

Jeevan Lakshya – Story

Vijay(42), paces around nervously at the foyer of an auditorium with a piece of paper in his hand, murmuring 'Aadarniya Mukhya athiti mahoday, humaare marg darshak shakha prabhari ji, DO sahab aur mere pyaare saathiyon...'

In the background, a faint sound of someone speaking on a mic can be heard. It's coming from inside.

'Aisa sunehra din aaya hai, mann hua hai prafullit... Aaj jo hum mein sarvashresth hai, use karenge sammanit' announces the emcee animatedly and invites the chief guest to come to the podium and present the coveted 'LIC agent of the year' award to the one who has done maximum number of policies this year.

As the chief guest, an old man in his early 60s, slowly walks towards the podium, Vijay's anxiety increases outside. He begins to jumble up the words 'aadarniya saathiyon, pyaare atithi ji'... his pace increases too. He is a nervous wreck.

The chief guest reaches the podium, the emcee gives him a card and the old man reads from it 'is saal ke vijeta hain... Vijaya ji'. The crowd applauds. A confused female gets up. Vijay is shocked outside. But just then the emcee corrects the chief guest 'Vijaya ji nahi Vijay ji... vijeta hai Vijay ji.' The crowd applauds again but Vijay is not in sight. The applause dies down. Someone runs out to get Vijay. That person comes back. The crowd applauds again. But Vijay is not with him. The applause stops again. The person gestures that Vijay is coming in a moment. Everyone waits... and finally Vijay enters with a huge round of applause.

Vijay smiles nervously and moves towards the stage, still stealing glances at the piece of paper in his hand and saying the lines of his speech under his breath.

He gets up on the stage, greets all the dignitaries (one of whom avoids eye contact with him) and taking the award from the chief guest, he goes to the podium to give the acceptance speech. 'Aadarniya Mukhya atithi mahoday, Humaare Marg darshak Shakha Prabhari ji, (a little awkwardly) DO sahab aur mere pyaare saathiyon'... but just then... BANG BANG BANG! A series of loud noises come from outside and everybody runs out to see what happened. Vijay stands alone at the stage with his speech in his hand.

Outside, a man has been shot dead by someone and the crowd gathers around the dead body. Nobody seems to be shaken by it or even surprised by the murder, but they are all curious to know who got killed. 'Arre woh gujjar ka ladka hai, pichale hafte cricket match mein jhagada ho gaya tha na gol market ke ladkon se, unhone hi goli maar di hogi' seems to be the general consensus and everyone is quite okay with this theory.

Vijay too walks out and sees the dead body. While rehearsing for his speech, he had actually seen a couple of guys lurking in the alley next to the auditorium, but rather than waiting there to tell the police about it, he just shakes his head and leaves. He is disappointed. Not because a young man lost his life due to a petty issue (which is just too normal in Muzaffarnagar), but because he didn't get the opportunity to deliver his acceptance speech.

Very soon, others disperse as well, leaving the dead body in the middle of the road.

Vijay is at the court in his friend Bijju's cabin, who is a (good for nothing) lawyer. His friends and colleagues Anil Tyagi and Ravi Tomar are here too and the group is celebrating Vijay's award by having chai samosa. They are all happy for Vijay's success but Vijay himself doesn't look to be in a good mood. Bijju asks if this is because Bhabhi ji (Vijay's wife) could not attend the event? Vijay shakes his head saying that she had her tuitions and he understands that there is nothing more important than the future of the little kids whom she teaches. 'Then what is the matter'... enquires Ravi and Vijay replies in a disgruntled tone that he had prepared the acceptance speech for a week, but did not get the opportunity to deliver it... 'us saale gujjar ko bhi tabhi marna tha. 10-minute baad goli maarte to meri speech ho jaati.'

The group laughs at Vijay's childlike complaint and ask him to give the speech now as this too is a celebration for his success and they are his best audience. Vijay denies at first but no one could be more persuasive than a group of close friends. Vijay agrees shyly, gets up and begins the speech... 'Aadarniya Mukhya atithi mahoday, Humaare Marg darshak Shakha Prabhari ji, (making a face) DO sahab aur mere pyaare saathiyon...' but just then there is a loud commotion outside and the entire gang runs out to see what is happening. Vijay is again left alone with his speech. He flinches in frustration.

Two guys are having a brutal fist fight at the court corridor and everyone is enjoying it. Bijju asks the crowd what is the matter and someone tells the group that one of the guys had come to thrash a person who has filed a case against his brother, but he slapped *this* chap instead, without confirming if he is the same guy. This guy turned out to be a rowdy himself and now the two of them are thrashing each other.

Vijay, who too has come out, listens to this stupid story and leaves disappointed, as his friends continue to enjoy the fight.

Vijay reaches home. There is a bike parked outside. Vijay's mood deteriorates further on seeing it. He reluctantly goes in and is welcomed by his loving wife Himani and their lovely daughter Naina, who were eagerly waiting for him to come back home with the award. Naina has even drawn a sketch of his father receiving the award. Vijay picks her up in his arms and asks Himani with a frown if 'HE' has come. But before she can reply, a woman comes out of the hall exclaiming 'Arre darwaaze par apni biwi ke saath hi guturgu karta rahega kya... apni didi ko bhi dikha apna award'. That's Vijay's elder sister Urmila. Vijay touches her feet and showing her the award murmurs that she should have called him and asked to pick her up, what was the need of coming with HIM.

The person in question here is Urmila's husband Laxman, with whom Vijay doesn't get along well. As the family proceeds to have a silent and awkward dinner at the dining table, it's revealed that Laxman is the same dignitary who was avoiding eye contact with Vijay on the stage. He is the 'DO sahab' who was addressed without any flowery prefix by Vijay. The two don't see eye to eye.

At night, as Himani joins Vijay in the bed after putting their daughter to sleep, she carefully broaches the topic of Vijay's issue with Laxman and says 'aap hi to hamesha kehte hain ki koi

aadmi bura nahi hota, sabko mauka dena chahiye... toh phir Jijaji', Vijay cuts in saying that he never said that Laxman is a bad person and they both have given each other enough chances... but some things are just meant to be a certain way and it's best for everyone if it remains that way. Rejecting any possibility of them ever getting along, Vijay ends the topic.

To lighten his mood, Himani asks him about the award ceremony and his speech which he had been preparing so diligently since last one week. 'Everyone must have gotten floored by your speech' she quips and Vijay replies angrily that they would have, if that Gujjar wouldn't have been floored by those bullets. Himani realizes that Vijay never got the chance to deliver his speech and to lift his mood she asks him to give the speech now... 'wahan to main waise bhi nahi sun paati... abhi sunaiye na, main soch loongi ki wahan kaisa laga hota'.

Vijay is in no mood to give the speech right now but couldn't resist his wife's loving requests for long. Soon, he gets up, closes his eyes to get in the mood and begins his speech as if delivering it in front of a packed auditorium 'Aadarniya Mukhya atithi mahoday, Humaare Marg darshak Shakha Prabhari ji, (looking at Himani) DO sahab aur mere pyaare saathiyon...' just then there is a loud police siren in the mohalla and a lot of noise in the neighboring house. Himani rushes to the window to see what's the matter and is alarmed to find a fleet of police men in the house next door. Although a bit disappointed, but Vijay goes out with Himani to check what's happening.

Outside, they get to know that three guys broke into their immediate neighbor's house and tried to rob them. Their neighbors fought back and made noise, resulting in two of the three guys running away, but the third one is still hiding somewhere in the colony. The police have arrived and the search is on to get him. Since Vijay and his neighbor's terraces are just separated by a small wall, he is advised to lock the terrace door properly and be alert.

As advised, Vijay goes up to check and notices that the door of the only room on the terrace, where Himani conducts her tuitions, is ajar. He walks towards the room and before closing the door, peeks in to check... and to his horror, the thief is hiding inside!

Vijay is about to shout and call everyone to his terrace when the thief falls on his feet with folded hands and begins to plead with him. Vijay notices that he is just a teenage boy who is begging him to not hand him over to the police. He says that he was forced by his elder brother and his friend to come with them for the theft. They had told him that they will just steal some construction iron rods lying in the backyard of that house, but then the two of them broke in and things got out of hand.

The boy says that the real culprits have already fled and if Vijay gets him caught, the entire blame will be put on him. Once he goes to jail, his whole life would be over. Vijay is in a tricky situation. He doesn't want to spoil an innocent boy's life, but what if the boy is lying and he lets go of a criminal. Vijay has to make a judgement call and he has to do it quickly. The people of his neighborhood are coming up to see what's taking Vijay so long. They will be there any moment. The boy continues to plead. Vijay doesn't know what to do. He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, thinks for a moment and suddenly... he rushes out of the room and locks it from outside.

His neighbors are there. Vijay tells them that the door was jammed and was not getting shut. He takes them downstairs and saves the boy.

Few hours later, when the dust settles down, Himani goes to Vijay and asks why did he save the boy? Vijay is surprised. How did she know about that!? Himani says that she knows him and her house a little too well to realize that it was not the door which was keeping him upstairs for so long. She asks again... the reason behind saving the boy and Vijay tells her the whole story. Knowing Vijay inside out, she is not surprised, but she still asks... 'What if the boy was lying?' and Vijay replies with an assured calmness on his face that he would like to believe that he wasn't.

Next day, Vijay's routine life resumes. He gets up early, goes for a morning walk, comes back and gets ready for work, prepares his own breakfast as Himani is busy with her tuitions, goes on his rounds meeting various people, chit chatting with them, having tea, eating samosas, collecting premiums from the old clients and explaining policies to new potential clients, trying to convince them to buy one.

Vijay works on ground the entire day and reaches the office only in the latter half of the afternoon. It's a typical government office with a laid-back work culture, employees chit chatting in groups with rounds of chais and pans. Even the ones who are working don't seem to be in any sort of a hurry. Time moves at a different pace here and they all seem to be in tune with it.

As Vijay walks towards his desk, sharing pleasantries with everyone on the way, he notices a group of agents in Laxman's cabin having a serious discussion about something. The group is led by Ravi, the union leader and one of Vijay's closest friends. Just by looking at his face Vijay knows what the discussion is all about.

It happens towards the end of every financial year, when it's time to calculate all the 'unclaimed matured policies' and send that money to the govt. Every year the agents demand from Laxman to keep a part of that money (showing that it got claimed) and distribute it to the agents as bonus and every year Laxman explains it to them that it is illegal and cannot be done. Ravi knows that if Laxman wants, it's very easy for him to turn illegal to legal and even the government won't fret over a few lakh rupees, but Laxman won't budge.

Vijay never participates in these discussions, not because he doesn't want to face Laxman, but because he goes by the book and doesn't believe in free meals. He is watching the whole drama from his desk while tabulating all the money that he has collected and all the new policies that he has sold today.

As the group comes out of Laxman's office, Ravi and Anil walk up to Vijay and taunt jokingly 'teri to saale na dosti ka faayda na dushmani ka ghaata' implying that Vijay must be a party to these discussions with Laxman, either to support his friends or to trouble his enemy... but he does neither. To this Vijay replies with a smile 'faayde ke liye ki to kya dosti ... aur apno se kaisi dushmani'. Ravi and Anil object hard to the use of the term 'apno' for Laxman with whom Vijay hasn't talked in last 5 years. 'That doesn't make him my enemy' says Vijay with a straight

face and adds that they don't talk because their opinions don't match, but that doesn't make one of them right and the other one wrong, or the two of them enemies.

Shaking his head in amused frustration, Ravi asks Vijay for the umpteenth time the reason behind this animosity between the Jija-sala duo, but like always, Vijay dodges the question and advises Ravi not to waste his energy to persuade Laxman to agree to his demand... 'He is an ethical man and will never succumb to your pressure. Agents have no rights over the unclaimed policy money and should not try to get their hands on it' concludes Vijay. Ravi is about to give his rebuttal when his phone rings... It's Bijju and he gives him a horrific news... Ravi's father has been stabbed!

Narayan Sir, a retired primary school teacher, who has taught Vijay and all of Ravi's friends, is a loved and respected man and the news of him getting stabbed shakes everyone. As Ravi, Anil and Vijay reach the hospital, they are told by Bijju how a guy, who was running away from someone, stabbed Narayan sir when he came in his way. The doctors have said that his condition is critical but they are trying. Ravi is distraught. They are not allowed to go inside the ICU and as they patiently wait outside, Bijju gets a call from his contact at the police station that the guy who stabbed Narayan sir has been caught.

Fuming with anger, they all reach the police station and demand to see the culprit. The inspector points towards the lockup and as they turn, Vijay is stunned to see who it is... The same teenage boy whom he saved last night!!... He trusted the boy and he betrayed him.

As Ravi charges towards the boy, Vijay couldn't stop himself from blurting out 'You!! Why did you do this?' Everyone is surprised to know that Vijay knows the boy. Feeling hurt and cheated, Vijay walks up to him and questions why did he butcher the chance that he gave him? Was everything that he said last night a lie? Did he fool him?

The boy remains silent. He couldn't even look into Vijay's eyes. But listening to what Vijay is saying, Ravi pounces on him shouting 'how can you be so stupid... how can you trust a thief!!' Ravi implores that if Vijay wouldn't have let the boy go last night, his father wouldn't be at the hospital today, fighting for his life. Maddened with anger, Ravi slaps Vijay tightly before the constables pull him away. And It's not just Ravi, the entire police station is surprised to know what Vijay has done. 'In a city like Muzaffarnagar, where even fathers don't trust their sons, brothers don't trust each other, you trusted a complete stranger?' quips the inspector as he shakes his head in disappointment. Everyone looks at Vijay with questioning eyes and Vijay just lowers his head and walks out from there.

It's a long walk back home for him. His mind is muddled with self-doubt and guilt. He reaches home and breaks down in front of Himani.

Next morning, a reporter who was present at the police station, publishes an article about the incident in the local newspaper. The article headlining 'Moorkhata ki aisi kahani jo uda degi aapke hosh' describes how Vijay's foolishness has led to a respected senior citizen's stabbing.

Soon, the entire city becomes privy to this news. Even if they don't know Vijay, they know about this incident. Vijay gets awkward stares on his usual work rounds and even in his office. Ravi is on leave to take care of his father, so Vijay doesn't have to face him, but even Anil is giving him cold shoulder.

Everyone is judging Vijay's action... his intellect... his maturity... but Vijay is not angry... he is surprised... he is confused. Did he really commit a mistake by trusting the boy? How has the world become so cynical? Do people have no faith in the goodness of humanity? Is he the stupid one for still having that faith?... With all these questions and many more, few days later, as Vijay gets to know that Narayan sir has survived the injuries and is out of danger, he musters up courage to go to the hospital to see him.

Trying to avoid an unnecessary conflict, Vijay waits outside the hospital for Ravi to leave and then goes in.

Narayan Sir is lying on the bed with his eyes closed. Vijay doesn't want to disturb him. So, he just puts the fruits that he has brought, on the side table, murmurs 'sorry sir' and begins to leave. But suddenly he hears a voice... 'It's not your fault Vijay' says Narayan Sir. Vijay turns around. Narayan Sir looks at him with a smile and says that even the law states 'Let a hundred guilty be acquitted, but one innocent should not be convicted'... Vijay was right in trusting that boy and giving him a chance... what's wrong is our society, which doesn't trust anyone. Had the society given that boy a chance in life, this day would have never come. Cynicism has clenched our minds and the only way to get out of its grasp is to 'break this chain of distrust'. Half of the world's problems will be solved if people just start trusting each other.

Narayan Sir's words keep ringing in Vijay's ears as he sits in his office the next day. Just then he hears Ravi's voice, who has joined back and is having a heated argument with Laxman about using a part of the 'unclaimed matured policy' money, to give bonus to the agents. Having just borne the heavy expenses of his father's treatment, Ravi is aggressive this time. He has the entire list of unclaimed policies, which cumulatively amounts to 60 lakh rupees. Ravi wants at least half of it to be distributed among the agents. Laxman is trying to hold his ground but Ravi's intensity is shaking him as well.

'In 30 lakh rupayon se Sarkar ko koi fark nahi padega, par hum sab ka bahut faayda ho sakta hai. Aur agar aapne humaari baat nahi maani to aapka bahut nuksaan bhi... kyun ki hum koi bhi bahana bana ke strike pe chale jaaenge' threatens Ravi. Laxman tries to reason with him and as their argument continues, Vijay, who is sitting silently on his desk gets thoughtful.

Something keeps brewing in Vijay's head as he sits on the bench of a temple late into the evening. Lost in his thoughts and in the echoing sound of the temple bells for evening 'aarti', Vijay suddenly sees a poor kid roaming around the stairs of the temple, eyeing a chappal that he probably wants to steal. Not realizing that Vijay is watching him, as the kid is about to make his move, the temple priest taps on his shoulder and gives him a big piece of delicious looking barfi as prasaad. Getting the barfi, the kid forgets everything about the chappal that he wanted to steal and walks off happily. Vijay smiles. He has found his answer. Kindness has the power to heal.

At night, as he reaches home, a concerned Himani tells him that Anil had visited in the evening and asked her to inform Vijay that the agents are going on a strike from tomorrow and he is not supposed to go on his daily round in the morning collecting premiums from clients. The protest will begin outside the office from 9 AM and he should join it. Seeing that Vijay is not paying much heed to what she is saying, Himani conveys Anil's advice to him that considering the recent chain of events and the strained equation with Ravi, it will be best if Vijay stands beside his colleagues showing solidarity. Vijay doesn't react much. Himani asks if he will go. Vijay remains silent.

While serving him dinner, Himani curiously asks what is this strike about and Vijay explains... Every year, out of all the policies that mature, many remain unclaimed as the family members of the person who had bought the policy are not aware of it. This usually happens in the lower strata of the society where people are not that literate. 'But aren't they the ones who need this money the most?' questions Himani. Vijay nods. 'Then why doesn't LIC do anything to inform them about their matured policy?' she enquires and Vijay tells her that LIC does send two notices to them to claim their policy, but most of them don't even understand its meaning and the money of the policies which still remain unclaimed at the end of the financial year goes into the government's fund.

Himani –'ohh... so the agents are protesting to get these poor people their money... such a noble cause. You must participate in the strike.' Vijay chuckles at her innocence and tells her what the agents actually want. 'What?' reacts Himani sharply, 'How can they demand this money to be distributed amongst them? They don't have any rights over it. It should go to its rightful owners... to those poor people' ... 'And that's where it will go' replies Vijay.

Next morning, as Ravi leads the strike (over the fake pretext of increasing their commission) in front of the LIC office and Laxman stands at the gate helplessly, Vijay walks up to him and to his utter surprise, talks to him after 5 years! Seeing Vijay talking to Laxman, even the agents stop chanting their slogans and start listening to what Vijay is saying... 'Ye paise na sarkari khate mein jaane chahiye, na agents ki jeb mein... ye paise jinke hain, unhe hi milne chahiye... aur main untak ye pahunchaunga' declares Vijay and everyone is taken aback by his announcement. Vijay continues that just sending two notices to those illiterate people, who don't even know what they are, is not enough. They need to go to their houses and make them aware of it. They anyhow need to get them their money and he will make sure that it happens.

Fuming with anger, Ravi charges towards Vijay, warning him to stay away from it... there is no need for him to become a 'mahatma' now. Everyone knows what he actually is and Ravi himself has suffered big time because of his stupidity... he won't tolerate it anymore. Vijay calmly replies that he is not trying to become a 'mahatma', he is just trying to do his job and is determined to go to any extent to do what he feels is right... No one can stop him now, neither Ravi, nor any other force. 'Paise jinke hain, unhe milenge' concludes Vijay and walks into the office, leaving everyone stunned.

INTERMISSION

A noisy inkjet printer in its last leg of life, works overtime to print out the list of unclaimed policies. It's long and daunting... 'Kareeb 600 log hain is list mein' says Laxman while staring cluelessly at Vijay, who is sitting in front of him. As the printer finally concludes its job, Laxman hands Vijay the list and asks 'Kaise karoge?' Vijay has no plan yet, but his determination is unwavering... 'Jab pata lag jaaega to bata denge' says Vijay and leaves Laxman's cabin.

Outside, Ravi and the agents are impatiently waiting for Vijay and as soon as he comes out with the list, Ravi charges towards him... 'Ye nautanki band karo Vijay nahi bata rahe hain' Vijay cuts in 'Kya karoge?' Asks Vijay looking straight in to his eyes... 'Maaroge?'... Ravi is shaking with anger, but even then, he couldn't bring himself to beat up his friend.

'Jaa ke Narayan sir se baat karo... Agar unhone keh dia ki hum galat hain aur tum sahi ho, to hum ye nahi karenge' says Vijay and leaves.

Vijay's phone vibrates continuously as he sits with Urmila, who is worried about this decision that her brother has taken, angering everyone around him. 'Phir se soch lo, parayon ka to bhala kar doge par apne door ho jaaenge' says Urmila in her usual melodramatic manner. Vijay contemplates... he looks at his buzzing phone. It's Anil who is calling him repeatedly. He then looks at Himani, who is standing calmly by his side in solidarity. Vijay cuts Anil's call, turns towards Urmila and says 'didi jo apne hain woh kabhi saath nahi chodhenge, aur jo saath chodh dein unke jaane ka koi gham nahi hona chahiye'.

Next morning, as Himani serves breakfast, Vijay is busy going through the list of unclaimed policies and is marking few entries. Himani asks what is he doing and Vijay tells her that he is shortlisting all the addresses which are in the same area where he has to go today to collect premiums. That's his plan of action... every day, he will take out some time from his usual round and inform the policy holders of that area that their policies have matured and they can claim it. This way, he wouldn't even have to compromise with his work and he would also be able to complete the task that he has taken.

Himani likes his idea but has a doubt, 'kaam ke beech mein waqt milega?' Vijay smiles and says 'thaan lo to waqt mil hi jaata hai... hum sab itne bhi busy nahi hote.'

Vijay starts his round, but it's a little different than his usual days. He is not chit chatting, or having tea and samosas with his clients, current and potential. Today, he is just doing his job, not wasting any time so that he can accommodate the work that he wants to do.

The job that usually takes his entire day, today gets finished by lunch. And then, the other work begins.

The first name on his list is of Ghanshyam Tiwari. He goes to the address mentioned in the list. It's a really tiny house with dilapidated walls and asbestos sheets roof. The financial condition of the inmates of the house seems to be very poor. Vijay pets his own back as these people are clearly in dire need of this money. It can change their lives. With a smile induced on his face by this thought, he knocks on the door.

After a few minutes and several knocks, the door gets opened by a very old lady. This must be Ghanshyam's wife, Vijay assumes, and asks her about her husband. The old lady keeps staring at him.

Vijay sits in front of a garlanded photo of Ghanshyam Tiwari, who has died few years back. 'That's why no one came to claim the policy' thinks Vijay and asks Ghanshyam's wife if she has the policy papers. She has no clue. Vijay asks her to look for it in the house, as it must be somewhere and it can get her 2 lakh rupees.

'Do Lakh?' questions a cold voice from behind. Vijay turns around and finds a lanky fellow standing at the gate. This is Ghanshyam's son, Vinod, who has just come back from his job of a rickshaw puller. 'Gareeb hain to humein bewakoof samjhe ho kya' says Vinod in a stern voice. Vijay tries to explain him the whole thing but a skeptical Vinod is in no mood to hear. He is sure that Vijay is trying to fool them as no one has the time to find someone and come to their house to *give* them money. It's ought to be a scam and Vinod has no intention of losing his hard-earned money by falling into this trap.

'Par aapko paise nahi bas papers dene hain. Paise LIC aapko degi. Ye aapke khud ke paise hain jo aapke baba ne jama karae the' implores Vijay but his passionate appeal falls on deaf ears as Vinod forcefully pushes him out of their house with a warning that he will break his legs if he ever tries to come back.

Vijay is surprised. He never anticipated this. When did the society become so cynical?

Nevertheless, he dusts himself off and goes to the next address. Here, instead of just one lanky Vinod, there are three strongly built brothers staring at Vijay suspiciously. In Muzaffarnagar, people lose their lives for much lesser things than being a suspected thug. So, Vijay decides not to push his luck and goes to the next address.

The people who lived there have moved long ago and no one knows where they went. The house has changed several hands since then and the current residents have not even heard their name. Some people in that gully say that they moved to their village but they have no name or address of the same. Vijay finds nothing that could help him locate them.

He moves to the next, but is unable to locate the address. The street and the house number mentioned in the list doesn't seem to exist. But why would someone give the wrong address?

He moves to the next. Finds the family but the old man who bought the policy doesn't even remember about it and has no idea where its papers would be.

Next, the policy holder used to rent that place but has moved long back and the owners don't know where he went.

Next, the address is unclear and Vijay is not able to find the house. No one in the locality seems to recognize the name.

Next... Next... Next.

Vijay keeps going from door to door that entire afternoon, and by the time he finally comes to the LIC office in the evening to deposit the premiums that he collected in the morning, he is completely demotivated. The task he has taken seems to be more daunting than he thought it would be.

Anil and Ravi stare at him as if he is a traitor. They don't even want to look at him. Others too give him cold shoulder. Vijay ignores all of them and goes to the cashier to deposit the money. Just then he sees Laxman entering his cabin and he follows him in with a question.

'Agar kisi ke paas policy ke papers nahi hain to kya use uske paise nahi milenge?' asks Vijay to an unusually perturbed Laxman. He looks at Vijay with piercing eyes and questions 'kyun kar rahe ho ye? Kya saabit karna chahte ho?' Vijay is a little surprised to hear this as he thinks of Laxman as a man of principles who would never object to something which is morally correct. Vijay asks him what is his issue with it and Laxman tells him that it is making them look bad. Even if a few people get their money because of Vijay's initiative, the media can ask why wasn't LIC doing it earlier. Vijay might become a hero by doing this but LIC will become a villain for life. Laxman says that he understands and appreciates his intentions but his actions will severely dent LIC's image and reputation.

'Matlab reputation bachane ke liye jo galti karte aa rahe hain woh karte rahen?' questions Vijay rhetorically and tells Laxman that these are very poor, illiterate, ignorant people, who desperately need this money that they don't even know they have. If helping them dents LIC's image, so be it. But he isn't going to back down because of that. He will make sure that each one of them get what they deserve and for that he needs to know if there is any way of giving money to the clients who have lost their police documents. Laxman shakes his head in frustration and taking out a form from his drawer tells Vijay the procedure for the clients who don't have the documents.

'Par jab logon ko tumpe bharosa hi nahi hai to is form ka kya karoge?' questions Himani as the couple prepares to go to bed that night. She is slightly worried that Vijay was not able to get even one person on the first day who would come to claim their unclaimed policy. But Vijay is unperturbed. He has firm belief that if he keeps at it, eventually people will come around and start trusting him.

The grind resumes the next day and it's more or less the same story. Either he is not able to find the address, or the people have moved, or if they are there, they don't trust him. Although today, he does get thrown out a little less than the first day and some even say that they will think about it, but the success rate is still zero.

Few days go by like this with frustration now slowly creeping into Vijay's head. One day, as he is trying hard to locate the address of someone named Satyendra Yadav, he runs into Bijju.

'Jab se ye samaj seva shuru ki hai doston ko bhool hi gaye' he complains as Vijay has not gone to the court in the last few days. Bijju thinks it's because he wants to avoid Ravi and Anil and he reprimands Vijay in a friendly way for distancing himself from friends. 'Hero banne ke chakkar mein doston se dushmani?' remarks Bijju and asks Vijay to come to the court tomorrow and sort things out with Anil and Ravi.

Vijay says he has no issues with doing that, but he is sure Anil and specially Ravi won't be up for it. But Bijju insists. He asks him not to worry about them. He will take care of everything, 'Teeno doston ko saamne khada kar ke, baat kara ke gale nahi milwa dia na, to humaara naam Bijendra Kumar Sinha nahi.' To which Vijay replies with a chuckle that anyways no one knows him by that name. He is Bijju, not Bijen(dra) – Vijay suddenly stops midway as something strikes in his head... Since last one hour, he has been trying to find Satyendra Yadav, when he actually should be asking for Sattu or Satya.

Vijay runs back into the market and asks people if they know where Sattu ji or Satya ji lives. An old shopkeeper happens to know one Sattu and he gives Vijay direction to his house. Vijay sprints to this house on the first floor of an old building and knocks on the door. An old man opens it and Vijay instantly asks 'Aap Satyendra Yadav hain?' The man stares at him quizzically.

'Ohh ye mature ho gaya' says the old man calmly as Vijay shows him his name on the list. He is the right Satyendra Yadav and he even remembers about the policy. Vijay asks if he has the policy documents and to his utter surprise, the old man does have it. Vijay is ecstatic. He asks Satyendra excitedly if he would come with him to claim his policy and the old man readily agrees. Vijay is over the moon. He has finally got his first success.

Vijay takes Satyendra to the LIC office in his own bike and makes him meet Laxman. He gives him the form to fill and proceeds with the formalities to process his claim. Within few minutes, Satyendra has a cheque in his hand. He cannot believe it. He is almost in tears and thanks Vijay from the bottom of his heart. He was really in need of money.

'Shukriya se kaam nahi chalega Sattu ji... Madad ke badle madad karni hogi' says Vijay and requests him to come with him to the houses of some of the people in his locality who don't believe that Vijay is trying to help them. He wants Satyendra to tell them that he is not a scammer and is genuinely trying to get them their money. Satyendra agrees and they decide to start from the next day. But before that, Vijay has to do something else.

Vijay tells Himani that he is meeting Ravi and Anil tomorrow afternoon at Bijju's office in the court. 'To aap logon ka jhagada ab court mein hi suljhega' quips Himani, but Vijay is not amused. He says he just hopes that things don't blow up even further after tomorrow's meeting. Just then he gets a message from Bijju and is puzzled after reading it.

Next day, as Vijay reaches Bijju's office after completing his round, he finds that Anil and Ravi are already there. They try to avoid eye contact as Vijay takes a seat. There is an awkward silence in the room. Bijju breaks it and asks all of them if they brought what he had asked them to, through his text last night. They all nod and take out tiffin boxes from their bags. Bijju smiles and opens all the boxes. Ravi and Anil's boxes have bharvan bhindi and matar paneer, both of which are Vijay's favorites and Vijay's box has Shahi Kofte, Himani's secret recipe which Ravi and Anil are fans of. Bijju has brought parathas for all of them to enjoy their favorite dishes with.

All their eyes light up and mouths salivate seeing their favorite food items and the group of friends slowly start this surprise potluck party as they have done so many times in the past.

Filled with nostalgia, they at least momentarily forget their issues, as they eat from each other's boxes.

The tiff is far from over, but the first step has been taken.

Vijay gets back to work. Today, with Satyendra by his side, he is able to convince a few more people (including Ghanshyam's wife and his son Vinod) that he is not a fraudster and is genuinely trying to help them. Satyendra also helps him in figuring out a few addresses. 'Arre is sadak ka naam pehle dubri road hi tha... Kargil ke time yahan rehne wale Lance Nayak Bachchan Singh shaheed ho gaye, tab iska naam Bachchan marg pada' tells Satyendra to a surprised Vijay, who always thought the road is named after Amitabh Bachchan.

Vijay ends the day with submitting 7 new forms of people who have lost their papers but now want to claim their policies. Laxman is not impressed. He again asks Vijay to stop doing this stupidity. It's been close to 15 days since he started this samaj seva, and he has just found 8 people. At this rate, it will take him several years to locate all the 600 people in that list and every year new names will be added. It's a never-ending process and a futile one. But Vijay is unmoved. He asks Laxman to process these claims as soon as possible, and leaves.

At home, Himani sort of concurs with Laxman. She is completely behind Vijay's mission, but thinks that he needs to come up with a new idea to reach more people quickly. Going from door to door doesn't seem to be an effective method. But Vijay has a different point of view. With just one Satyendra getting his money, he got to 7 more people, with these 7 getting their money, he will reach to many more. The chain will keep on increasing and soon he will find most, if not all the people in that list.

Vijay's highly optimistic plan doesn't turn out the way he had hoped. He doesn't get the exponential growth that he had expected. 1 led to 7, but 7 doesn't lead to 49, it just leads to 12 more and those 12, help him get 15 more. The curve is plateauing pretty fast and even after trying hard for more than a month, he manages to find only 37 people out of 600. Vijay is disappointed.

'Adhiktar log ya to mar chuke hain ya to Muzzafarnagar mein hain hi nahi' tells Vijay to Narayan sir, as he goes to see him at his home, seeking guidance and motivation. Narayan sir has completely recovered now and is doing pretty well. He tells Vijay not to get bogged down by the low percentage of success. The quantum of impact created is not as important as the efforts put in to bring that impact. 'In life, we should only try to control the controllable' advises Narayan sir and adds, 'What's in your hand is to try as much as you can and then leave it up to the universe to guide you and show you the path.'

As Vijay comes home, he finds an angry Urmila sitting in his hall. 'Ek mahina reh gaya hai Ruchi ki shaadi mein, aur uske ek laute mama ji ko fursat hi nahi hai' complains Urmila telling Vijay that there is so much work to be done and poor Laxman, who is in his late 50s now, is required to do everything on his own, because Vijay is busy doing 'Jan Kalyan'. 'Can't a sister even expect this much from her brother' questions Urmila, taunting Vijay on how she has always stood by his side and he is not even there for her daughter's marriage.

Vijay feels guilty and apologizes to Urmila telling her how this mission has completely occupied his mind and time, but now he will make amends and contribute as much as he can. She just has to order.

Urmila bangs a big bundle of cards on the table and tells Vijay that he needs to distribute them. As Vijay looks at the cards, contemplating how he will manage time for this, Urmila taunts again 'ho paaega to batao, varna shok samachar ki tarah akhbaar mein chapwa dete hain ki bhai humaari beti ki shaadi hai, agar aap humein jaante hain to falana tareekh ko, falana jagah mein aa jaaen.'

Vijay is about to pacify Urmila when something else clicks in his head. He gets an idea and runs out of the house thanking Urmila for her help. Urmila sits perplexed.

Vijay goes to Anil's house with Bijju, who acts as the mediator and explains to Anil that Vijay needs his help to take out an article about what he is doing, in the most popular local newspaper run by Anil's Mamaji. Anil is reluctant to help Vijay as he thinks that Ravi won't like it. So Bijju takes them all to Ravi's house. Ravi listens to Vijay's request with a stoic face and then asks him rhetorically 'so now you want us to join you in your stupid mission?' Vijay stands silently. Ravi asserts sternly that he doesn't think this article will have any impact. The people who are ignorant about their own money, will ignore the newspaper article too. This is all a futile exercise.

Vijay hears him patiently and then repeats what Narayan sir had said to him 'The quantum of impact created is not as important as the efforts put in to bring that impact' and tells Ravi that he wants to put in as much effort as he can and just wants their help with one small thing. Ravi shakes his head, irritated by his stubbornness, and tells Anil to do what Vijay wants. Vijay is thrilled.

Next morning, a full-page article gets published in the local newspaper about Vijay's work along with the entire list of people who have unclaimed policies. The article also has Vijay's phone number for the policy holders to call him and clear their doubts. Vijay sits in the LIC office with his phone excitedly waiting for people to call him. But the entire day goes by and he doesn't receive a single call. He thinks that maybe Ravi was right. Nobody is going to read this article.

In the evening, as he is about to leave, Laxman calls him to his cabin and tells him that he has had enough of his drama and doesn't want him to spend a single day on this anymore. So far all he has done is to dent LIC's image and after this news article, Laxman has received orders from higher authorities to ask Vijay to stop, or else, his job will be in danger.

Vijay's head hangs low as he leaves, but just as he opens the cabin door, his phone starts ringing. It's an unknown number. He picks up the call quickly and is surprised by what he hears. A young guy tells him that he is calling from a nearby village and there are 25 families there who are on that list. Vijay cannot believe his ears. He tells the guy that he will come to their village tomorrow and explain to everyone how they can get their money. As he cuts the call, Laxman stares at him in disbelief. Vijay says that he doesn't care about his job if it comes at the cost of these poor people not getting their money. He will do what's right.

Vijay goes to that village next day and meets all the 25 families together at the chaupal. He explains them the process, collects their documents, gets form filled and comes back in the evening with 25 claims. Meanwhile, he gets few more calls and few more appointments are set in different villages and towns. The numbers now increase steadily. 25, 50, 70... within a week Vijay visits 10 nearby areas and submits claims of around 200 families. One third of the list is done. Everyone is surprised, including Anil and Ravi.

With each passing day, more and more people keep coming forward and the stack of claims on Laxman's desk keeps piling up.

Moved by the emotion of the few who come to collect their cheques, Ravi finally realizes the importance of what Vijay is doing and he comes up with an idea. He hesitantly goes to Vijay and tells him that instead of giving away these cheques individually, he should call all the claimants he has found so far, on the same day, so that it becomes like a small ceremony which attracts media attention and spreads the news even further.

Vijay not only likes the idea, but is happy that Ravi has finally come around. They decide a date, 10 days away and inform all the claimants to come and collect their cheque that day. Anil takes responsibility of calling the press and Vijay goes to inform Laxman about it as he is the one who has to process all the claims and prepare the cheques.

A nervous Laxman stares angrily at Vijay as he tells him about the date and his plan. Vijay requests Laxman to process all the claims in the next 10 days and Laxman suddenly blurts out 'Nahi hoga koi bhi claim process.' Vijay is confused. He asks Laxman what's the matter and Laxman retorts in a shaking voice that he can't process the claims as there is no money in the account.

'No money? Where did it go?' asks Vijay, and Laxman tells him that he used it for the preparations of his daughter's wedding.

Vijay is shocked... He always thought of Laxman as a man of integrity but he turns out to be a fraud. Laxman tries to justify his action by telling him that the pressure of dowry was immense and he crumbled under it. This is the first time he has done something like this and didn't know that it will bite him in the ass like that. He requests Vijay to help him, because if he gets exposed, not only will he go to jail but his daughter's future will be in jeopardy as well. He will be disgraced and no respectable family will ever agree to marry her.

Vijay doesn't know how to react to this. He just walks out of Laxman's cabin without saying a word. He goes back home and tells everything to Himani. She too is baffled. It's a sleepless night for the couple. They don't know what to do. On one hand it's his reputation, his hard work on the line and on the other it's his family's reputation and his niece's future on the line. The dilemma is big, the problem is intense.

The next few days go by in contemplation. Vijay is tensed. He can't even discuss this matter with his friends, who too are puzzled by his changed demeanor.

As the day of cheque distribution comes close, Laxman sends Urmila to Vijay's house to convince him to cancel the event. Urmila cries in front of Vijay and pleads to save her family. Vijay gets angry at this emotional blackmailing and tells Urmila that her husband should have thought about the consequences before doing such a big scam. 'I was trying to do something good, why should I take the burden of his wrong doings' screams Vijay before breaking down himself.

There is no solution to Vijay's problem. Even if he exposes Laxman, the poor people will not get their money back. In fact, they will again feel cheated by the system. It was such a tough journey for Vijay to make them trust someone again, and now if this happens, their trust will be broken again. The faith on humanity will be lost forever.

Troubled by all these thoughts and struggling to find the right way, Vijay again turns to Narayan sir who has been guiding him through this journey. But as they are talking and trying to figure out a solution, the hot-blooded Ravi overhears their conversation and comes charging in saying that he will report Laxman to the police. He always preached that he won't do anything illegal to favor the agents and now he has committed such a big fraud to favor himself. Even if the people don't get their money, it shouldn't be Vijay who takes the blame. Laxman should pay for what he has done and should go to the prison.

Ravi takes out his phone to call the police. Vijay requests him to stop and think. But Ravi is determined. Vijay gets anxious as Ravi dials the number and just when he is about to make the call Vijay pounces at him and tries to snatch the phone from his hand. They get into a scuffle with Ravi screaming at Vijay for behaving so irrationally. 'How can *you*, who went against all odds to do the right thing, can protect a criminal? Are you too a *dogla* like Laxman!'

Vijay has no answers to Ravi's burning questions but he has gotten the clarity that he was seeking. He cannot send Laxman to the jail. He knows that's the right thing to do but he just cannot do it. 'Itna mahaan nahi hoon main ki sach ke liye apno ka balidan de doon' cries Vijay in a trembling voice and apologizes to Narayan sir for being so weak. He says he knows that he is doing the wrong thing by protecting Laxman but he would like to believe that it's Laxman's first and last mistake and he deserves a second chance.

'Like that kid who stabbed my father after getting a second chance from you?' questions Ravi and says that he thought Vijay has learned his lesson but he is doing the same mistake again. Neither did that kid change, nor will Laxman. In fact, after getting away with something like this, his courage will only increase.

Vijay stares back at Ravi with a troubled face. He is hugely conflicted and clearly in pain.

As Vijay reaches back home, he finds Laxman and Urmila sitting in his house. Their daughter Ruchi too has accompanied them and she greets Vijay by touching his feet. Vijay doesn't react, he just goes and sits on the sofa. There is silence in the room. No one is uttering a single word but there is a conversation going on. Vijay knows what they want to ask and they can see from his body language that he hasn't decided. They want to request him to spare Laxman but don't have the courage; He wants to tell them how much pain they have caused him but doesn't have the energy to express.

Few moments later, Vijay suddenly speaks, remembering the incident because of which he and Laxman had stopped talking 5 years back. It wasn't personal. They didn't have a feud. Nobody said or did anything to harm the other person, yet, both of them were so invested in the matter at hand (where a married woman from their community wanted to leave her husband and kids to marry someone she loved) and felt so strongly about the ideology they represented (while the young Vijay was in support of love, the experienced Laxman placed responsibility above everything else), that neither of them spoke to each other after the heated argument that they had while trying to resolve the matter.

'That's the Laxman I thought you were... opiniated, strong headed but fiercely principled... Even though we were seldom on the same page, but I always respected you, your thought process and your dignity... and I hope, you will go back to becoming the same Laxman again, after getting this second chance' says Vijay and tells them that he has decided not to report Laxman to the police... Urmila and Ruchi sigh of relief and begin to thank Vijay, while Laxman just keeps staring at the floor, lifelessly.

After they leave, Himani questions Vijay's decision of sparing Laxman... 'you really think it's a one-time thing and he will never do it again?' Vijay just shrugs and tells Himani what Narayan sir had once said to him, 'it's better to trust and get betrayed, rather than not trust at all. Cynicism is like cancer for the society.' -'But what about the poor people? They will not get their money because you are trying to save Laxman?' she retorts and Vijay says that he won't let them down either.

Vijay now tells Himani that he has decided to sell their home and all the ancestral land that he has in the village to pay the claimants. That way, neither Laxman will have to go to prison, nor the people's trust will be broken. Himani is not comfortable with this. He is putting everything in the line. She reminds him that when he started this mission, he had told her that one doesn't have to do a lot to change things around, but here he is certainly going way too far. He is playing with the future of their family and he should not do it. Vijay understands her concern, but tells her that he can create wealth again but if he disappoints so many people and break their trust, he won't be able to look into the mirror ever again.

A determined Vijay goes to Bijju to help him sell his property. Bijju has many contacts in the real estate market but they have very limited time in their hands. The date is approaching. They go from one agent to another, one businessman to other... They leave no stone unturned and work round the clock to make it happen. And finally, a night before the big day, they get an offer. It's lower than the actual market price of the properties, but all distress sales happen at a discount. The money is enough to pay all the claimants and so Vijay accepts the offer.

Bijju gets on with the task of preparing the sale deeds and Vijay and Himani start packing their stuff to vacate the house.

Next morning, as Vijay is about to leave for signing the papers, there is a knock on the door. He opens it and finds Laxman standing there with wet eyes. Vijay is puzzled.

Laxman comes inside, looks at all the packed bags and in a shaky voice asks Shivani to unpack them saying 'tum log kahin nahi jaa rahe... jaaunga main... Jail.' Vijay and Himani are shocked!

Laxman sits on the stairs and avoiding eye contact with Vijay, he says 'It's very easy to be righteous and principled when you don't have to pay any price for it. When you don't have to face the hardships which come with it... But when your own interest is at stake, people usually crumble. Like I did... Because it was too damn tough not to... and I didn't have the strength... like you have!'

Laxman now slowly turns towards Vijay, looks at him with moist eyes and says 'I don't want to go back to becoming the Laxman that I was, I want the new Laxman to be more like you!'

He gets up, folds his hands and tells Vijay that his goodness has changed him. He has realized what a big mistake he has done and deserves punishment. He has already informed the head office about it and has resigned. They will take proper action against him and as far as the people are concerned, they too will get their money. LIC will pay them. The cheques will arrive in a few hours and Vijay's function will take place as planned.

Laxman says that he has come here just to apologies to Vijay for letting him down and tells him that what he has done is really brave and has the power to transform anyone. He has started something phenomenal here and he can't wait to see how his small step brings a big change in the society.

An emotional Vijay stands silently as Laxman hugs him tightly and leaves.

The news of Laxman getting arrested by the police spreads very quickly among all the agents and Ravi is surprised by the turn of events. He never expected Laxman to surrender like this and now he understands what Vijay has been saying all along... Even a small act of kindness can change the society... one person at a time.

They receive the cheques from the headquarters and the distribution ceremony takes place smoothly with Narayan Sir as the chief guest and everyone else in attendance. People are happy... everyone is praising Vijay... and he finally gets the chance to deliver the speech that he had prepared long back.

'Aadarniy Mukhya Atithi Mahoday... Humaare marg darshak Shakha Prabhari ji... mere pyaare saathiyon... aur aaj upasthit LIC Parivar ke sabhi sadasyon... Mere liye aaj bahut hi harsh ka din hai... kyun ki aapne humpe jo vishwas dikhaya tha, aaj hum us kasauti par khare utare hain. Aaj ye Rishta aur bhi mazboot ho gaya hai... aur main asha karta hoon ki ye ek misaal bane un sabke liye jo aaj kal kisi par bharosa karne se katarate hain... Duniya buri nahi hai, Log bure nahi hain... humein bas apne dekhne ka nazariya badalna hai... aur jis din ye nazariya badal gaya, is duniya ki aadhi samasyaen waise hi khatam ho jaaengi... '

Vijay goes on with his speech as his family and friends look on proudly.

THE END

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