,000 rupees, not including the additional travel expenses and later monthly expenses for room rent and food. This sum was a hefty burden for his family, yet somehow, Ma managed to gather the necessary funds. Curious and concerned, Tarendra repeatedly asked her about the source of the money, but Ma remained steadfastly silent, refusing to reveal any details.

In his heart, Tarendra suspected that the villagers might have contributed. His mother had always been a pillar of support in their community, assisting during childbirths, hospital visits, and more. Knowing her financial struggles, it seemed plausible that the villagers might have rallied to support her son's education.

However, the truth later revealed by Balu was a testament to Ma's deep sacrifice. She had pawned her mangalsutra, a treasured family heirloom and a symbol of marital commitment, to raise money for their college fees. This revelation struck Tarendra with a blend of admiration and sadness. The mangalsutra was more than just a piece of jewelry; it represented love, commitment, and family heritage. That his mother had parted with something so precious to ensure their education further fueled Tarendra's determination to succeed and honor her sacrifice.

As Tarendra and Jitu embarked on their educational journey in Nanded, their younger brother Kranti took on the responsibility of assisting Balu at the atta chakki in Tumsar. The arrival of Kranti, the fourth sibling in the family, was a welcome relief for Balu, who had been single-handedly managing the mill's operations. Kranti's participation in the family business lightened Balu's load, easing the daily demands of running the floor mill.

Upon their arrival in Nanded, Tarendra and Jitu appreciated their new college, situated in the village of Vishnupuri, roughly ten to twelve kilometers from the heart of Nanded city. They were immediately drawn to the campus and its environment but faced the challenge of finding accommodation. The hostel on campus had limited availability, offering only a few students the luxury of on-site living.

As they began searching for housing, Tarendra and Jitu noticed that many students were forming groups to rent flats within the city, a solution with a steep price tag. The high rent costs in the city area seemed daunting, but luck was on their side when they met Ganesh Dekate, a fellow student who shared their perspective on the situation.

United in their quest for affordable housing, the trio stumbled upon an ideal place to rent comfortably within their budget. Although inside the bustling city area, the location offered them a modest yet sufficient space to live and study together. For Tarendra, Jitu, and Ganesh, this new accommodation marked the beginning of a shared journey through their college years.

Tarendra's college journey was a blend of academic ambition and financial pragmatism. Already ahead in his engineering course thanks to his polytechnic diploma, Tarendra began his second year, while his brother Jitu embarked on his freshman year after completing twelfth grade.

Recognizing the critical role of friendships in college, Tarendra encouraged Jitu to live independently. He believed this would give Jitu the freedom to interact, face challenges, and form meaningful bonds with

peers. Tarendra understood that protective environments could sometimes hinder personal growth, and he wanted Jitu to have his own experiences.

As they progressed in college, Tarendra made a financially savvy move by relocating to Asarjan village, near their college in Vishnupuri. In contrast, Jitu chose to stay in the city with classmates from his engineering branch for his second year.

Tarendra's new accommodation in Asarjan was a large flat shared with ten other students. Despite being two and a half kilometers away from the college, the daily walks through the scenic rural landscapes of India were both financially and emotionally rewarding for Tarendra.

Cost considerations drove this decision to move to Asarjan. While a small apartment in Nanded city would cost 400 rupees, a spacious flat in Asarjan would cost only 200 rupees, which he shared with nine other students. This strategic choice greatly reduced his living costs, allowing Tarendra to concentrate on his studies without financial worries.

Living in a village setting like Asarjan brought challenges for Tarendra and his fellow students. The lack of social activities and entertainment options, such as meeting people from different social circles, particularly girls, or having access to amenities like cinema halls and restaurants, was noticeable. The absence of opportunities for part-time tutoring to earn extra income also presented a hurdle. In such an environment, their primary focus was on their studies and routine tasks.

Despite these limitations, Tarendra discovered an exciting new pastime that brought him joy and a sense of adventure. He found the college boat club near the Vishnupuri dam on the Godavari River, which opened up a world of aquatic activities for him. Although the club offered badminton and table tennis facilities, Tarendra's interest was drawn to the water.

He spent his time learning to swim in the dam's waters after classes. The dam, stretching 12 kilometers and characterized by its gentle current and expansive riverbed, was ideal for swimming. Tarendra set his sights on earning a boating license, a goal that required him to swim a kilometer non-stop. This task was difficult, as the licensing examiners only visited every four months to conduct the tests. Yet, Tarendra was determined to succeed in the next examination session, viewing this as a challenging but achievable target amidst the quiet village life.

Tarendra's journey in mastering swimming culminated remarkably on his boating license test day. Despite only being able to swim a maximum of 40 meters without stopping, Tarendra displayed extraordinary stamina during the test. It was as if he was endowed with divine endurance, allowing him to cover an impressive distance of 800 meters doing horizontal strokes without a single pause. His effort impressed the examiners, leading to his successful acquisition of the boating license.

Rowing across the calm waters for a few kilometers became a daily ritual for Tarendra and his friends Ajay Bhonge, Ravi Joshi, and other room partners. Bating emerged as a serene escape amid the intense routine of college studies and the mental toll of absorbing complex academic material. It was a practice that brought him peace, helping to clear his mind and enhance his focus on his studies. This experience at the boating club, amidst the natural beauty of Nanded, remained a treasured memory for Tarendra long after his college days were over.

This foray into higher education also exposed Tarendra to the raw beauty of nature in its most pristine form. His stay in the remote region of Asarjan, although in the proximity of his village roots, presented a new

perspective on rural life. He found himself amidst a landscape dominated by towering mountains draped in lush green foliage. The area was rich with dense trees and thick bushes, starkly contrasting the academic and technological world he was immersed in at the engineering college.

Tarendra's life in the village near College, close to the wonders of nature, turned out to be a refreshing experience. The tranquility and vastness of the surrounding landscape profoundly affected him. Whenever concerns about the future clouded his thoughts, a simple step outside into the embrace of nature seemed to dissolve his worries, expand his spirit, and refuel his energy.

His regular visits to the boat club gave him physical exercise and a chance to engage in exhilarating water sports. He found joy in challenging his friends to intense table tennis matches and playing badminton. However, his greatest passion lay in canoeing and kayaking. Maneuvering these small boats across the water became his ultimate source of thrill and rejuvenation, especially after a demanding day at college.

The formation of significant friendships with like-minded individuals such as Ajay Bhonge and Ravi Joshi also marked this period of Tarendra's life. Their shared adventures and experiences forged strong bonds that Tarendra cherished deeply. One of these adventures, however, turned into a life-changing event for Tarendra.

During a routine outing on the river, a senior student, struggling to stay afloat near the bank, caught Tarendra's attention by frantically moving his arms, a sign of distress. Tarendra, acting swiftly, moved to assist him. However, in a state of panic, the senior student clung to Tarendra's back, and as he struggled, Tarendra began to sink. Soon, he grasped Tarendra's neck, and when Ganesh arrived to help, he, too, was grabbed by the neck. To stay above water, the senior inadvertently pushed Tarendra and Ganesh under, causing water to flood their noses and mouths.

Observing this dangerous situation, Rajesh, an adept swimmer, intervened. Cleverly, he avoided the senior's grasp, seized his hair, and steered him towards the nearby bank. This action allowed Tarendra and Ganesh to break free and reach the bank safely. The senior's life was saved. But the encounter with death's proximity affected him, leaving a lasting psychological mark.

The experience was so traumatic that he developed a severe fear of water, to the extent that he refrained from even bathing for a week. This episode was a stark reminder of the fine line between bravery and danger, leaving an indelible mark on Tarendra's psyche.

As Tarendra sat by the dam, lost in thought, he was reminded of an observation he made a few weeks prior.

He had watched two individuals of similar age swimming in the lake, each with a distinct style. The skilled swimmer was graceful and efficient, while the novice thrashed energetically. Tarendra commented to Ajay beside him, "It's fascinating to see their different approaches to the same task."

Ajay nodded, "True, it's like they're in two different worlds."

Tarendra continued, "Exactly. The expert swimmer's technique is about syncing movements, not just exerting more force. It's like a dance, finding the rhythm between arms and legs."

"I guess life's a bit like that, too," Ajay added thoughtfully.

"Absolutely," Tarendra agreed. "In life, like swimming, the key is not always more effort but smarter, better-synchronized effort."

Tarendra discovered that synchronized effort, or syncing, is the act of aligning actions and thoughts towards achieving a shared goal. This involves finding common ground with people to foster friendships quickly or engage with clients to secure deals effectively. At its core, syncing is about working in harmony, be it through shared objectives, mutual interests, or common values.

This not only enhances teamwork and collaboration but also facilitates smoother interactions and transactions, making it a powerful strategy in both personal relationships and professional dealings.

Navigating the increasing financial pressures of college life, Tarendra and Jitu found themselves in a challenging situation. The costs associated with their academic projects were escalating, straining the limited financial resources their mother could provide from Mundikota. Tarendra's deep connection with his college environment and dedication to his studies couldn't mitigate the growing concern over their financial sustainability.

Recognizing the need for a solution, Tarendra and Jitu identified a potential way to alleviate their financial burden: securing a room in the college hostel. The reduced living costs and elimination of travel expenses could significantly ease their financial strain. Moreover, the hostel's amenities, such as the open-access computer labs, would be particularly beneficial for Jitu, who was studying computer science.

However, their plan hit a roadblock when they discovered the hostel was at total capacity, with the management unwilling to accept new residents. Tarendra knew a straightforward request wouldn't suffice. He needed to adopt a more strategic approach.

Tarendra, understanding the urgency and importance of securing a place in the college hostel, took a bold step. He approached the hostel clerk, clearly laying out the financial constraints he and Jitu were under. Given the resources available, he emphasized how gaining access to the hostel would greatly alleviate their financial and academic situation.

Aware that the hostel was already at capacity and recognizing the need for a creative solution, Tarendra made a proposition to the clerk. He offered 200 rupees as an informal arrangement for him and Jitu to stay in the hostel. Without formal records, this arrangement would be unofficial, effectively allowing them to remain illegally in the hostel.

The idea was to find a willing student in the hostel who would agree to share their space with Tarendra and Jitu. This unconventional approach was a gamble, but it was needed to ensure that he and his brother could continue their education under more sustainable conditions.

Tarendra and Jitu found themselves in a challenging situation, needing a place to stay within the constraints of their tight budget. Luckily, they had a friend from their first year of college, Ganesh Dekate, who was now staying in the hostel with his roommate, Prashant Puri. Tarendra and Jitu saw this as a potential opportunity and decided to approach Ganesh and Prashant with a proposal.

Aware that it was against the hostel rules to have extra occupants in a room, Tarendra and Jitu approached their old friend cautiously. They explained their situation and asked if Ganesh and Prashant would be willing to share their room. Despite the risks and crowded room, Ganesh and Prashant agreed to help their friends. They all acquired two extra beds, making room for Tarendra and Jitu in their dorm room. This arrangement worked out well for all parties involved.

After six months of sharing a room with Ganesh and Prashant, Tarendra moved to another room within the same hostel, joining his other friends, Prasad Laturkar and Shashi Ghurme. Jitu, on the other hand, chose to stay in the same room.

Tarendra and Jitu faced significant financial challenges at college, particularly with the high tuition fees and limited budget for essentials like food and clothing. Despite these difficulties, they found support in unexpected places, which helped them navigate through their academic journey.

Deva Uncle, the canteen in-charge, played a crucial role in their lives. Known affectionately as Deva Mama by the students, he was aware of the brothers' financial struggles and extended his kindness by providing them with meals and allowing them to pay whenever they could. Tarendra was deeply moved by Deva's compassion and made it a priority to repay him whenever funds arrived from home. Deva's generosity was a beacon of hope during their tough times, ensuring they had nutritious meals to sustain them.

Clothing, however, was a luxury they couldn't afford. Tarendra and Jitu managed with just three sets of clothes each, leading to amusing confusion among their friends due to their similar appearance. Despite their financial hardships, they found joy and humor in these moments, indicating their resilience and positive outlook. Their shared experiences, challenges, and the kindness they encountered shaped their college life and strengthened their bond as brothers.

Tarendra found life in the hostel bustling and vibrant, with hundreds of students from diverse backgrounds living together. He was committed to his studies but understood the importance of hobbies and extracurricular activities for a well-rounded college experience. Witnessing many of his peers succumbing to boredom and its detrimental effects on their academic performance, Tarendra decided to take up new hobbies.

One of his main hobbies was chess. Tarendra's dedication to chess rapidly enhanced his skills, transforming him into a formidable player. He devoted so much time and energy to the game that it began to permeate his dreams.

A few months later, the annual college sports competition sparked intense student rivalry. Tarendra won the chess competition in his college, earning a place in the intra-university championship in Aurangabad. The experience was thrilling, with the college covering travel and food expenses, offering a chance to explore a new city. His team finished second among several colleges. Immersed in chess, Tarendra starts imagining the game pieces as real entities and the floor tiles as the chessboard, navigating his usual walks like the game's knights and bishops. However, eventually, he decided to move on to another sport.

One day, he approached a senior, asking, "Hey, could I borrow a pair of skating shoes?" His request was met with surprise, but they agreed. The following day, as dawn broke, Tarendra laced up his borrowed skates and took to the empty streets around the campus. The quiet and open roads were perfect for his skating practice. "This is amazing! The streets are all mine at this hour," Tarendra thought, reveling in the freedom and thrill of skating under the morning sky.

While in the college, Tarendra and Jitu grappled with the cost of traveling between Nanded and Tumsar. The overnight bus fare was around Rs 95, a substantial amount for students. One evening in their hostel room, Tarendra broached the subject with Jitu.

Tarendra: "Jitu, these bus fares are eating into our savings. Going home for the festivals is turning out to be expensive."

Jitu, looking thoughtful, replied, "Yeah, it's Rs 95 one way. That's almost Rs 400 for a round trip during the festivals."

Tarendra, holding up the college's discount form, said, "What if we use this more strategically? Getting it signed every time is a hassle, but it could save us a lot."

Jitu nodded, "That's a smart idea. But it's available only once a year, right?"

Tarendra, with a hint of a plan in his voice, suggested, "Let's get it stamped and signed ourselves. And maybe we could even help out some friends with it. We could charge a small fee, say Rs 5, to manage the extra effort."

Jitu, realizing the idea's potential, agreed, "That's brilliant! We save money and help others, too. Let's do it."

Recognizing the value of this, they also started offering this benefit to their friends. By charging fees for sharing the discount forms, they were able to help their friends save on travel costs while also offsetting some of their expenses.

In his final year of engineering, Tarendra confronted a crucial decision regarding his participation in a significant engineering project. He had to choose between joining a team of high-achieving students, where his contribution would bolster an already strong group, or aligning with a team facing challenges, where his leadership could make a significant difference.

After careful consideration, Tarendra decided to join the latter group. He realized that aligning with the high-achievers would offer little opportunity for personal growth, as they were already well-equipped to excel. In contrast, joining the struggling team allowed him to enhance his teaching skills, team and resource management, and problem-solving.

Ravi, Ajay, and Prashant were part of a strong team that was expected to perform well regardless; however, the team that Tarendra joined is working on an ambitious project under Professor Hundiwala. His team regularly journeyed into the lively center of Nanded to procure essential items for their engineering project. They required various metal components, welding tools, and other supplies to construct and test a hydropower dam model, including measuring the pressure at different points under the dam, as assigned by Professor Hundiwala.

Professor Hundiwala kindly lent them his Hero Honda motorcycle for these excursions, turning the trips into thrilling rides for Tarendra. Gliding through the tranquil, picturesque roads of Nanded-Vishnupuri became a welcome diversion from their challenging task, providing a moment of tranquility amidst the verdant surroundings.

However, on the day of the project's presentation and Viva, their efforts hit a stumbling block. When they filled the dam model with water and initiated it, unexpected leaks and flooding occurred at several points. Despite their continued efforts to rectify the leakages over the next few weeks, they couldn't fully resolve the issue. This setback deeply troubled Tarendra and his team, fearing it might negatively impact their grades for the "Design Project" subject.

Contrary to their worries, Professor Hundiwala, seeing their disheartened faces, praised their dedication rather than dwell on the project's shortcomings. He encouraged, emphasizing that failure is a crucial component of the learning process. His supportive words helped reinvigorate the team, reminding them that challenges and setbacks are essential steps on the path to success. To their relief, Professor Hundiwala

recognized their commitment and sincerity, awarding them good grades for their efforts in the Design Project.

Tarendra's experiences with Professor Hundiwala continue to influence his approach as a mentor to his PhD students in the USA. Whenever his students encounter setbacks, Tarendra recalls Hundiwala sir's words during his times of failure. He has come to understand the profound impact of motivational encouragement. Such words can heal a defeated spirit and imbue the strength to face challenges anew.

This understanding is evident when Tarendra observes his students overcoming setbacks and failed projects, embarking on their tasks with renewed vigor and determination. Witnessing their resilience and growth brings Tarendra a sense of accomplishment in their collective efforts.

For Tarendra, the accurate measure of a student's value isn't found in their results, which are often beyond their control, but in their dedication and effort in their work. His mentorship style focuses on nurturing their persistence and resilience, qualities he believes are essential for long-term success and personal growth.

In the final year of Tarendra's college, an event occurred that would significantly alter the course of his life. He enrolled in an elective course on "Satellite Remote Sensing," a decision made more out of curiosity than anything else. However, his interest in the subject quickly deepened when he was selected for a week-long practical training camp at the National Remote Sensing Center in Hyderabad. This experience was transformative, immersing him in advanced satellite sensing technology and NASA's involvement and igniting a passion to pursue a career in this field.

During his final year, Tarendra achieved an exceptional feat by scoring 88.28% on the Graduate Aptitude Test in Engineering (GATE). He was the first student to pass the GATE exam in the Department. This outstanding performance earned him a scholarship and paved the way for his advanced studies in MTech and later for PhD program at IIT Mumbai. His GATE scores opened doors to opportunities that were previously beyond reach. His journey, marked by this pivotal moment in his final year, set him on a path toward achieving his professional aspirations and making a meaningful impact in his field.

During Tarendra and Jitu's engineering studies, their younger brother Kranti was making his mark in high school. At LTRV School, Kranti led an unprecedented student strike, showcasing his leadership skills and unwavering commitment to his principles. His charismatic personality naturally rallied his peers around essential school issues.

Concerned about Kranti's transition to college, Tarendra and Jitu contemplated the potential benefits of experiencing ragging. They thought it might strengthen Kranti's already bold character, equipping him with resilience for his impending college journey.

Leveraging Tarendra's connections at Kranti's future college, they discreetly arranged for a mild ragging session, believing it would ease Kranti's adjustment to the new environment. Contrary to their expectations, Kranti adeptly handled the situation. He faced the challenge with his inherent fearlessness and astuteness and managed to outsmart his seniors. This outcome reassured Tarendra that Kranti was well-prepared to handle college life independently.

Meanwhile, as Tarendra, Jitu, and Kranti pursued their educational and professional paths, the youngest sibling, Chhotu, moved to Tumsar to support Balu in running the flour mill.

## Chapter 11: MTech: Triumphs, Trials, and Transformations

Tarendra, having excelled in his GATE exam, was excited for the next step in his academic journey: pursuing an MTech degree. His impressive GATE results invited him to the prestigious IIT Mumbai for an MTech admission interview, a moment he had eagerly awaited.

However, his excitement turned to dismay when he realized the admission test was scheduled on the same day as his final BE exam of one of the courses. Faced with an impossible decision, Tarendra was forced to miss the MTech admission test at IIT Mumbai, forfeiting what he saw as a golden opportunity to further his studies and potentially pursue a PhD there.

After completing his BE with a sense of loss, Tarendra returned to Tumsar. He began searching for other opportunities to continue his education, still hoping for an MTech degree. His determination and high GATE scores paid off soon enough. Tarendra received a new invitation for an MTech entrance exam at IIT Roorkee.

Tarendra's journey to Roorkee for the MTech entrance exam was a test of endurance. The journey required a combination of bus and train rides, spanning a considerable distance from Tumsar. His first leg of the trip involved taking a bus to Nagpur, followed by a train ride to Delhi. In Delhi, he faced a waiting period before boarding the final train that would take him to Roorkee.

Upon arriving in Roorkee, Tarendra was physically exhausted. The twenty-four-hour journey had drained him of his mental energy as well. Despite this, he mustered the strength to attend the entrance exam, pushing through his fatigue.

After completing the exam, Tarendra didn't waste any time. He immediately left for the Roorkee bus station and embarked on the return journey to Delhi. Arriving in Delhi at ten o'clock at night, he discovered that the last train bound for Nagpur was still at the station, preparing to depart. Realizing the tight timing, Tarendra quickly reached the ticket counter, hoping to secure his passage back to Tumsar via Nagpur.

In disbelief and urgency, Tarendra found himself in a challenging situation at the Delhi railway station. He had just handed over a 500-rupee note for his ticket to Nagpur, but the ticket agent insisted that he had only received a 100-rupee note, refusing to return the correct change.

"Are you sure? I gave you a 500-rupee note," Tarendra protested, trying to keep his composure while the train's departure time loomed closer.

"No, it was just a hundred. That's all you gave me," the agent replied dismissively, unwilling to admit any mistake or wrongdoing.

Tarendra's frustration mounted as he realized the agent attempted to scam him. He warned the agent, "This isn't right. I know what I gave you. If you don't return my change, I must report this to the railway police."

The agent, unfazed, gestured towards the Railway Police Box. "Go ahead, report me if you want. But you only gave me a hundred."

Tarendra glanced anxiously at the train, which was almost ready to depart. He recognized the agent's tactic: exploiting his urgency to board the train. With no time left to argue or seek help from the police, Tarendra was forced to make a quick decision. He decided to forgo the argument and rush towards his train, realizing that catching it was more crucial than continuing a futile dispute.



Exhausted and frustrated by the recent events, Tarendra begrudgingly paid an additional eighty rupees to secure his ticket. Rushing onto the train, he found himself in a compartment overflowing with passengers. Every seat was taken, and the aisles were crowded. His energy drained from the lengthy journey and the stress of the ticket counter confrontation; Tarendra desperately sought a place to rest.

Scanning the compartment, he noticed a small, cramped space at the end, beneath the long seat, where passengers hadn't stowed their luggage. It was far from comfortable, but it was all he could find. He squeezed into the narrow gap, surrounded by the feet of seated passengers. In this confined space, with the constant hum of conversation and the rhythmic clatter of the train, Tarendra's body finally surrendered to exhaustion.

Despite the discomfort and noise, Tarendra fell into a deep, undisturbed sleep, which comes only when one is completely spent. For twelve uninterrupted hours, he slept, oblivious to the train's thunderous journey and the unceasing chatter around him. It was a profound and restorative sleep that seemed to erase the weariness of his ordeal, providing a much-needed respite for his weary body and mind.

Recovering from the exhaustion of his taxing journey, Tarendra soon found himself embarking on another trip. This time, his destination was Nagpur, where he was scheduled to attend the admission process at VRCE for M.Tech. Admission. His younger brother Jitu was accompanying him, offering support and companionship on this crucial venture.

Upon their arrival, they were pleasantly surprised to discover that Tarendra was eligible for admission in two available subjects: Environmental Engineering and Structural Engineering.

This revelation led to a lengthy and thoughtful discussion between the brothers, weighing the merits and potential of each field. The choice was not easy, with both options presenting unique opportunities and challenges.

"Environmental Engineering sounds promising, doesn't it?" Tarendra mused, looking at Jitu.

Jitu nodded thoughtfully. "It does, but Structural Engineering has its perks too. It's a tough call."

Tarendra sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, each has its future scope. I wish this were easier."

Jitu, always practical, suggested, "Why don't we leave it to chance? Let's flip a coin."

Tarendra raised his eyebrows, surprised yet intrigued by the idea. "A coin flip? That's quite a gamble for such a big decision."

"Yeah, but sometimes, fate knows better than we do," Jitu replied with a slight grin.

Tarendra chuckled, reaching into his pocket for a coin. "Alright, let's do this. Heads for Environmental, tails for Structural."

He flipped the coin, and they both watched it spin in the air, their future hanging in the balance. It landed with a soft clink on the ground.

"Heads," Jitu announced, peering down at the coin. "Environmental Engineering it is."

Tarendra nodded, a mix of nerves and excitement in his voice. "Environmental Engineering, then. Let's see where fate takes me."

With that unconventional decision made, Tarendra felt a weight lift off his shoulders. Sometimes, the most significant choices in life are made with the simplest of actions. After carefully considering various factors,

Tarendra enrolled at VRCE for MTech admission in Nagpur. If the effort you put in is genuine, then opportunities will always come your way.

After confirming his choice for Environmental Engineering at VRCE, Tarendra unexpectedly received his admission results from Roorkee the next day. To his surprise, he had been accepted into the institute. This news, however, arrived too late. Tarendra had already committed to VRCE by paying his fees, and the arduous journey to Roorkee still lingered in his mind as a bitter experience. He wasn't keen on reliving that challenging trip, particularly when Nagpur was conveniently close to his home in Mundikota.

Tarendra's time at VRCE for his MTech was remarkably smooth. Financial worries were a thing of the past, thanks to a monthly fellowship of 1800 rupees he received. This amount was sufficient for his modest lifestyle, covering all his needs. He even contributed some money to his family back home and occasionally sent funds to Jitu, helping with his brother's educational expenses.

While pursuing his MTech at VRCE, Tarendra was in a unique situation. He was among several government engineers from the Public Works Department who were there to pursue higher education, their studies funded by the government. These engineers had reserved seats, and Tarendra quickly struck up friendships with them.

One day, Tarendra remarked to one of his friends, a government engineer, "It's fascinating to see how different our paths have been. The government covers your education and living expenses, while I've had to struggle for every step."

His friend replied, "It's true, Tarendra. We have different journeys, but your determination is truly inspiring."

Despite his new friends' comfortable lifestyle, Tarendra was mindful of his background. "I can't forget where I come from," he confided to another friend during lunch at a fancy hotel. "This... all this luxury is new to me. I enjoy it, but know it's not my everyday life."

His friend nodded, understanding, "Remembering our roots is important. It keeps us grounded."

Tarendra appreciated these new experiences but did not let them overshadow his humble beginnings. He was cautious not to become too immersed in the lifestyle of his affluent friends, aware that he still had a long journey ahead and much to accomplish on his terms.

During his MTech program, Tarendra's experience and perspective grew profoundly. He started to see a clearer path for his life. As the crucial oral exam approached, he prepared diligently, eager to showcase his knowledge.

However, in front of the panel, Tarendra faced an unexpected hurdle. Starting his PowerPoint presentation confidently, he suddenly found himself nervous and struggling. His mind blanked, and he stood there, unable to speak. The realization of his predicament hit him hard.

Professor Tapan Chakraborty, who had observed Tarendra's dedication at the NEERI Research Center, intervened. "Tarendra, take a moment. We've seen your commitment and know your capabilities. Would you prefer to show your code and present it in the lab, perhaps in a more comfortable setting?" he offered.

Gratefully accepting this chance, Tarendra nodded. "Thank you, Professor. I will happily show the code and present it in the lab."

In the lab, Tarendra found his stride. His presentation flowed smoothly, impressing the professors with his depth of understanding. His relief was palpable when he finished, and the professors exchanged approving nods.

As expected, his written exams went well, and soon, Tarendra graduated with his MTech degree. Following this achievement, Dr. Deshkar from NEERI handed him a letter of recommendation. "Tarendra, your hard work has paid off. I believe you have a bright future ahead. This letter should help you at IIT Mumbai. Go meet Professor Kelkar. He's expecting you."

Tarendra accepted the letter, feeling a mix of excitement and gratitude. "Thank you, Dr. Deshkar. This means a lot to me," he said, understanding that this recommendation was a gateway to even greater opportunities.

## Chapter 12: IIT Dreams and Struggles: A Journey of Betrayal and Beginnings

Tarendra grappled with conflicting desires as he entered the professional world after completing his MTech. Although the prospect of furthering his studies at the Indian Institute of Technology Mumbai (IIT Mumbai) intrigued him, the immediate need to support his family and his brother Jitu, who had recently graduated and was job-hunting in Pune, weighed heavily on his mind.

Tarendra joined an environmental engineering company in Nagpur, eager to make his mark in the field. His responsibilities primarily involved collecting environmental samples for air and water quality assessments within various study areas. Each excursion took him to different locations, often accompanied by a junior assistant and a driver. Together, they navigated long journeys spanning 18 to 24 hours, carrying bulky air quality samplers and water quality kits in their trusty Jeep.

One particular assignment led them to the picturesque landscapes of Goa, its moderate mountainous terrain a stark contrast to the urban sprawl of Nagpur. However, their journey took an unexpected turn when they encountered a harrowing accident just before reaching their destination. Negotiating a narrow road, they inadvertently veered off course, plunging into a canal adjacent to the roadway. The Jeep was submerged, leaving Tarendra and his companions momentarily stunned.

With quick thinking and strength, Tarendra's assistant managed to shatter the window, allowing them to escape the sinking vehicle. Once safely on dry ground, Tarendra wasted no time in assessing the situation. Despite the setback, they were determined to carry out their mission. Calling their office for guidance, they were faced with a crucial decision: return home or press on and complete the study.

On the line, the office manager's voice crackled with concern. "Tarendra, are you all right? What's the situation there?"

"We've had a bit of a mishap," Tarendra replied, trying to keep his tone steady. "But we're fine. The Jeep, however, not so much."

The office manager paused, considering their options. "It's up to you, Tarendra. Do you think you can still manage to finish the study?"

Tarendra glanced at his drenched companions, resolve hardening in his gaze. "We'll make it work. We'll get the Jeep fixed and complete the study as planned."

With the office's support behind them, Tarendra set about organizing repairs for the waterlogged Jeep. It was a challenging task in an unfamiliar locale, but with determination and resourcefulness, they managed to get the vehicle back on the road within a week.

Despite the setback, they persevered, conducting their environmental study with diligence and dedication. Finally, their mission was accomplished, and they embarked on the journey back to Nagpur. The Jeep was restored, and their spirits were undaunted by their trials.

This half-year stint gave him valuable experience and a growing realization that he needed to seek better opportunities in a larger city. With this in mind, he decided to move to Mumbai, a city known for its vast opportunities.

In Mumbai, Tarendra's career took a promising turn. He secured a job at Mahabal Environmental Company in Thane, a well-respected firm in the industry. This newfound stability, however, came with its own set of challenges. As Tarendra settled into his role and enjoyed the perks of a well-paying job, his long-held dream

of pursuing a PhD began to dim. The allure of a steady income and the responsibilities that came with it made the idea of returning to academia less appealing.

Tarendra, deep in thought at his desk at Mahabal Environmental Company, often found himself staring at Professor Deshkar's recommendation letter. One evening, his colleague, noticing his contemplation, asked, "What's on your mind, Tarendra?"

Holding up the letter, Tarendra replied, "This is from Professor Deshkar. He believes I should pursue higher studies, but I'm conflicted."

"Why the hesitation?" his colleague inquired, curious.

Tarendra explained, "It's a big step. I'm settled here, the job's good. But this," he gestured to the letter, "it's about pursuing a Ph.D., something I've always dreamed of."

His colleague nodded understandingly, "You've got a brilliant mind, Tarendra. Such opportunities don't come often. Why not chase your dream?"

Encouraged by this support, Tarendra decided to meet Dr. Kelkar. In their meeting, he laid out his accomplishments and aspirations and handed over the letter. Dr. Kelkar is a highly regarded academic with a Ph.D. from an esteemed American university.

Dr. Kelkar, impressed by Tarendra's credentials, said, "With your skills and drive, IIT Mumbai would be an excellent fit for you. I'd strongly advise you to apply."

Feeling a renewed sense of purpose, Tarendra thanked Dr. Kelkar, "I appreciate your guidance. It's time I followed this path."

Months later, as Tarendra walked through the IIT Bombay campus, he felt an overwhelming sense of achievement. Despite the challenges ahead, including the modest stipend of Rs 6,000 and the long journey to a Ph.D., he knew he was exactly where he needed to be, pursuing his passion and contributing to the world of knowledge.

As Tarendra settled into his second year of the Ph.D. program at IIT Bombay, he became increasingly aware of his single status. One day, while discussing with his friend and fellow researcher, Amit, he shared his concerns.

"You know, Amit, everyone's getting married. I'm starting to feel the pressure," Tarendra confessed, his voice hinting at worry.

Amit chuckled, "It's a common phrase, Tarendra. You're doing great in your Ph.D. program. That's something, right?"

"Yeah, but I can't wait five more years to finish my Ph.D. and then think about marriage. Plus, with the stipend we get, I could manage a simple life with someone," Tarendra reasoned.

"You're right, Tarendra. Maybe it's time to consider it seriously," Amit agreed, nodding thoughtfully.

Tarendra called his brother Jitu and explained the situation. Jitu nodded in agreement. "That's great news! How can I help?"

Tarendra smiled, "Yes, I am. I'm not getting any younger, and it's about time. I could use your help in finding the right person."

Jitu's face lit up, "Consider it done, Taren! Let's call Ma. Maybe your future wife is just a phone call away!"

During a family gathering at their new home in Tumsar, Tarendra shared his decision to find a life partner. The family, now comfortably settled in their extended mill house, eagerly embraced the idea.

"Family, I've decided it's time for me to get married," Tarendra announced, watching his family's reactions. They gathered around, the milling machine humming in the background, marking their new life in Tumsar.

His mother, always supportive, nodded, "We were wondering when you'd bring this up. What are you looking for in a wife, Tarendra?"

Tarendra sipped his tea thoughtfully, "She should be educated, value family above all, and have humility. That's what matters most to me."

Uncle Maroti, who had been instrumental in their move to Tumsar, said, "I know a few families in Nagpur. Let's plan some visits for you to meet potential brides."

Tarendra agreed, and the following Sunday, the meetings were set up. With Uncle Maroti and his family in tow, Tarendra embarked on a day of back-to-back introductions in Nagpur.

At each home, they were greeted warmly. Tarendra met four girls, each unique and beautiful in her way. Yet, as the day progressed, he felt a growing sense of uncertainty. Despite their qualities, none seemed to strike the chord Tarendra hoped for.

On their way back, Uncle Maroti broke the silence, "What do you think, Tarendra? Did any of these girls catch your eye?"

Tarendra sighed, "They were all wonderful, but I didn't feel that connection. She must fit well with our family, too."

His mother patted his hand reassuringly, "Don't rush, son. The right one will come along. It's a decision for a lifetime."

Tarendra nodded, grateful for his family's understanding and support. He knew his search for a partner would continue, but he was determined to find someone who complemented his life and values.

Tarendra, feeling slightly disheartened, was ready to put his quest for a life partner on hold and focus on his academic responsibilities in Mumbai. But as he was packing his bags, a surprise visit from Aparna's grandmother altered his plans.

"Tarendra," his mother called, "there's someone here to see you."

Curious, Tarendra met the elderly lady who introduced herself as Aparna's grandmother. She proposed a proposal, urging Tarendra to consider her granddaughter a potential bride.

"I appreciate the offer," Tarendra responded politely, "but I'm due back in Mumbai. Maybe we can arrange a meeting another time."

But Aparna's grandmother was persistent. "Please, just meet her once before you go. She's a wonderful girl, and I think you'll like her," she implored.

After a brief discussion with his Parents and Jitu, Tarendra reluctantly agreed to the meeting. They decided to visit Aparna's home in Bhandara on their way back to Mumbai early the next day. Tarendra also thought it was an excellent opportunity to catch up with his friend Prashant, who lived there.

The next day, arriving at Aparna's home, they were greeted warmly. Aparna, a graceful figure, welcomed them with a platter of freshly made Poha. Her smile was infectious, lighting up the room. Her simplicity and warmth enchanted Tarendra as they sat and conversed.

"The Poha is good," Jitu whispered to Tarendra, "and she seems very nice."

Tarendra nodded, his eyes meeting Aparna's. There was something about her that resonated with him deeply. Initially seen as a formality, the visit turned into a delightful encounter. As they left Aparna's house, Tarendra knew his search for a life partner had finally ended.

The day Tarendra introduced Aparna to the rest of his family marked a turning point in his life. As he watched his family interact with her, they were as obsessed with her as he was. The warmth and ease with which they all connected was a joyous sight.

Later that day, Tarendra made a heartfelt call to his family. "I think I've found the one," he said, his voice tinged with happiness. "You all need to meet her."

His remaining family arrived at Aparna's house, and the atmosphere was instant camaraderie and acceptance. As Tarendra watched his family bond with Aparna, his heart swelled with joy and pride. The connection was undeniable, and it wasn't long before the families agreed that Aparna was the perfect match for Tarendra.

With blessings from both families, Tarendra slipped a ring onto Aparna's finger, symbolizing their new beginning. This moment marked the official start of their journey together.

During the ten months leading up to their wedding, Tarendra and Aparna's relationship blossomed. They went on dates, discovering each other's likes, dislikes, and the little quirks that made them unique.

Tarendra, who had always focused on his studies and career, found a newfound joy in the romantic aspects of life. He often serenades Aparna with heartfelt Bollywood songs like "Ek Rasta Hai Zindagi" and "Akela Gaya Tha Main," bringing smiles and laughter to their time together.

Aparna's appreciation for Tarendra's dramatic flair and his singing only deepened their bond. They found joy in each other's company, and their engagement period was filled with love, laughter, and anticipation for their future together.

At 9 pm, the laboratory was usually quiet, with most students gone for the day. However, a fellow student, slightly out of breath, approached Tarendra in the lab that evening. "Tarendra, there's an urgent phone call for you," he said with a hint of urgency.

Tarendra wiped his hands on his lab coat and hurried out, puzzled about who could be calling him at this hour. When he reached the phone, he was surprised to hear Aparna's voice on the other end.

"Hi, Tarendra!" Aparna's voice was a mix of excitement and nervousness. "Guess what? I'm in Mumbai with my college group. We're staying in a Govt Guest house somewhere near Virar. I just wanted to let you know."

Aparna was in her second year of studies, and her college tradition involved sending the entire class on educational trips each year. This year, they had planned an extensive journey across the nation, with Mumbai being one of their stops. Her college rented the PWD government guest house in Virar, just off the main freeway.

Tarendra's heart skipped a beat. "That's amazing, Aparna! How long are you here for?" he asked.

"We're here for one night. But I'm not sure if we can meet. We have a packed schedule; tomorrow, we are going to Mumbai City, and our professors are quite strict," Aparna replied, her tone tinged with disappointment.

Tarendra, determined not to let this opportunity slip away, quickly said, "Don't worry, I'll figure something out. See you in the morning."

Tarendra, with his mind preoccupied by the thought of seeing Aparna, prepared to leave for Mumbai. He shared his plan with Umesh over the phone. Umesh was his classmate and good friend from Polytechnic Sakoli. Who was working in Thane, which is a one-hour driving distance from IIT Mumbai?

"Umesh, guess what? Aparna's in Mumbai for a college trip, and I'm planning to surprise her!" Tarendra's voice was filled with excitement.

Umesh, on the other end of the line, chuckled. "That sounds like quite an adventure, Taren. But how will you manage it? You know how strict her college can be."

"I know, but I can't miss this chance. She's so close yet so far," Tarendra replied, a hint of determination in his voice.

Umesh supported his friend's decision, "Well, if anyone can pull off a surprise like this, it's you."

"Start now from your place and come to the IIT hostel. We need to head out early tomorrow to meet her," Tarendra instructed over the phone before ending the call. True to his word, Umesh arrived at IIT Mumbai by 11 p.m., ready for the early morning adventure.

After some casual conversation, Tarendra had an idea to make a special gift for Aparna. A few months earlier, he had purchased a used dual cassette player and recorder. He often recorded romantic songs with personal introductions for Aparna, adding a touch of intimacy to the mixtape.

For the next few hours, Tarendra and Umesh focused on selecting the right songs and recording them onto a cassette. By 2 a.m., they had completed recording on both sides of the tape. After finishing their morning routines and showers, they were ready by 3 a.m. and left IIT for Andheri Station. From there, they caught a train to Virar Station, embarking on their long journey.

They arrived at Virar Station by 5:30 a.m. and took a taxi to the PWD Guest House. As they approached the guest house at around 6 a.m., Tarendra knocked on the door, his heart pounding with a blend of nervousness and excitement. He was eager yet anxious to see how Aparna would react to his surprise visit.

Unaware of Tarendra's plan, Aparna was surprised and overjoyed when she saw him. His effort to see her left a lasting impression, strengthening their bond and deepening their connection.

"This means so much to me, Tarendra," Aparna said, her eyes shining with happiness. "I can't believe you came all this way just to see me."

"For you, I'd cross any distance," Tarendra replied, holding her hands in his.

Their time together was brief but filled with laughter, shared stories, and plans for the future. As Tarendra left, he knew this gesture had deepened their relationship, proving the lengths he was willing to go for love. It was a memory they would both cherish forever.



Amid the joyful chaos of merging two large families, Tarendra couldn't help but reflect on the Indian adage that marrying someone meant marrying their entire family. This became a vivid reality for him. Aparna's family, with her five younger sisters, mirrored his family structure with his five younger brothers. "It's like I've suddenly gained a whole new set of siblings," Tarendra mused to Aparna one evening, feeling overwhelmed yet warmly embraced by the affection and care that surrounded him.

In Aparna's home, being the eldest son-in-law came with a special status, and Tarendra felt a deep sense of respect and kinship with her family. "You're not just a son-in-law; you're more like a big brother to us all," Aparna's sister said to him, her eyes beaming with pride and affection.

But the expansion of family ties didn't stop there. Aparna's maternal and paternal uncles, each with their lively offspring, added a vibrant dynamic to their gatherings. "It feels like we're building our small village," Tarendra joked one day as the children of Aparna's uncles ran around him, pulling him into their games and laughter. The merging of their families wasn't just a formal union but a blend of lives and stories, bringing together a tapestry of relationships that Tarendra cherished.

However, amidst this whirlwind of personal joy, Tarendra faced a tumultuous phase in his professional journey a few weeks before marriage. His research proposal, which he had been working on diligently for over a year, was rejected by his advisor. Confused and frustrated, he met with his advisor for clarification.

"I don't understand, sir. I've put so much effort into this proposal," Tarendra said, trying to hide his disappointment.

His advisor, unapologetically, replied, "Tarendra, your proposal lacks originality and relevance to your Ph.D. topic. It seems you've been focusing on the wrong areas."

Feeling betrayed and realizing he had been unwittingly contributing more to his advisor's personal projects than his own, Tarendra knew he had to reassess his approach.

Tarendra met Jitu at a small café in Pune. A sense of frustration was evident in his demeanor, and Tarendra couldn't hide his disappointment as they sat down with their coffees.

"Jitu, I've wasted an entire year at IIT Bombay," Tarendra sighed, stirring his coffee absentmindedly. "I was so engrossed in what I thought was my research, only to realize I've been aiding my advisor's personal project."

Leaning forward, Jitu empathized, "That's tough, brother. But you've always been one to trust and respect your teachers. It's not your fault."

"I guess so," Tarendra replied, his voice hinting at bitterness. "But now, I've learned the hard way. From now on, I need to be more skeptical, more self-reliant."

The decision loomed large until an unexpected job interview opportunity presented itself. With apprehension and hope, Tarendra decided to explore this new possibility, wondering if it might be the answer to his dilemmas. "Maybe this is the sign I've been waiting for," he thought as he prepared for the interview before reaching Tumsar for his wedding. His journey was about to take another turn that could redefine his path yet again.

A few days before marriage, he traveled back to Tumsar. The next day, he went to Bhandara and confided in Aparna, "I'm torn between the responsibilities of our upcoming marriage and the commitment to my Ph.D. What if it takes too long? What if it hinders our plans?"

Aparna, the supportive partner, replied, "You've always followed your dreams, Tarendra. Let's not let fear dictate our choices now."

But the doubts lingered. With his wedding date looming and the pressure of establishing a stable future, Tarendra grappled with the decision to continue his Ph.D. or secure a job. "I just want to ensure a good life for us, Aparna," he confessed one evening.

"I know you do, and you will," she reassured him, her hand in his. "Let's take each step as it comes."

The conversation between Tarendra and Aparna in Bhandara was a significant turning point in their lives. Tarendra, with a heavy heart, opened up to Aparna about his decision to leave his Ph.D. program.

"Aparna, I've made a tough decision," Tarendra began hesitantly. "I've decided to quit my Ph.D. at IIT."

Aparna's eyes widened in surprise. "Quit? But why, Tarendra?" she asked, her voice concerned.

Tarendra sighed deeply, "It's not been productive, Aparna. An entire year has passed, and I'm still at square one. I'm worried it might end up being a futile pursuit."

Aparna took a moment to process his words, her initial shock slowly giving way to a calm understanding. "I trust your judgment, Tarendra," she replied gently. "If you believe this is the best course of action, I support you."

Tarendra felt a wave of relief at her words but knew there was more he needed to address. "There's something else," he continued. "I'd rather we didn't tell our families about this just yet. They have enough on their plates with the wedding preparations."

Aparna nodded in agreement. "Your secret's safe with me. We can discuss it with them later once everything settles down."

Just two days before marriage, Tarendra received a job confirmation letter from the company. He interviewed before heading to Tumsar for marriage. With the wedding celebrations over, Tarendra finally shared his decision with his family. Though the initial period was challenging for the newlyweds, the unwavering support from Aparna and his family provided Tarendra with the strength and encouragement he needed to navigate this new chapter of his life.

He needs a new place since he will no longer stay on the IIT campus. Moving to a new place brought excitement and anxiety for Tarendra and Aparna. Vijay Lanjewar, Tarendra's friend, had found them a one-bedroom apartment in Navi Mumbai, setting the stage for a new chapter in their lives. Tarendra shared the news with Aparna, his voice tinged with anticipation and concern.

"Aparna, Vijay managed to find us a small apartment in Navi Mumbai," Tarendra said, packing their essentials.

"That's great news!" Aparna replied though she sounded a bit worried. "But will we manage with our limited stuff until our boxes arrive?"

Tarendra nodded, "We'll have to make do with a small electric stove and a few pots from my hostel days. It'll be a bit of an adventure."

Despite the delay in the arrival of their belongings and the initial inconvenience, the couple found joy in setting up their new home together. Tarendra's job provided them with stability and comfort, a stark contrast to the challenges they had faced in the past.

However, Tarendra couldn't shake off a feeling of regret that often clouded his mind.

One and half years later, one day, while contemplating his unfulfilled academic dreams, he received a call from Jitu.

"Brother," Jitu started, his voice filled with concern, "I know you regret dropping out of your Ph.D. at IIT, but there might be another way."

Tarendra's interest piqued. "What do you mean?" he asked, trying to mask the hope rising in his voice.

"Your GATE scores were impressive," Jitu reminded him. "You have a solid chance to pursue a Ph.D. in the USA."

Tarendra was skeptical yet intrigued. "But my job takes up so much of my time. How can I manage that with Ph.D. preparations?"

Jitu's voice was encouraging. "I've seen less qualified people make it, brother. I truly believe you can do this. You should discuss it with Aparna."

Tarendra felt a flicker of the old flame of ambition. "Alright, I'll talk to Aparna about it," he said, a sense of determination growing within him. The conversation with Jitu had rekindled a hope he thought he had lost.

The prospect of reigniting his academic aspirations in the USA brought a new wave of hope and determination to Tarendra. This crucial decision needed to be discussed with Aparna, especially with their growing family, as Aparna was pregnant with their first kid.

Tarendra broached the subject with Aparna one evening, his voice tinged with excitement and apprehension. "Aparna, I've been thinking about something important," he began, taking her hand.

Aparna looked at him, sensing the gravity of the conversation. "What is it, Tarendra?" she asked.

"You know how I've always regretted not completing my Ph.D.," he said, his eyes reflecting his inner turmoil. "Jitu has suggested an opportunity for me to pursue it in the USA. It's a big step, and I wanted to discuss it with you."

Aparna's eyes widened in surprise. "The USA? But what about your job here? And... I'm pregnant," she gently reminded him.

Tarendra nodded, fully aware of the implications. "I know, and it's not a decision I take lightly. But I believe this could be a turning point for our future. It's a chance to fulfill a dream and provide better opportunities for our family."

Aparna took a moment to process his words, her initial shock giving way to a thoughtful expression. "I understand your passion, Tarendra, and I've always admired that about you," she said, squeezing his hand. "If you believe this is the right path for us, then I trust you. We'll figure out the rest together."

Tarendra felt a surge of gratitude for Aparna's support. "Thank you, Aparna. Your faith in me means everything. I promise we'll make this work for us and our baby."

With Aparna's encouragement, Tarendra decided to take the leap.

As Tarendra prepared to leave his job and prepare for the GRE and TOEFL exams, he felt apprehension and excitement. This step marked a significant turn in his journey, fuelled by his dream of earning a Ph.D. and the unwavering support of his family.

During this time, Kranti, his brother, completed his Bachelor of Engineering (Mechanical Engineering major) and married a girl named Aarti, who also graduated from the same engineering College in the same year (2001). Kranti and Aarti have started preparing for the GRE and TOEFL exams for further studies abroad.

After a few months, Tarendra joined Kranti and Aarti and started studying for the GRE and TOEFL exams. It's like a family examination, all living in a small one-bedroom apartment.

"Kranti, can you believe we're doing this?" Tarendra said, his voice eliciting excitement as they prepared for the exam.

Kranti smiled back, "It's a big step, brother. But I know we're ready for it."

After months of hard work, Kranti and Aarti achieved excellent scores on their GRE and TOEFL exams. They aim for Master's degrees in the USA and UK. Kranti was thrilled to be accepted by several U.S. universities.

"Can you believe it? We're going international!" Kranti exclaimed to Aarti, brimming with excitement.

But the thrill was short-lived for Kranti. His visa application was unexpectedly denied by the US consulate in Mumbai, a setback that left him disheartened.

Aarti, trying to lift his spirits, suggested, "Let's not give up. The UK could be our next adventure."

Agreeing, they refocused their efforts, with the UK becoming their primary target, hopeful for a new beginning.

Before long, they received an admission offer from a university in the UK, solidifying their decision to pursue their Master's degrees there. With renewed determination, they bid farewell to their homeland and embarked on their journey to the UK, eager to embrace the new opportunities and challenges.

Here, Tarendra received good scores in the GRE and TOEFL exams and began his search for universities in the United States where he could apply. However, in 2003, the internet was primarily accessed through dial-up connections, which incurred higher costs during the day and lower rates at night.

Tarendra made the most of the nighttime internet rates to conduct extensive research. He identified professors in remote sensing, water resources, and environmental sciences and meticulously compiled a list of these experts, noting their specific fields of study.

During the day, he crafted personalized emails offline, explaining how his professional and academic experiences aligned with their research interests. He sent these emails in bulk at night, maintaining this routine for weeks. He reached out to over 500 professors worldwide, carefully targeting those most relevant to his field of interest.

Tarendra's unwavering dedication led to some interest from U.S. professors, who invited him to apply for their Ph.D. programs. However, he faced a common hurdle: limited funding for international students, exacerbated by the global economic downturn following the 9/11 attacks. University funds were

increasingly scarce, making the competition for financial aid even more challenging. Undeterred by these obstacles, Tarendra applied to ten universities.

Tarendra's unwavering dedication paid off handsomely as he received acceptance letters from four universities. Though none offered a full fellowship, they did extend partial tuition fee waivers, igniting a glimmer of hope in his academic odyssey. However, a significant turning point occurred with an email from Prof. Reza at CUNY expressing keen interest in and assuring Tarendra of a full fellowship upon acceptance into his program.

This opportunity at The City University of New York (CUNY) filled Tarendra with boundless joy, marking a significant milestone in his academic journey.

Excitement brimmed over Tarendra and Aparna, joined by their little Astha, as they eagerly anticipated their new life in the USA. As Astha reached her ten-month milestone, the arrival of Tarendra's admission and VISA application papers and (I-20) for his Ph.D. in the USA stirred up a whirlwind of excitement and anticipation.

Obtaining a visa for the USA is notoriously challenging, with only a small percentage of applicants successfully securing one. Tarendra meticulously prepared his documents and braced himself for the nerve-racking visa interview. Amidst the uncertainties, he grappled with the added concern of English not being his first language, knowing that effectively communicating with the visa officer would be another hurdle.

As he approached the visa officer's window, Tarendra couldn't help but feel a knot of nervousness in his stomach. He knew there would be a series of questions, each one crucial in determining his eligibility for the visa. Foremost among them was the need to assure the officer that he harbored no intentions of immigrating to the USA and that he possessed the financial means to support himself during his stay.

Visa Officer: "Good morning. May I have your passport and documents, please?"

Tarendra handed over his documents, his palms slightly clammy with anxiety.

Tarendra: "Good morning. Here are my documents."

Visa Officer: "Thank you. So, what is the purpose of your visit to the United States?"

Tarendra: "I have been accepted into a Ph.D. program at The City University of New York, and I need to obtain a visa to pursue my studies there."

Visa Officer: "That's great. Can you tell me about your plans after completing your studies?"

Tarendra: "Once I complete my studies, I intend to return to my home country and contribute to the field of environmental engineering there."

Visa Officer: "How do you plan to fund your studies and stay in the USA?"

Tarendra: "I have secured a fellowship from the university, which covers my tuition fees and provides a stipend for living expenses. Additionally, I have savings to support myself if needed."

Visa Officer: "Okay, everything seems to be in order. Your visa will be processed, and you will receive a notification once it's ready for collection."

Tarendra breathed a sigh of relief, grateful that the interview had gone smoothly. He exited the consulate, his heart buoyed with hope for future endeavors in the USA.

He eagerly shared the news with his family. "It's official now," he announced, his voice brimming with happiness. "I'm going to the USA!"

His family members were overjoyed. "This is just the beginning of great things for you," his mother said, her eyes gleaming with pride.

However, just weeks before their departure, Tarendra received disheartening news: his offer was only partial and might not suffice to cover the expenses for all three of them in one of the world's most expensive cities.

After much deliberation, they reached a decision: Tarendra would go ahead and settle in New York first, gaining a thorough understanding of the expenses involved. Once he had established himself, Aparna and Astha would follow suit and join him.

Sitting with Aparna through the documents, Tarendra felt mixed emotions. "This is it, Aparna. A new chapter for us," he said, his voice tinged with excitement and nervousness about the remaining visa process.

Looking at him with pride and affection, Aparna reassured him, "You're destined for great things, Tarendra. And remember, we're in this together, every step of the way."

Emboldened by his family's love and support, Tarendra was set to begin his journey to the USA in the last week of August. He was ready to tackle the new challenges and seize the opportunities in this next phase of life.

As the realization of starting a new chapter sank in, Tarendra began preparing for his journey. "There's so much to do and plan," he mused aloud. "But I'm ready for this adventure." He felt a mix of anticipation and nervousness, knowing that a significant life change awaited him.

As the realization set in that Tarendra wouldn't be returning from the U.S. for at least 2-3 years due to his education, the importance of Jitu's marriage became a pressing matter. Jitu called home, his voice tinged with excitement and urgency. "Bro, I think it's time. I want you to be there when I choose my bride," he said earnestly.

Tarendra, understanding the moment's significance, replied with equal sincerity, "Of course, Jitu. Let's make this happen before I leave. Our family should be together for this."

With just 15 days remaining before Tarendra's mandatory attendance at the CUNY admission orientation, the family jumped into action immediately. "We've always been a team in times like these," Tarendra's father declared, rallying everyone's spirits.

Jitu landed in India two days later. The family had already shortlisted seven potential brides. "I trust your choices, but I need to feel that connection," Jitu told his family.

They quickly began the bride selection process. Among the two candidates shortlisted, Disha from Gondia stood out. Tarendra observed Disha's small but significant act—her thoughtful gesture of bringing food for their driver. "Did you see that? Such compassion," Tarendra whispered to his mother, who nodded in agreement.

Discussions about the marriage unfolded within the comforting walls of the Lakhankar family home in Tumsar. "We would be honored to welcome Disha into our family," Tarendra's father expressed warmly to Disha's family.

In the early morning hours, Tarendra's father reached out to Disha's father, extending a respectful proposal for marriage and cordially inviting their family to their home. Disha's family boarded the morning train to Tumsar, arriving around 8:30 am.

As they journeyed, Disha's family gathered references from their relatives about Jitu and his family, seeking reassurance. Both families appeared to be in agreement, fostering a sense of harmony and anticipation for the union.

"Dad, I hope everything goes smoothly today," murmured Jitu to his father, his nerves tingling with anticipation.

"Don't worry, son. Everything will be fine. We've done our best to make them feel welcome," Tarendra's father reassured him, patting him on the back with a smile.

Meanwhile, before coming to India, Jitu took a three-week leave from his job to prepare for the wedding and had plans to take his bride to the USA with him. However, upon checking with Disha, he discovered she didn't have a passport. This added another task to their already long list of to-dos. They realized that obtaining a passport typically takes 4-6 weeks after application, and they were running short on time. Also, it would be late if they wait for the marriage ceremony and get proof of marriage for the passport application. So, they choose to have a court marriage on the same day and a ceremonial marriage a few days later.

With Jitu and Disha's consent, arrangements for a court marriage kicked into high gear to facilitate Disha's passport application. "We'll have the court marriage in the morning (around 10 am), obtain the marriage certificate, and then head to Nagpur for Disha's new passport application and wedding shopping," Tarendra outlined his plan aloud. He promptly dispatched a couple of friends to prepare everything at the Magistrate's office, including forms, flowers, sweets, and other necessities.

The court marriage at the Magistrate's office was simple yet heartfelt, with brothers and friends only joining. Mother had prepared a large feast at home, creating an atmosphere of celebration. "This is just the beginning of your journey together," she said, smiling at Jitu and Disha.

The car was filled with laughter as they drove back from Nagpur toward Tumsar. The conversation turned to Balu, the brother who was not yet married. "So, Balu, when will we make another trip like this for you?" Tarendra teased.

Caught in the moment, Balu blurted out, "Actually, there's Snehal..." His admission led to an impulsive but decisive turn towards Snehal's house in Nagpur. Upon their arrival, Snehal's family warmly welcomed them, though the unexpected proposal took them aback. After thoughtful discussions, Snehal's family consented to the marriage. In Tumsar, Tarendra's mother visited the Pandit to seek auspicious dates for the wedding, consulting the Hindu calendar to determine the most favorable day based on the alignment of the stars.

In a flurry of excitement, two wedding dates were set for the same day. Jitu's wedding was scheduled for the morning at 9:30 am in Gondia (60 km to the East), while Balu's wedding was planned for the evening at 6:30 pm in Nagpur (90 km to the West).

The next few days were spent traveling to Nagpur from Tumsar, immersed in wedding preparations. They bought wedding sarees for Disha and Snehal and jewelry and attire for Jitu and Balu. Tarendra also picked up a few essentials for his upcoming journey to America.

Tarendra's relatives were initially taken aback upon receiving simultaneous wedding invitations for both Jitu and Balu. Nonetheless, they converged at the family home in Tumsar, where their mother, the calm and collected matriarch, explained the brothers' imminent departure to America for his PhD study.

Tarendra admired his mother's grace under pressure. Every task was well-planned in a short time. She had steered them through the challenges of Mundikota and continued to be their pillar of strength in Tumsar. Her resilience and leadership qualities deeply impressed Tarendra.

The day of the dual weddings has finally dawned. Jitu's wedding commenced at ten in the morning in Gondia, while Balu's was set for the evening in Nagpur. Following Jitu's morning wedding in Gondia, Tarendra and the family, along with Jitu and his bride Disha, made their way back to Tumsar by 2 pm.

After Disha was welcomed into the family home by their mother, Balu's pre-wedding Haldi ceremony took place. Freshened and ready, Tarendra and the others embarked on their journey to Nagpur for Balu's evening wedding. Meanwhile, their mother conducted the Haldi removal ceremony and ritual bath for Jitu and Disha in Tumsar. Once completed, she and the newlyweds joined the others at Balu's wedding celebration in Nagpur.

Amid the whirlwind of wedding celebrations, Tarendra was juggling additional concerns. Noticing changes in his appearance compared to the photo in Passport, like weight gain and slight balding, he worried about potential complications during the immigration process in the USA. He renewed his passport to ensure everything went smoothly, extending its four-year validity.

Once his passport affairs were in order, Tarendra hurried to the wedding hall in Nagpur, arriving by 7:30 in the evening. The ceremony concluded successfully, and the joyful wedding procession returned to Tumsar with the newlyweds, Balu and Snehal. That night, their mother lovingly conducted the Haldi removal ceremony for Balu and Snehal, welcoming them into the family home. In just eight days, Tarendra successfully saw two of his younger brothers get married.

In a whirlwind of events, the weddings of Jitu and Balu unfolded beautifully, with each groom finding an ideal match in their bride. The family celebrated these joyous unions with happiness. Following a day of rest and celebration, Tarendra shifted his focus to his upcoming journey. He started preparing for his trip to Mumbai, from where he would depart for his eagerly awaited move to the United States, marking the beginning of a new adventure in his life.



### **Chapter 13: The American Dream: A Bittersweet Beginning**

Once filled with excitement and anticipation, Tarendra's dream of studying in America turned bittersweet when an unexpected email arrived. It was from the professor who was to be his Ph.D. advisor, bearing disheartening news: the fellowship grant that was enough to support Tarendra and his family in America had been significantly reduced. The revised amount would barely cover his tuition fees and some expenses.

This development left Tarendra reeling. The news weighed heavily on him as he broke it to his family. He had to face the harsh reality that he couldn't take his wife Aparna and their infant daughter Astha to America, at least not under these circumstances.

"I'm sorry, Aparna," Tarendra said, his voice tinged with regret. "I had different plans for us, but fate has other ideas. The fellowship isn't enough to support both you and Astha in America. I can't risk taking you both to a new country with such financial instability."

Aparna, holding their infant daughter close, looked up at him with understanding eyes. "I know, Taren," she replied softly, her voice steady despite the disappointment. "And it's okay. We'll manage here. Focus on your research, and don't worry about us. We'll be waiting for you."

Tarendra's promise to her was heartfelt. "I promise I'll bring you to America as soon as I can," he assured her, determination lacing his words.

The time came for Tarendra to depart from Nagpur, leaving his family behind. His wife stood at the threshold, holding their daughter, tears streaming down her face as she watched him walk away, embarking on a journey that would change their lives, albeit not in the way they had initially hoped.

Sitting aboard the plane en route from Nagpur to Mumbai, Tarendra was immersed in introspection. The hum of the aircraft's engines constantly reminded him of the distance growing between him and his family back in Tumsar. He couldn't help but question the sacrifices he was making for his ambition. Was he being unfair to his family? Leaving Aparna and their ten-month-old daughter behind weighed heavily on his conscience. Doubts clouded his mind: was he failing as a husband and father?

He had made promises to his wife—vows of reuniting them in America as soon as he could secure a stable financial footing. These promises were now his guiding light, his motivation to overcome the uncertainty and anxiety of his new venture.

Peering out the window, Tarendra watched as the familiar landscapes shrank into mere specks, eventually disappearing into the vastness below. The doubts and fears gradually dissipated in this moment of solitude high above the clouds. A renewed sense of purpose and determination started to emerge. Tarendra realized that he had indeed embarked on a journey of a lifetime – a journey that a simple boy from a remote village in India had dared to dream.

As the white clouds drifted by, Tarendra reflected on his past—the lonely nights spent studying on train station benches, surrounded by quiet darkness, with nothing but his determination and dreams for company. These memories reminded him of how far he had come, reinforcing his belief in his sacrifices.

Overwhelmed with emotion as he flew high above the clouds, he reflected on the immense struggle and perseverance that had led him to this pivotal moment in his life. Finally, his efforts were bearing fruit, and despite the sacrifice and separation from his family, Tarendra felt a deep sense of fulfillment. His dream of flying on a plane, once a distant aspiration, was now a reality. He closed his eyes, allowing a blissful contentment to wash over him. He reassured himself that these sacrifices were a stepping stone to a brighter

future for his family. He imagined looking back on this day in the future with pride, knowing it was all worth it.

Securing a ticket to the USA had been a significant challenge. August was a hectic month for travel, with thousands of Indian students flying to America for university education as the semester started at the end of August. Tarendra's determination didn't waver even amidst the chaos and uncertainty in Mumbai. He spent an entire day at a travel agency, hoping for a chance. His persistence paid off when a cancellation allowed him to secure a ticket on the same midnight flight departing at 2.30 am.

Eager to ensure a smooth arrival in America, Tarendra went to an internet café. There, he hastily gathered contact details for Pravin, Jitu's friend, and Sanjay, Aparna's cousin, who were based in the East Coast of the USA. He contacted them through Yahoo Messenger (Online Chat service), explaining his situation and requesting their assistance upon arrival. They readily agreed to pick him up from the airport to his relief. Although Sanjay was in Florida on vacation, he drove all the way to Newark to Tarendra. This gesture of kindness from acquaintances abroad offered Tarendra comfort and support, easing some of the anxiety about his impending arrival in a new country.

As the plane ascended, soaring above the Indian subcontinent, a felt heaviness enveloped Tarendra. The departure from his homeland marked not just a physical journey but a passage filled with emotional turbulence. Tarendra couldn't help but feel excitement and apprehension about the new chapter he was about to begin. Despite the challenges ahead, he was ready to embrace the opportunities in the United States, driven by the hope of creating a better life for himself and his loved ones.

Tarendra's journey to America was an odyssey that stretched far beyond physical distance, encapsulating a voyage of anticipation, apprehension, and reflection. As the airplane hummed steadily, cutting through skies and time zones, Tarendra was enveloped in a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. Sleep eluded him throughout the long flight as he grappled with the unknowns awaiting him in a new land. The prospect of encountering unfamiliar customs and lifestyles and possibly facing prejudice weighed heavily on him.

His journey involved a significant layover, beginning with a ten-hour flight to London and another eight-hour flight to America. Staring out the airplane's window, Tarendra was captivated by the world unfolding beneath him. The vast expanses of land and water, seen from thousands of feet above, offered an exhilarating and humbling perspective.

In these moments of quiet observation, Tarendra's mind wandered to the engineering marvel of the aircraft itself. The plane, a remarkable feat of human ingenuity, symbolized the pinnacle of technological advancement and the triumph of human creativity. Tarendra, with his background in engineering, could not help but marvel at the intricate design and sophisticated mechanisms that made such a massive structure soar through the skies with grace. He contemplated the parallels between birds and airplanes, both masters of the air, yet fundamentally different in their essence.

This flight, Tarendra's maiden voyage in the sky, was more than a physical transition from one continent to another. It was a journey that bridged the gap between his past and future, between his dreams and the reality that awaited him. As the plane neared its destination, Tarendra braced himself for the new life ahead, armed with hope, resilience, and the unyielding spirit that had brought him this far.

Tarendra's journey culminated as the plane descended towards EWR Airport in New Jersey. Upon touching the ground, the aircraft's gentle jolt signaled his arrival in a new world, a new chapter of his life. He stepped off the plane and into the terminal, his heart pounding with nerves and excitement. It was 5 pm, and as he

descended from the sky, Tarendra had glimpsed the mesmerizing lights of New York City, sparking a sense of wonder and anticipation.

As Tarendra navigated the immigration and customs process, he felt an overwhelming sense of being in an entirely different world. The efficiency and smoothness of the process were a relief, but stepping outside the airport brought him face to face with the summer heat of the United States. The heat enveloped him like an oven, a stark contrast to the controlled climate of the airport's interior.

Feeling slightly disoriented amidst the bustling crowd of mostly white strangers, Tarendra began to feel overwhelmed. Just then, he spotted familiar faces in the crowd. Sanjay Khobragade and Pravin Marupadagi, whom he had contacted earlier, were there to receive him. The relief he felt upon seeing them was palpable.

"Hey, Tarendra!" Sanjay called out as he approached, a welcoming smile on his face. "Welcome to America!"

Tarendra's face lit up with gratitude. "Thank you, Sanjay, Pravin," he said, shaking his hand. "It's so good to see familiar faces."

"Don't worry, we've got you," Pravin said, helping Tarendra with his luggage. "It can be overwhelming at first, but you'll get the hang of it."

Sanjay nodded in agreement. "Yeah, and we're here to help you settle in. I'll take you to my place; you can stay there until you find your feet."

As they navigated the city, Tarendra's senses were bombarded with new sights, sounds, and smells. America was a vast change from what he had known back home in India, and he knew there was much to learn and adapt to. Yet, with the support of Sanjay and Pravin, Tarendra felt a burgeoning sense of hope and excitement for the journey ahead.

The three of them piled into Pravin's car, and a soft chuckle escaped him as he noticed the steering wheel on the left side. "Everything seems reversed here," he mused with a smile.

That evening, they found themselves at Pravin's apartment in Edison town, New Jersey, just across the expansive Hudson River from New York. Situated in a suburban area, Edison boasted a significant Indian population.

Tarendra and Sanjay were aboard the NJTransit train departing from Metropark Station bound for Penn Station in NYC the following day. They stayed with Pravin, whose hospitality he greatly appreciated. As the train whisked through the scenic landscapes, Tarendra couldn't help but compare the efficient service to his experiences with public transportation back in India.

Upon arrival in the bustling heart of New York City at the Penn Station, Tarendra and Sanjay headed to the Graduate Center of CUNY (located at 34<sup>th</sup> St) for their orientation. The location couldn't have been more central, nestled amidst the city's vibrant energy. Standing before the iconic Empire State Building, Tarendra felt excitement. The prospect of passing by the tallest building in the world daily filled him with awe.

Engrossed in the PhD orientation, Tarendra learned that his academic pursuits would primarily unfold at the City College of New York, situated uptown in Manhattan. While initially disappointed that he wouldn't frequent the Graduate Center as anticipated, he reminded himself that he was still fulfilling his dream of studying in NYC.

Later that afternoon, Tarendra and Sanjay boarded the subway from 34th Street station, bound for City College, located on 137th Street in upper Manhattan. It is exciting to see that most roads are named after numbers, which helps you quickly determine how many blocks you need to walk or drive. Descending into New York City's underground subway system, Tarendra immersed himself in a fascinating mosaic of humanity. Amidst the labyrinthine tunnels and bustling platforms, he encountered people from every corner of the globe, each adorned in unique styles and speaking various languages.

From the sleek suits of executives to the vibrant attire of tourists, the diversity of cultures and backgrounds represented in the subway was proof of the city's status as a global melting pot. As he rode the trains, Tarendra marveled at the kaleidoscope of faces and languages, each telling their own story amidst the rhythmic hum of the city's underground lifeline.

After reaching The City College of New York, Tarendra eagerly anticipated meeting Prof. Reza from the Civil Engineering Department, who had been instrumental in encouraging him to apply for the Ph.D. program. The anticipation of this meeting filled him with excitement as they embarked on this new chapter of academic exploration.

Tarendra: "Can you believe we're actually here, Sanjay? It's surreal standing in the heart of Manhattan, gearing up for our PhD journey."

Sanjay: "I know, right? And wait until we meet Prof. Reza. He's been such a guiding force for you."

Tarendra: "Absolutely. I owe a lot to him. It's amazing how everything has fallen into place."

Sanjay: "And hey, even though you won't be at the Graduate Center daily, think of the new experiences awaiting us uptown at City College."

Tarendra: "You're right. This city will amaze me all the time."

Upon arriving at the Civil Engineering department of the City College of New York, locating Prof. Reza's office proved straightforward. The professor welcomed Tarendra warmly and engaged him in discussions regarding coursework and research prospects. He even shared anecdotes about his family. During this conversation, Prof. Reza assured Tarendra of his support in securing a full fellowship for his studies.

Situated just half a kilometer from Harlem, a renowned hub of African American culture and history, the City College of New York held a unique position in the city. Harlem, known globally as the Black Mecca, had played a pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement, making the proximity of the college all the more significant.

With the college visits complete, the next priority was finding suitable accommodation in the bustling metropolis. Drawing on his familiarity with NYC, Sanjay suggested Jackson Heights as a potential neighborhood for Tarendra. Boarding the subway to Jackson Heights, they were greeted by a vibrant enclave that felt like a slice of India transplanted into the city. From Indian restaurants to grocery stores and clothing boutiques, the neighborhood offered a taste of home.

Amidst the bustling streets, they spotted advertisements for rooms and apartments posted in various shops. Sanjay took action and made a few calls to inquire about available rentals, eventually arranging visits to potential living spaces. As they navigated through the process, Tarendra couldn't help but feel excited at the prospect of finding his first home in the city.

Tarendra: "It's incredible how diverse and vibrant this city is, isn't it, Sanjay?"

Sanjay: "Absolutely. And Jackson Heights seems like the perfect blend of familiarity and new experiences for you."

Tarendra: "I'm grateful for your guidance in all of this. Finding a place to live is such a big step."

Sanjay: "Hey, that's what friends are for. And I have a feeling you'll settle right in. Just wait until you try some of the food around here!"

Tarendra: "I can't wait. This is just the beginning of our adventure in NYC."

Tarendra found himself nestled into a cozy room within a four-bedroom apartment, sharing space with fellow Indian roommates. Despite the one-hour journey to college, he embraced the opportunity to immerse himself fully in the vibrant energy of New York City.

In the initial weeks, Tarendra faced some challenges adjusting to his professors' language and pronunciation. Conversations were peppered with confusion, but gradually, he began to acclimate to the diverse accents and lecture styles.

On a crisp evening, Tarendra called Aparna, his voice filled with excitement and nervousness. "Hey, Aparna," he began, "I've got some news. My full scholarship has been reinstated. But there's more. I've been thinking... maybe you could join me here for your studies?"

Intrigued, Aparna responded eagerly, "Really? How could that work?"

"Well," Tarendra explained, "you've always been academically gifted. What if you prepared for the GRE and TOEFL exams? With your impressive academic record, I'm confident you could secure a scholarship to study in the U.S. It's a big step, but it could be our chance to be together again."

Aparna's voice trembled with excitement. "That's a wonderful idea, Tarendra! I'm ready to take on this challenge. It would be a dream to study in America and be with you. Let's make it happen!"

Tarendra felt a surge of relief and happiness. "Great! I'll help you with the preparation and guide you through the application process."

They discussed the plan in detail, with Tarendra offering insights and encouragement. Studying in America seemed daunting to Aparna, but Tarendra's faith in her abilities gave her the confidence to pursue this new path.

As they ended the call, Tarendra felt a renewed sense of purpose. This plan wasn't just about his dreams anymore but about their future together as a family. He knew the road ahead would be challenging, but the thought of Aparna joining him in pursuing their shared dreams filled him with an unshakeable optimism.

His experiences at the university further opened his eyes to the cultural differences. One particular incident stood out to Tarendra. During a seminar preparation, he watched Professor Reza, the Director of NOAA CREST, arrange chairs in the room. In India, such tasks were usually delegated to subordinates. Tarendra found this hands-on approach both surprising and inspiring.

"This is something," Tarendra commented to a fellow student. "Back home, professors wouldn't do this."

The student, busy arranging a projector, glanced up. "Oh, yeah? Well, here we all pitch in. It's a good way to keep things running smoothly."

The university's diverse student body was a melting pot of cultures, which Tarendra found immensely valuable. During lunch breaks, he often found himself surrounded by classmates from different parts of the world, each sharing stories from their homelands.

“Where are you from?” Tarendra would often ask, intrigued by the varied accents and backgrounds.

Each response added to his growing understanding of the world, making his time at the City College an academic journey and a deeply personal and enriching cultural experience.

Tarendra's transition to life in New York City marked the beginning of a new chapter in his journey. The move to Jackson Heights brought a comforting familiarity amidst the foreignness of the United States. The neighborhood, bustling with the sights, sounds, and scents reminiscent of his homeland, provided Tarendra with a seamless blend of the new and the known. Settling into his one-room apartment in this vibrant community, he felt a sense of home in a distant land.

“Feels like I never left India,” Tarendra often thought to himself as he walked through the lively streets of Jackson Heights, lined with shops and eateries that reminded him of back home.

The contrast between his new life and his past commutes from Mundikota to Tumsar was stark. The efficient and bustling New York City subway system offered a smooth and enjoyable commute to his college. This daily journey was far from the long, arduous trips he had grown accustomed to in India.

Tarendra found himself mesmerized by the energy of Times Square. The lights, the crowds, the constant hum of activity—it was like stepping into a different world, where dreams seemed tangible and within reach.

“The world meets here,” Tarendra mused, standing amidst the whirl of Times Square. “So many stories, so many dreams.”

His research work at the college quickly became the center of his focus. The initial language barrier, a challenge despite his TOEFL preparation, gradually diminished as he immersed himself in the academic environment. With each passing day, his confidence grew, and he began forging connections with fellow students.

Tarendra's determination to reunite with Aparna in the United States was unwavering. Hope emerged when he learned that his scholarship would be fully reinstated. He saw an opportunity for Aparna to join him not just as his partner but also as a fellow student in America.

Tarendra's journey in America had transformed into an exciting adventure of academic discovery. He reveled in the abundance of resources and opportunities at his disposal, enabling him to dive deep into his research on soil moisture analysis through satellite remote sensing. His commitment to his studies was unwavering, but the distance from his family remained a lingering challenge, softened only by the technological wonders that allowed video calls with his loved ones in India.

In Nagpur, Aparna and their daughter Astha had adapted to a new life. She had thrown herself into the rigors of preparing for the GRE and TOEFL exams, determined to join Tarendra in America. Tarendra's mother provided unwavering support, helping to care for Astha while Aparna focused on her studies.

One evening, as Tarendra sat in his lab, his phone rang. It was Aparna, and her voice was vibrant with excitement. "Tarendra, guess what?" she said, barely containing her joy. "I did it! I've got my GRE and TOEFL scores!"

Tarendra's heart leaped with happiness. "That's amazing, Aparna! I knew you could do it."

For Tarendra, it felt like a moment of triumph. All the loneliness and hard work seemed worthwhile now. "I can't wait to have you and Astha here with me," he replied, his voice filled with emotion.

As the tumult of emotions settled, Tarendra and Aparna found themselves embarking on a conversation about Aparna's academic trajectory. Tarendra gently explained that her classes would predominantly occur in the evenings, meaning her days would be devoted to research and preparation for the night sessions. The practical implication was that they'd likely return home around 10 to 10:30 PM. This led to the pressing question: Who would take care of little Astha during these academic hours, considering their commitments?

Tarendra sighed, expressing his gratitude that his fellowship would cover their basic expenses, such as rent and groceries. However, the prospect of arranging childcare and securing health insurance weighed heavily on their minds. A flurry of concerns raced through Tarendra's thoughts, sparking a heartfelt conversation with Aparna as they navigated the complexities of their situation.

Aparna furrowed her brows, her expression reflecting the gravity of their predicament. "I don't know how we'll manage everything," she admitted, her voice tinged with worry.

Tarendra reached out, gently squeezing her hand in reassurance. "We'll figure it out together," he assured her, his determination shining through. "We always do."

After much contemplation, they turned to Tarendra's mother for guidance. It wasn't merely financial support they sought; instead, they yearned for her seasoned advice. Upon laying out their circumstances, Tarendra's mother proposed a solution: she could care for Astha in India while they pursued their studies in the USA.

The heart-wrenching decision to leave their precious daughter, Astha, who was just a year and four months old, behind in India weighed heavily on Tarendra and Aparna. Tarendra's mother, sensing their anguish, stepped in with words of solace, mainly aimed at Aparna. "I know it's hard, but your dedication to your studies will pave the way for a brighter future for Astha," she assured, her voice a gentle balm to their worried hearts.

Aparna's eyes glistened with unshed tears as she listened to Tarendra's mother. "But what if she feels abandoned?" she fretted, her concern palpable.

Tarendra's mother reached out, gently squeezing Aparna's hand. "She won't. One day, she'll look back and understand the sacrifices we made for her," she reassured, her tone unwavering in its conviction.

Tarendra nodded in agreement. "And not just for her, but for our entire family," he added, a sense of determination creeping into his voice.

Their decision, fraught with anguish, suddenly seemed imbued with purpose. "We'll be pioneers in our family," Aparna murmured, a glimmer of hope breaking through the clouds of doubt.

Tarendra's mother smiled, her eyes reflecting pride and love. "Indeed, you will be," she affirmed, her words resonating with the weight of generations past and future.

That evening, their dialogue swirled with a mix of intricate plans, hopeful dreams, and the sad weight of leaving Astha behind. Yet, amidst the bittersweet emotions, they forged ahead with a shared vision of their future in America. With each word exchanged, they discovered a renewed sense of determination, fueled by the anticipation of soon having their family reunited, thus propelling their collective dream towards fruition.

Four months into Tarendra's journey in the USA, Aparna joined him, marking the beginning of their quest for a suitable abode. Together, they scoured the neighborhoods, seeking an apartment that could accommodate their needs and offer a sense of belonging in their new surroundings. Eventually, they stumbled upon a cozy and secure apartment nestled in Corona, just a stone's throw away from Jackson Heights. While modest by American standards, its warmth and security outweighed any grandeur.

Their new neighborhood, a vibrant mosaic of cultures, greeted them with open arms, offering a glimpse of familiarity amidst the unfamiliarity. Their Bangladeshi landlord, Rabi Khan, and his family welcomed them warmly, bridging the gap between their old and new lives with hospitality and kindness.

Their new residence, a two-story house with a basement, became their sanctuary in this foreign land. Rabi and his family occupied the first floor, while the second floor was divided into two small apartments, one of which became home to Tarendra's family. The basement, with its small windows near ground level, housed two more apartments occupied by a Sri Lankan family and a Bangladeshi-British family.

Separated from their native countries by miles, the families quickly bonded, finding solace and companionship in their shared experiences. Festivities became a cornerstone of their communal life, as they joyously celebrated Diwali, Eid, and other cultural events together. These gatherings fostered a sense of community and kinship, transforming their shared residence into a haven of togetherness amidst the bustling city.

In one of their gatherings, Aparna remarked, "It's incredible how we've all come together, creating our own little family away from home."

Rabi nodded, a smile gracing his face. "Indeed, it's like we've built our own mini-world right here," he agreed, his eyes reflecting the warmth of their shared bond.

After a few months, a family in the basement of the house faced a housing dilemma due to the woman's pregnancy. New York City regulations did not allow pregnant women to live in basement accommodations.

As Tarendra and Aparna discussed their day one evening, Tarendra broached the subject. "Aparna, you know the family living in the basement? The woman is expecting, and they can't stay there anymore."

Aparna thought for a moment before responding. "Yes, I heard about it. It must be difficult for them. What do you think we should do?"

Tarendra paused, then said, "I think we should offer them our apartment. We can manage in the basement."

Aparna looked at him, touched by his suggestion. "That's very kind of you, Tarendra. Let's do it. It's the right thing to help them out."

Their decision to move into the basement and offer their apartment to the expecting couple was met with immense gratitude. This act of kindness helped the needy family and strengthened the bond between Tarendra, Aparna, and their neighbors.

Both achievement and sacrifice marked the journey of Tarendra and Aparna in America. Their daughter Astha, growing up in India under the nurturing care of Aparna's mother and Snehal, was a constant reminder of their sacrifices for their education and future.

Despite the distance, Tarendra and Aparna kept the bond with their daughter strong through weekly video calls. They faced financial challenges as their scholarships were insufficient to cover all expenses. Aparna



took a part-time job to support their small family, showing their determination to make the most of their opportunities in America.

In America, Tarendra and Aparna found more than just an academic haven; they discovered a vibrant community that embraced them with warmth and camaraderie. Their bond with their landlord, Rabi Khan, and other families in the neighborhood became a source of joy and cultural exchange.

The dinners every weekend turned into delightful gatherings, fostering a sense of family and togetherness far from their homeland. These moments were especially cherished during the winter months when snowfall added a magical touch to their surroundings, making everything seem more festive and lively.

In addition to his daytime research commitments, Tarendra found himself balancing doctoral requirements by enrolling in three courses each semester for three semesters. He noticed that the university scheduled these courses in the evenings, running from 6 to 9 pm—a thoughtful arrangement tailored to accommodate working professionals like himself. This flexibility not only facilitated his pursuit of higher education but also allowed others to enhance their qualifications without disrupting their professional lives.

Aparna, on the other hand, secured a research position in the "Earth and Atmospheric Sciences" department and decided to pursue a Master's program there. Their classes often stretched late into the night, concluding at 9 pm, and they typically arrived home around 10:15 pm, weary from a long day of academic pursuits.

On such evenings, they were met with the heartwarming gesture of dinner prepared by Rabi Khan's family or one of the other households sharing their residence. These acts of kindness served as a beacon of warmth amid the bustling city life, fostering a sense of familial camaraderie within the walls of their shared home.

Tarendra: "It's such a relief that our classes are in the evenings. Can you imagine trying to juggle everything if they were during the day?"

Aparna: "I know, right? This setup makes it so much easier to manage work and studies."

Tarendra: "And coming home to a warm meal after a long day? It's like a little slice of home right here in New York."

Aparna: "Definitely. We're fortunate to have such caring neighbors."

Tarendra: "Absolutely. It's moments like these that make me grateful for the community we've found here."

Living in such a culturally rich and diverse environment, Tarendra and Aparna also enjoyed the local amenities. Just a short walk from their home was a large park, a perfect spot for community get-togethers and leisurely afternoons. Nearby was a Shia stadium, an exciting locale as it was the venue for the annual prestigious US Open tennis tournament.

During the weekend, there was a video call session with Astha over the Internet, during which Tarendra's mother and Snehal took exceptional care of her. Time seemed to fly by amidst research and classes.

During his doctoral studies, Tarendra had the opportunity to travel to different cities and present his research at several international conferences. At one of the conferences, he won the award for best poster presentation.

As Tarendra was on the verge of completing his doctoral thesis and Aparna was approaching the end of her Master's program, an exciting opportunity emerged. Tarendra was offered a post-doctoral position at

Colorado State University with a good salary. This milestone propelled him to plan a trip to India to reunite with his daughter and bring her back to the USA.

The reunion of a father and his daughter in Tumsar was a very emotional event, filled with overwhelming feelings. After nearly two and half years, Tarendra embraced Astha, acutely feeling the absence of numerous moments from her life. The blend of joy and tears during their reunion highlighted their profound connection and love. Firm in his decision, Tarendra took Astha back to America with him, committed to keeping the family united. This marked the beginning of a hopeful and promising new chapter in their lives together.

Tarendra's diligence at the university culminated in his completing his Ph.D. in an impressive two years and nine months, setting a departmental record. This was a significant achievement for him. Aparna was also making notable strides in her Master's program, signaling progress for both.

After Tarendra successfully completed his Doctoral Degree and Aparna proudly graduated from her Master's program, the family embarked on a new chapter, setting their sights on the tranquil town of Fort Collins, nestled in central western Colorado, USA.

The transition from the bustling streets of New York City to the serene landscapes of Fort Collins marked a significant shift for Tarendra, Aparna, and their daughter, Astha. Surrounded by the picturesque beauty of the foothills, Fort Collins offered a stark contrast to the urban jungle they had left behind.

In their quest for familiarity in this new environment, Tarendra embarked on a search for the Indian community. His efforts were rewarded when he stumbled upon a small Indian grocery store and a quaint restaurant, offering a taste of home amidst the unfamiliarity of their surroundings. Additionally, the acquisition of their first car marked a milestone, granting them newfound freedom to explore the town and its surroundings at their leisure.

With Aparna unable to work due to visa restrictions, she poured her energy into nurturing Astha. The slower pace of life in Fort Collins provided them with the opportunity to savor precious moments together, free from the relentless hustle and bustle of city life. Astha, in particular, thrived in her new environment, quickly adapting to her school and effortlessly mastering English within a mere two weeks.

As they settled into their new home, the family found solace and companionship in a remarkable group of individuals in Fort Collins, including university professionals. Together, they embraced the majestic beauty of the Rocky Mountains, forging lasting bonds and creating cherished memories amidst nature's grandeur.

As Tarendra's two-year postdoctoral tenure approached its conclusion, an exciting opportunity presented itself: a prestigious job offer as a Research Scientist at the NOAA CREST center, located at the same university in New York City where he had once pursued his Ph.D. The mere thought of returning to the bustling metropolis filled the family with a potent blend of excitement and anticipation, signaling the dawn of yet another thrilling chapter in their journey.

In a conversation with Aparna about the job offer, Tarendra's eyes sparkled with excitement. "Can you imagine, Aparna? We could be back in New York City, where it all began," he exclaimed, his voice tinged with enthusiasm.

Aparna smiled, her heart swelling with pride for her husband's accomplishments. "It's incredible, Tarendra. I can't wait to see where this opportunity takes us," she replied, her eyes reflecting a mix of excitement and anticipation for the adventures that lay ahead.

Their conversation drifted to the memories they had made in Fort Collins. "I'll miss the tranquility of this place," Aparna admitted a hint of wistfulness in her voice.

Tarendra nodded, a nostalgic smile playing on his lips. "Me too, Aparna. But I'm also excited for the energy and vibrancy of New York City," he added, his excitement palpable.

Astha, who had been listening intently, chimed in, her eyes shining with curiosity. "Will there be more parks to explore in New York City, Papa?" she asked eagerly.

Tarendra laughed, ruffling Astha's hair affectionately. "Oh, absolutely. We'll have a whole new world to discover together," he replied, his heart brimming with anticipation for the adventures that awaited them in their beloved city.

Opting to settle across the Hudson River in Ridgefield Park, New Jersey, they secured a charming second-floor abode in a picturesque house. Nestled amidst the verdant landscape, their new home boasted a tranquil haven away from the city's hustle and bustle, yet conveniently close enough for Tarendra's daily commute. Their landlord, a delightful fusion of Japanese and Ecuadorian heritage, resided on the first floor, adding a unique layer of cultural richness to their new abode.

However, this joy seemed fleeting for their daughter, Astha. In Ridgefield Park, she frequently returned home subdued and introspective. One evening, she said to her parents, "I just wish I had someone to play with." Recognizing the significance of companionship for Astha, Tarendra, and Aparna opted to relocate to an apartment community in the neighboring town of Wallington. This new apartment community was home to a small yet lively group of Indian families, offering a sense of community and the potential for Astha to find playmates.

In Wallington, Astha's transformation was almost immediate. She made friends with other Indian children, and her laughter filled their two-bedroom apartment. During this period, their joy doubled with the birth of Ayan. Tarendra often said, "Seeing Astha and Ayan happy makes everything worth it."

However, Tarendra and Aparna knew that education was paramount for children. Astha was in 4<sup>th</sup> Grade. "We need a place with excellent schools where our children can flourish," Aparna expressed one evening. After researching the local area surrounding their workplace, they came across Edison town. This town is known for its highly-rated high schools and significant Indian and Asian community. They ultimately decided to purchase an apartment and settle in the Margate housing complex located in Edison, NJ, after searching for weeks.

Margate, boasting 632 apartments and a substantial Indian community, appeared to be an ideal choice for Tarendra and Aparna. The couple quickly found camaraderie within this vibrant enclave, forging close bonds with 20-25 families. These were primarily Maharashtrian families, sharing the same linguistic and cultural heritage as Tarendra and Aparna's native state in India. This newfound community offered them a comforting slice of home, enabling them to engage in cultural practices, celebrate traditional festivals, and converse in their mother tongue. It became a nurturing environment not just for them but also provided a sense of belonging and cultural continuity for Astha, enriching her upbringing with the traditions of her parent's homeland.

The community boasted lush, beautiful green lawns, yet the community board had imposed restrictions against walking or playing on them. It's important to note that the climate in this area is cold for

approximately six months of the year, gradually warming up for the remaining six months, which is when children are most eager to play outside.

"Why can't the kids play on the lawns?" Tarendra inquired during a community meeting. These stringent rules prevented children from enjoying the outdoor spaces, causing disappointment among numerous families who wished for their children to have the freedom to play and enjoy the natural beauty of their surroundings.

Driven by a desire to improve his community, Tarendra ran for the position of community board president. During his campaign, he promised, "I will work towards creating a space where our children can play and grow freely." Winning the election, he fulfilled his promise by advocating for and overseeing the construction of a new playground.

Under Tarendra's leadership, Margate transformed. The community began celebrating cultural festivals like Diwali, Holi, Ganapati, summer picnics, and some American holidays as well, including Halloween and Easter Egg Hunts. Astha, now more vibrant than ever, said to her father, "You've made this place feel like home."

The intertwined stories of Tarendra and his brother Jitu reflect the complex choices that immigrants face when balancing their cultural heritage and pursuing new opportunities in a foreign land.

Amidst their journey, a significant milestone marked Tarendra's path: sponsorship for a green card by CCNY, propelling him closer to permanence in the United States. Meanwhile, Jitu celebrated the attainment of his green card, a pivotal step towards securing citizenship and establishing roots in their adopted home.

The prospect of settling permanently in America versus returning to their beloved India remained a recurring theme in the brothers' conversations. Caught between the allure of boundless opportunities in the land of opportunity and the deep-seated ties that bound them to their ancestral land, Tarendra and Jitu grappled with conflicting emotions. "The opportunities here are boundless," Tarendra often remarked, his voice tinged with both excitement and nostalgia, "but our roots, our family, they all lie back in India."

Jitu, reflecting on their shared experiences, emphasized, "We must ensure that we don't look back with regret for not returning to our homeland after benefiting from the education and opportunities here in the U.S."

As they stood at the crossroads of their lives, Tarendra and Jitu grappled with the weight of their decisions, torn between the comfort of familiarity and the allure of new beginnings. After much deliberation, they reached a mutual agreement: Jitu would return to India to explore job opportunities and reacquaint himself with life in their hometown. They set a timeframe of one year, during which they would reassess their options and chart the course of their future together.

Upon his return to India, Jitu wasted no time in seeking out job opportunities, and soon, he found himself immersed in the bustling tech hub of Bangalore, renowned as one of the IT capitals of southern India. With his wife, Disha, and their son by his side, Jitu settled into a community nestled within the confines of a multi-storied building.

Their new abode offered a plethora of amenities, from the convenience of hired help to the luxury of their car, easing the transition into their new life. With the assistance of dedicated maids, household chores became a breeze.

After spending a year in Bangalore, Jitu shared his experience of living back in India. Despite being familiar with the culture and surroundings, he felt that the opportunities in America were more compelling. The brothers discussed the realities of their situation. "Even with our education and career prospects, it's unlikely we would settle in Tumsar or even Nagpur, close to our native home, with parents and brothers," Tarendra noted. They recognized that their professional paths would likely lead them to major cities like Mumbai, Bangalore, or Delhi. "These cities are a train journey away from Tumsar, almost 18 hours. And ironically, traveling from the U.S. to India by flight takes about the same time," Tarendra added, highlighting the paradox of distance and opportunity.

"Bangalore was a great experience, but for our children's future and the opportunities we have, America is where we need to be," Jitu concluded during one of their heartfelt discussions. Finally, they both agreed that their future lay in America. This decision, while challenging due to the emotional distance from their birthplace, was made with the welfare and future of their families in mind.

After thoughtful deliberation and heartfelt discussions with their respective families, Tarendra and Jitu arrived at a monumental decision: to make the United States their permanent home and pursue citizenship.

This milestone was not just a formal change of status but a gateway to deeper involvement in his local community. Empowered by his citizenship, Tarendra became more active in local governance and politics. He successfully ran for a position as a committee member of the Democratic Party.

"Being an American citizen means I can do more for the Indian community, whether in America or India," Tarendra explained to his family. "It's about making this place better for everyone, just like back home in Tumsar."

Dr. Tarendra's research is in the field of satellite remote sensing and its application for snow estimation, and they developed an algorithm that can be used in any region. His research stands as a cornerstone in unraveling the intricacies of seasonal water flow from these snow-capped peaks into rivers during the late spring and summer months.

At the forefront of his endeavors is the international "Snow Research Campaign," a bold initiative that has revolutionized our understanding of snow-related environmental phenomena. With generous backing from NOAA and NASA, this ambitious campaign has extended its reach to Snow Field Research sites located roughly one thousand kilometers from the bustling metropolis of New York City.

Operating in the unforgiving conditions of winter, with an average snow depth of 4-5 feet and temperatures plummeting below -20 degrees Celsius, presented a formidable challenge for Dr. Tarendra, hailing from a region known for its equatorial warmth. Yet, his unwavering dedication and tireless perseverance have been instrumental in steering the project toward success despite the formidable obstacles.

With a keen eye for mentorship, Dr. Tarendra has cultivated a dynamic research environment, collaborating closely with students to construct the snow research site. Under his guidance, four Ph.D. students have successfully graduated, alongside some master's and bachelor's students who have utilized data generated by the field campaign to propel their academic journeys forward. The fruits of their labor have been showcased in a myriad of publications, each one contributing to the ever-expanding body of knowledge in the field.

In a candid conversation with a colleague, Dr. Tarendra articulated the profound significance of the Snow Research Campaign in Caribou, Maine, viewing it not merely as a project but as a sacred mission to

safeguard and comprehend our precious water resources. He expressed deep gratitude for the unwavering support provided by CUNY and NOAA, emphasizing its pivotal role in amplifying the scope and impact of their research endeavors.

Tarendra, defying the stereotype of scholars as withdrawn, thrived on adrenaline-fueled activities like skydiving and mountaineering. In a conversation, he once said, "People often box academics into a narrow frame. But for me, extreme sports are as vital as my research. They bring a sense of balance and excitement and push me to explore my limits."

An intrigued friend asked, "Doesn't that distract from your work?"

"On the contrary," Tarendra replied, "It complements it. Balancing rigorous intellectual pursuits with adventurous experiences is enriching. It's about living fully, challenging ourselves, and finding value beyond academic achievements." Believing the importance of a well-rounded life, combining intellectual challenges with the thrill of adventure.

Furthermore, his leadership in the Soil Moisture Field Campaign at CUNY-SMART in Millbrook, New York, which is a crucial site of NASA's satellite-based soil moisture calibration and validation research site, has produced crucial insights into soil moisture dynamics, enhancing the accuracy of weather and water predictions. Numerous publications in top-tier journals underscore the success of these initiatives. His colleague responded, "The insights from the Soil Moisture Field Campaign at CUNY-SMART are already influencing ecological studies significantly."

Under his mentorship, many graduates have embarked on significant careers, with some joining prestigious institutions like NASA and NOAA. His influence has inspired many young minds to continue his work in environmental research, focusing on snow research, a critical area for accurately estimating Earth's water and ice resources.

Tarendra's contributions to the university extended far beyond his leadership in ambitious research projects; he was also a dedicated educator, sharing his expertise across a range of subjects including Satellite Remote Sensing, GIS Mapping, and Earth and Environmental Sciences.

In 2015, an opportunity arose through the Department of Education funding for Tarendra to teach Earth Science Systems, a 3-credit course designed to enhance earth and environmental education among New York City public school teachers. Over four semesters, he engaged with numerous educators, recognizing a common challenge: how to effectively engage the next generation, who are increasingly immersed in digital media and technology.

During discussions with colleagues, the idea of incorporating more hands-on activities into teaching emerged as a potential solution. As they brainstormed ways to make learning about climate and weather more interactive, the concept of installing weather stations in schools arose. Excited by the prospect, Tarendra proposed the idea to Professor Reza, and together, they crafted a compelling proposal for funding.

To their delight, their proposal was swiftly approved, securing funding for the installation of weather stations. Tarendra, along with his students, embarked on a mission to install 21 weather stations across schools and other locations in New York City. Their goal was to actively engage students and the broader community in climate and weather education and awareness.

In a conversation with Professor Reza after receiving the funding, Tarendra expressed his enthusiasm for the project. "I truly believe that by bringing weather stations into schools, we can make learning about climate and weather more tangible and relevant for students," he remarked, his excitement palpable.

Professor Reza nodded in agreement. "This initiative has the potential to not only enhance education but also foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of environmental science among students," she added, sharing in Tarendra's enthusiasm.

As they set out to implement their vision, Tarendra and his team were driven by a shared passion for empowering the next generation with the knowledge and tools to address the pressing environmental challenges of the future.

In a conversation with a colleague, Tarendra remarked, "I believe in empowering educators. Through our Teacher Training program, we're enhancing skills and shaping the future of climate education."

His colleague replied, "Your commitment to education is inspiring. Establishing those weather stations in New York City schools is a fantastic way to bring climate research to life for students."

Reflecting on his journey, Tarendra often pondered the imperfections and vulnerabilities inherent in human nature. "No one is perfect," he mused, "and that's the beauty of life. As a rose thrives despite its thorns and a lotus blooms in the mud, we too can flourish amidst our imperfections."

His research efforts were not confined to one geographical location. With funding from US-Aid and other resources and collaborating with international colleagues from Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Argentina, Dr. Lakhankar pursued an understanding of climate change's impacts on agriculture and livestock. This global approach underlined the universal nature of environmental issues and the need for collective action.

In 2022, his university recognized his exceptional contributions and teamwork with the S.T.A.R. award. Upon receiving the award, Dr. Lakhankar reflected on the poignancy of the moment, "It's quite symbolic. My name, Tarendra, means "King of the stars" in Hindi, and here I am, receiving the S.T.A.R. award. It's a humbling full circle." His journey from a small village in India to becoming a celebrated scientist in America exemplified the power of perseverance, education, and the pursuit of excellence.

## Chapter 14: Karma Bank: Investing in Positive Energy

While on one of the India trips, sitting with old friends, the café was filled with the buzz of conversation. Dimly lit and cozy, it created an atmosphere of familiarity and camaraderie. Tarendra, amidst old friends, was immersed in the warmth of shared memories and laughter. But the mood shifted abruptly with his friend's pointed question.

"Hey Tarendra, you're highly educated, right?" his friend began, his tone carrying a hint of challenge. "You've gained so much from India regarding education and opportunities. But what have you given back?"

Tarendra, slightly taken aback, responded calmly, "Yes, that's true. What about it?"

The friend pressed on, "Well, this country shaped you. But then you just left for the US, taking your talents abroad. Don't you owe something to your homeland?"

The accusation hung in the air, starkly contrasting with the light-hearted banter that had filled the room moments before. Tarendra felt a sting at the implication of his disloyalty. Gathering his thoughts, he decided to confront the accusation head-on.

"Let me turn that question around," Tarendra said, leaning in. "What have you given back to our country?"

His friend faltered, caught off guard. Silence fell over the table as Tarendra continued, "Have you ever returned to the institutions that nurtured you? Have you contributed anything to their development?"

The friend remained silent, unable to respond. Tarendra's frustration was palpable as he threw his hands in the air. "See, this is the hypocrisy I'm talking about. Why single me out for leaving India when you haven't even supported the very schools that educated you?"

A palpable discomfort settled over the group, a stark reminder of the complexities surrounding giving back to one's homeland. Tarendra's retort was a mirror to their contributions, or lack thereof, challenging the notion that geographical proximity equated to loyalty or contribution.

Tarendra sighed deeply, his voice steady yet filled with a hint of frustration. "You see me flying from America to India every year, but do you know what I do during my visits here?" he asked, looking around the table at his friends gathered in the café.

He continued, "I dedicate much of my time here to visiting universities, colleges, and schools. I'm not just a visitor; I organize conferences, workshops, and motivational sessions. I'm trying to give back to the community that raised me, to give a platform to disadvantaged young people like I once was."

Intrigued, one of his friends leaned in and asked, "So, you're doing all this just out of gratitude?"

Tarendra nodded affirmatively. "Absolutely. How I repay my debt to the institutions made me who I am today. It's not charity; it's my sacred duty."

The table fell silent, absorbing Tarendra's words. One friend finally said, "We never realized the depth of your commitment, Tarendra. You're indeed a true patriot."

Tarendra smiled and said, "My efforts don't stop there. I've been back to my old school in Tumsar. I funded a new library, installed classroom fans, and built a volleyball court. I brought two professors from America to teach for a couple of weeks. It's all about inspiring the next generation."

His friend exclaimed, "That's incredible, Tarendra! You're making a difference."



"But it's not just about my hometown," Tarendra added, his tone turning solemn. "I was in Nepal during the 2015 earthquake. The devastation was beyond words. But I stayed and helped with relief efforts and rebuilding. It's about reaching out wherever help is needed."

His friends looked at him with newfound respect and admiration, understanding the breadth and depth of Tarendra's commitment to positively impacting his homeland and beyond.

Tarendra was deeply moved when he learned about the devastating earthquake in Nepal and the plight of the village where he had installed a weather-measuring unit. He discovered that international aid was primarily reaching Kathmandu, leaving remote areas, including the village he knew well, in dire need.

Determined to make a difference, Tarendra contacted his friends and network in America. "Friends, the situation in Nepal is heartbreaking," he shared on a call with his close friends, his voice heavy with emotion. "We have to do something. The remote areas are suffering greatly."

His social media posts, filled with poignant images of the disaster, spurred a fundraising campaign. Astoundingly, they raised twenty lakh rupees. "I can't believe the response we've gotten," Tarendra said, overwhelmed by the support.

He coordinated with a friend's father in Kanpur, instructing him how to use the funds. "We need essentials like food, water, clothes, and medicine," Tarendra explained over the phone. "We must get these supplies to the village as soon as possible."

Understanding the logistical challenges of delivering aid directly to the affected village, he arranged for the relief supplies to be first transported to the India-Nepal border at Sonouli.

He coordinated with his research collaborators in Nepal, including scientists, faculty members, and students. "We need to organize a team to collect these supplies at Sonouli," Tarendra instructed his Nepalese colleagues over the phone. "We must get these materials to the people as quickly as possible."

His Nepalese team, accompanied by doctors, reached Sonouli and transferred the essential supplies from the truck arriving from Kanpur into two lorries. This strategic decision ensured the aid could be distributed efficiently to the village and surrounding areas.

The impact of Tarendra's initiative was profound. "Your efforts have not only brought much-needed relief but have also motivated our local community to get involved," one of the Nepalese professors expressed gratitude during a call with Tarendra.

This mission was more than just delivering supplies; it was about instilling hope and resilience in a community facing despair.

Back in America, Tarendra's university caught wind of his selfless actions. They promptly published an article lauding his efforts. "Dr. Lakhankar's initiative in the Nepal earthquake relief is a testament to his compassion and leadership," the article read.

Tarendra's experiences in India and America taught him a lot about happiness. "I've seen both ends of the spectrum," he explained. "And I've realized that happiness isn't about accumulating more but being content with what we have. A minimalist lifestyle, free from the endless pursuit of desires, brings true contentment."

Tarendra's involvement in the India Initiative Collaboration (IICCCI) to bridge the gap between India and the USA in climate change research. His efforts in establishing IICCCI highlighted his dedication to creating opportunities for learning and research that address critical issues like water and food security,

especially in his home country. In 2022, a significant milestone was achieved when vice-chancellors from four renowned universities, along with American researchers and Indian officials, signed a statement of common interest. This event was a testament to Tarendra's vision and hard work in bringing together diverse expertise for a common goal.

During a conversation about this achievement, Tarendra shared, "This is more than a professional accomplishment. It's about connecting my two worlds – the land of birth and where I've grown my career."

Life, indeed, can sometimes feel like leftover rice from the previous night – seemingly neglected and overlooked. But, as we often do with that rice, transforming it into a delicious new meal with a few simple ingredients, why not similarly approach our lives? Adding onions, chili, and spices to the rice gives it a new purpose and flavor. Again, we can add elements to our own lives –new skills, perspectives, or experiences – to rejuvenate and enrich them.

Just as we see potential in the leftover rice, we should see potential in the discarded or overlooked aspects of our lives. By applying effort, creativity, and a bit of spice, we can transform these overlooked elements into something powerful and tasteful. What's stopping us from doing so? It's a matter of perspective and willingness to see the value in what might initially appear as waste or mundane. By embracing this approach, we can turn seemingly ordinary or neglected parts of our lives into sources of joy and fulfillment.

Despite the physical distance from India, Tarendra's cultural roots remained deeply ingrained in his daily life. He fostered a strong connection to his heritage through language and traditions. "Speaking Marathi and Hindi at home keeps me connected to my roots," he said. "And celebrating our festivals here, like Dussehra, Diwali, Ganesh Chaturthi, and Holi, not only keeps our traditions alive but also shares our rich culture with others here in the USA." Tarendra's engagement in cultural events in his community, like Ramlila and Ravandahan, further reinforced his commitment to preserving and promoting his cultural heritage.

Tarendra's commitment to fostering international collaboration in climate change research was evident in his efforts to bridge the academic and cultural gaps between India and the United States. In the presence of American delegates, his involvement in signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Governor of Maharashtra was a significant achievement. This MoU facilitated the organization of various "Climate Change" conferences at universities in Maharashtra, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana, highlighting Tarendra's dedication to spreading awareness and knowledge on this critical issue.

During a conversation about this collaboration, Tarendra reflected, "It's crucial to maintain a connection with our roots. I always visit India whenever possible to stay close to family, friends, and our culture. It's amazing how even small things, like finding Lifebuoy soap in New York, can evoke such strong memories of home."

Tarendra also mused on the differences between the educational systems of India and America. "The focus here in America is on project-based learning, encouraging kids to work in groups, solve problems, and collaborate. It's quite a contrast to the memorization-based system I experienced in India. Both systems have their merits but fundamentally differ in their approach to education."

This perspective allowed Tarendra to appreciate the value of diverse educational methodologies and their impact on students' learning experiences. His observations underscored the importance of adaptability and open-mindedness in education, fostering a global understanding among the younger generation.

Looking back at his own life, from the humble benches of an Indian train station to the esteemed halls of a university in the USA, Tarendra remained grounded. "I've come a long way, but I'm far from perfect. Every day is a learning opportunity, and staying humble is key. No matter how much you achieve, there's always more to learn and improve. That's the mindset that has always driven me."

Tarendra often reflected on the contemporary world's pursuit of perfection, seeing it as a misguided endeavor. "It's sad to see people chasing an illusion of perfection," he said one evening while discussing life's philosophies with a colleague. "They seem to forget that failure is inevitable and necessary. We grow through our failures, not by chasing an unattainable ideal."

His philosophy extended to dealing with challenges and criticism. "Every obstacle, every bit of mockery, is a chance to learn and improve," he mused. "It's all about perspective. Look for the silver lining, and you'll find it."

Indeed, life offers a canvas of opportunities, and our hesitation or fear often holds us back from painting it with vibrant experiences. Why not seize these moments, no matter how modest or daunting they seem? Whether enrolling in a dance class, starting music lessons, or even something as simple as skipping stones across a lake, these acts can inject new energy and perspective into our lives. There's no need for shyness or embarrassment; these moments define us.

Through such experiences, we may find a resilience we never knew we had, uncovering new paths and opportunities that can reshape our existence. This new outlook can be transformative, propelling us toward uncharted territories and new life journeys. Embracing change and life's unexpected twists can make us more robust, adaptable, and equipped to face future challenges.

A perfect example is the metaphor of leftover rice turning into a delightful dish. Adding spices to something seemingly mundane can create something extraordinary. Similarly, infusing our lives with new experiences, no matter how small, can lead to personal growth and self-discovery.

This principle extends to our relationships as well. Sometimes, we connect instantly with someone whose energy resonates with ours, bringing us immense joy and a sense of belonging. Other times, we may find ourselves drifting away from long-known acquaintances, realizing that our paths or values no longer align. A person's true essence often reveals itself unexpectedly, playing a significant role in our lives and shaping our preferences and perspectives.

Tarendra's experiences with individuals like Deepak, the tea seller at the train station, gave him a profound understanding of societal disparities. He observed people's contrasting attitudes toward the less fortunate, ranging from dismissive and demeaning to compassionate and kind. It became clear to Tarendra that true richness lies not in one's material wealth but in one's attitude and approach toward others, regardless of one's social or economic status.

"Deepak's resilience always amazed me," Tarendra reflected during a conversation. "People often mistreated him, yet he remained steadfast, a true warrior in his own right. His life wasn't about victimhood but the unyielding struggle for dignity."

Tarendra shared these thoughts with a friend one evening. "You know, I spent five years living among these so-called 'marginalized' people. They're often labeled as troublemakers, but what I saw was their fight for basic respect and rights."

His friend nodded, listening intently as Tarendra continued, "They're part of a community that's constantly overlooked, yet they possess a strength and kindness that's truly humbling. I remember many times, as a hungry kid, when they would share their food with me. Those acts of generosity spoke volumes about their character."

Tarendra's journey allowed him to witness firsthand the complex dynamics of society, where those in power often fail to acknowledge the plight of the less privileged. It was a lesson in humility and empathy, teaching him that true wealth lies in one's character and actions, not material possessions or social standing. His experiences with Deepak and others from similar backgrounds underscored the importance of understanding and addressing the root causes of societal issues rather than merely casting judgment based on superficial assessments.

"It did, but not just in terms of knowledge. It helped me see the world differently," Tarendra replied. "I learned that real happiness doesn't come at the expense of others. 'Uparwale ki lathi me Awaz nahi Hota' – this saying resonates with me deeply. It's about karma, the unseen justice in our actions."

The conversation turned philosophical as Tarendra shared his belief in the 'Karma Bank.' "Every good deed we do, no matter how small, adds up in this cosmic account. It's about building a reservoir of positive energy that eventually flows back into our lives."

His colleague nodded, understanding Tarendra's perspective. "So, it's like what you give to the world returns to you?"

"Exactly," Tarendra affirmed. "It's not just about our own lives. Our actions, positive or negative, impact those around us. I've always believed that the energy I put into the world will return to me, enriching my life in unexpected ways."

Tarendra often pondered the special attention given to his birthday in his house; a tradition shrouded in mystery. Yet, regardless of this unique practice, the unity and affection among him and his brothers never waned.

One evening, while reminiscing with his brothers over a video call, Tarendra couldn't help but express his curiosity. "I've always wondered," he said, "why was it that only my birthday was celebrated back home with such fanfare? None of you ever questioned it."

His brothers laughed, their faces lighting up the screen. Jitu, the closest age to Tarendra, replied warmly, "We never really thought about it, brother. It was just a day filled with happiness, and that was enough for us."

"It's true," added Kranti. "Our bond goes beyond these celebrations. We've always felt connected, regardless of where or what we're doing."

Tarendra nodded, feeling a wave of gratitude. "I guess, in some ways, it brought us closer. Mother did have a way of teaching us about unity and love in her unique way."

The conversation drifted to their childhood memories, each sharing anecdotes and laughter. Despite the distance and their busy lives, their bond remained unshaken, a testament to the values their mother had instilled in them.

Tarendra reflected on this connection, wondering if there was a more profound, perhaps spiritual, reason for their strong bond. "Maybe we were connected in a past life," he mused. "And we were fortunate to be born into this family, into our mother's care."

The conversation ended with plans to meet soon, reaffirming the unbreakable bond between the brothers. Tarendra's heart swelled with pride and love for his family, and he was grateful for their unyielding support and unity, which are rare and precious gifts in life's journey.

Last Cover Page Text:

"Beyond Mediocrity: The LoneStar Odyssey" chronicles Dr. Tarendra Lakhankar's remarkable path from a remote village in India, Mundikota, to New York, highlighting his ascent through dedication and a mother's love. From humble beginnings to achieving a doctorate and becoming a Senior Scientist, this story celebrates resilience, the value of roots, and the pursuit of dreams. It's an inspiration, showing how perseverance, hard work, and family support can lead to extraordinary achievements. Join us in discovering Tarendra's journey, a testament to the power of ambition and the spirit of determination.