

## Chapter 1

Purshottam mused about the crowd below. Well-dressed people shopped in the bazaar—rich people got proper nourishment, good medical facilities, and a good education. They were active and intelligent and therefore more productive. They aspired to and achieved success.

The industrialists of Amlawar were well known in the commercial circles of the country and their products, primarily hosiery, bicycles, machine tools, and machinery parts had a reputation for high quality all over the world. Chartered accountants, company secretaries, and engineers contributed greatly to the growth and prosperity of this industrial city.

He'd always taken an interest in Amlawar and had spent two years in the city during his college days, fifteen years earlier, when he'd received his master's degree in English from Government College. Back then, he'd lived in a rented room along with a fellow student.

Looking down on the city now, Purshottam thought back to the time he'd once spent in this city and contemplated his future in Amlawar—to spend the next several years here among the fortunate and unfortunate, the good and the bad, the workers, preachers, saints, pickpockets, and armed dacoit thugs.

*I am now part of this city and all its diversity. I must share my life with people who have different sets of values, who believe in different religions and worship different gods. I will live with and interact with these people, happy or sad, high or low. I am now part of the crowd.*

Lost in his thoughts, he went back to his room and switched on the TV. A few minutes later, he heard a knock at the door, opened it, and beckoned the visitor inside.

A dark man, frail and wrinkled, stepped into the room. "Sahib, I am your room servant. I have come to tell you that whenever you need anything, press this button." He pointed to a switch on the wall near the head of the bed. "I will immediately come to serve you, sahib."

Purshottam switched off the TV and asked, "What is your name?"

"Ram Chander, sahib."

"Ram Chander, where are you from?"

"I am from Ayodhya, sahib. It is in the Uttar Pradesh state."

"How long have you been in Amlawar?"

"I have been in Amlawar for the last thirty years, sahib. I was sixteen years old when I first came to this place and started to work as a casual laborer. After ten years, I began pulling a rickshaw. I pulled the rickshaw for eighteen years before I fell ill and it became difficult for me. By God's grace, I got this job. It is very comfortable. God is very kind, and I am happy now. Pulling a rickshaw is also very nice, sahib, but now my body does not cooperate with me enough to pull it. I worked very hard and made a lot of money by rickshaw."

Surprised, Purshottam quickly did the math. If the man had come to the city at age sixteen and that was thirty years ago, he must be forty-six. From Ram Chander's appearance, Purshottam would have guessed seventy. He suppressed a sigh.

"What did you do with that money?" Purshottam asked.

"Sahib, I go to home almost every year and take so many gifts for my children." A spark of excitement lit up Ram Chander's face, and he gave Purshottam a wide smile. "One time I bought a radio for them, the next time a bicycle and then a watch. I gave them so many things, sahib. This city of Amlawar has given me so much money. All these thirty years, I have been supporting my family. Now they have a bicycle, a radio, and a watch. God willing, I will buy a TV for them one day."

Though his eyes rested on Ram Chander's beaming face, for a moment Purshottam pictured a stooped gardener he'd known here during his college days. About ten migrant laborers lived near his room then, and Purshottam often sat and talked with them in the evening. After a year's hard work, a migrant laborer would be overjoyed when it came time to go back home on vacation. He'd dress in his best clothes and spend his entire year's savings on gifts for the family. Bicycles, radios, and watches were important possessions and made the families happy, at least for a while. All workers aspired to buy at least one such treasure after a year of hard work.

During a recent business trip to California, Purshottam had come across some Mexican laborers who worked in the strawberry fields. They earned more than a hundred dollars a day, at a time when the cost of a decent brand-new bicycle was \$139.99. An ordinary day laborer could buy a bicycle, a radio, or a watch from two days' pay. What was the difference between laborers in the United States and these laborers? Was it a difference in productivity, or could it be some kind of exploitation? Or was it merely fate?

After Ram Chander left, Purshottam turned the TV on again and channel-hopped but found nothing of interest. He tried reading a book but couldn't get interested in that, either. He went to bed, then found it difficult to sleep.