

Another Reminder

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Many thoughts linger in my mind, I am restless and want to search more to find my family. Yesterday's night was peaceful, but yet I had the very same nightmare of the tragedy. I saw the water flowing fiercely, trees and rocks rolling down the hill, and people and animals screaming out loud for help. What a sight! Terrified by it, I woke up from my sleep abruptly. I was saved by some kind volunteers who saw me trying hard to swim in the then-formed river in Chooralmala. Now, everything is better here; people are putting all their efforts into making things better.

“The Wayanad landslides of Kerala: Death toll rises to 258, more than 125 gone missing”, the reporter near me announced the update to the camera before her. People say that even though the rain has stopped, many people are still isolated in the forest and the villages on the other side of Chooralmala. Every now and then, I pray for their fast rescue. With this, I have seen everything in my life. Daily, I see people crying for their loved ones who lost their lives or went missing. The commoners of the region lost everything; an entire village was wiped out by the landslides. A few days back, I heard a kid complaining to her mother, “Amma, our school was totally destroyed by the flood. Will I ever see my friends again? I want to go to school and play with them”. The helpless mother could only hug her and pat her on the back. Two policemen came with some food and told me to eat it. I couldn't even look at that. For the last six days, I have survived on water only, that too in the hope of meeting my lost family. I feel like something is suffocating me from the inside, I don't want to believe that Amma, Achan, Chinnu, and Kunjan won't come to take me with them. I fear that because it happened with many people of Chooralmala, they have become orphans in just a day's time! The relief camp and its atmosphere are comfortable and positive in many ways. Even amidst the disaster, people hold tight to hope. I am proud of my people; be it flood, tsunami, or pandemic, they unite and fight for a better tomorrow.

I have also noticed another side of the problem. I remember watching a news debate on the Gadgil report about the *Paschimaghattam*¹ on our colour TV with Chinnu on an unusually

rainy day in the month of *Onam*². The report alerted people that the illegal mines, constructions, and deforestation in the Paschimaghattam are destroying our nature so fast that the consequences of the same will be evident within a short period of time. When Gadgil reminded the world that we all will be alive when environmental disasters happen in the near future, I hugged Chinnu tight out of fear. That evening, a torrential rain tried to give people the last reminder, but they didn't understand it. Now, some blame the government for not stopping the destruction of nature in the western ghats, while others complain about the illegal human occupation and construction in hilly areas and forests. Whoever is at fault, I know one thing for sure. People remained silent! They neglected all the signs. If we don't raise our voice to protect our mother nature, then who will?

I am done with the waiting. I terribly miss Amma now; she may be missing me, too. I know, Amma won't sleep or eat without me. Oh god, wherever they are, let them be safe.

Mornings in the camp are the most painful for me. I get reminded of my morning walks with Amma and Achan back home and the breakfast with them afterwards. Here, I don't even know anyone. People are so good here also, but I feel like I am a stranger here. They offer me food, check on me regularly, and include me in everything they do, but I am not happy. Even though I am very weak, I stood up somehow and started to walk. I was directionless at the beginning, but now I know where my mind is taking me...I am heading towards my destroyed village in Chooralmala. Maybe my mind still has some hope left. But, among the destroyed houses filled with mud, among the new paths created by the slides, I stood lost. I cannot find my house! My own dear home, which had a small front yard garden filled with fragrant flowers and a small swing tied on our favourite *Moovandan*³ mango tree, is all gone now. If I search further, go up the hilly area, maybe I will find them. Amma may be waiting for me with teary eyes in some other relief camp up the hill. Achan may have gone more silent now, and he can't do anything without me beside him. My dear Chinnu and Kunjan, please come and save me.

Some army people saw me from afar, and they came near me. One of them said, "You poor little thing! Why are you going up the hill? There is no one there. Please go to the camp, dear". They don't understand. How can I sit there peacefully without knowing what happened to my family? The only lady army officer in the group took me in her hands and brought me back to the relief camp. On the way, I saw a heartwarming sight, people bringing orphaned cattle to the relief camp down the hill. The poor creatures were wandering here and there without proper food and care. I already told you, right? People are inherently good; they can understand pain as well as love.

Evening *chaya*⁴ time is a very happening time in the camp. People sing and dance, and children present their hidden talents in front of all. They share their feelings, and sometimes it is emotional, for they are people who have lost a lot in their lives trying to be happy, to survive the tragedy. I am stunned by the resilience of the people of this land. We get whatever we need from different parts of this land with just a phone call! While I was thinking about this, a government officer came to us to share an interesting event that happened during the landslides. He explained the experience of an old woman and her granddaughter who got lost in the forest area amidst the landslides and their encounter with an enormous *komban* in the dead of the night. When he started, I thought the *komban* was the villain of the story; sorry, it is not a story; it is someone's life. But it wasn't the case; the giant *komban* was the hero. When the woman and the girl struggled to swim in the water, they somehow succeeded in finding a rescue space beneath a tree. Suddenly they saw the *komban* standing beside the tree. They got scared and felt helpless. The woman, with folded hands, requested to the *komban*⁵, "We came here after escaping a dreadful tragedy. Please be kind not to attack us". The *komban* stood silent, and tears flowed from its eyes. It stood there without moving an inch as if to protect the abandoned human beings. The officer said that the woman was crying and praying with her eyes simultaneously when she said that the *komban* didn't leave them until some rescuers came to save them. I couldn't listen more. I was filled with many emotions. I wanted to hug Amma and cry for some time, thinking about the kindness of the world.

I found a newspaper near the camp kitchen with many photos of the disaster. There was a photo of a partially destroyed house near a canal. It is Pappu's house! Chinnu's and Kunjan's dear friend Pappu. I clearly identified it because I still remember that small house with a faded brown colour, which was very unusual among the whitewashed houses in our village. I desperately looked for Pappu and his family in other photos. I couldn't find them. What might have happened to Pappu and his family? I thought of the good old times when I used to go to Pappu's place with Chinnu and Kunjan to play hide and seek. I still remember our little Kunjan complaining when they always made him the catcher of the game. I am tired, I can't think more. Let me sleep and take some rest.

I am very weak now. I can't walk properly. I am lying down as if waiting for death. I feel like staying here forever. Many people in the camp came near me and gave me many things to eat and drink. Since morning, I couldn't stop thinking about my family. Yesterday night, I had another nightmare. This one was about that terrible night! When I heard the sound of water coming down, I ran towards Achan to inform him. He understood my signals and woke Amma,

Chinnu, and Kunjan up from sleep. We all opened the front door and were shocked to see muddy water entering our house. We ran outside and saw a river formed in front of us! Achan hugged us tight and stood there for a moment, not knowing what to do next. Suddenly, a large wave of water struck us, and sadly, I was taken away by it to some other direction from my family. I haven't seen them since then.

I woke up when I realised that somebody was trying to take me in their hands. I opened my eyes partially and saw people caressing me and sympathising with me. Ha, I am finally going to die, I guess. That's fine. Why live an unpleasant life and be a burden to others?

Two volunteers took the responsibility of taking me to the hospital. One among the two said, "I think he is very depressed. Not eating, not drinking, maybe got tired of waiting for his family." They arranged a bike for us to go. I sat on the young volunteer's lap with closed eyes, just praying for a peaceful death. I don't want to be cured, not even treated.

"Honk honk"

I opened my eyes to see an autorickshaw passing by. I randomly looked into the passenger seat...Achan! It is Achan who is sitting there, I am sure! My heart got its life back! With a swift jump, I reached just behind the running autorickshaw. I took all my strength and started rushing to follow the vehicle.

I was filled with happiness. Finally, at least I could find Achan. With a big smile on my weary face, I barked, "Bow bow, bow bow". Of course, it is the only sound through which I could voice all my inner feelings. Within a second's time, the autorickshaw stopped. The volunteers who followed me on the bike also reached me by then. Achan came out with tears falling down his cheeks, crying out loud, saying, "Appu...Appu, my dear, we thought we lost you forever". Achan hugged me tight and started kissing me on my face and hands. I forgot all my weariness and was ready to go with Achan. We went to the camp and thanked everyone for their help and care. They gave me a delicious *sadhya*⁶ and told me to visit them often.

On our way to meet Amma, Chinnu, and Kunjan, Achan told me, "Appu, we are staying at Ambili aunty's place now. Everyone is sad that we couldn't find you. Now that we've got you back, we will celebrate".

I was looking at Achan's eyes. They were so calm. It felt like this man had got his son back from a huge disaster. I wondered whether a human could love an animal this hard.

The next moment I thought of Amma. I know she will make an offering to her *Guruvayurappan*⁷ once I reach her. Maybe an animal can also love a human very hard.

But what bothered me was something else, why don't people's love make them protect nature? I feel that people take for granted things that they get without any effort. Sadly, they learn only when *karma*⁸ hits them back badly.

Maybe I won't understand humans completely, I am not human, right?

But, don't you think that life has given us something in common? Love, the power to love... The entire world is filled with it. Without it, everything else is worthless.

That's why when you get hurt, I feel your hurt. Tragically, you've learned something else that I could never understand. You've learned to do harm and then move on like nothing happened... you say you forget, but you always 'choose' to forget.

1. Malayalam word for the western ghats of India.

2. The official state festival of Kerala. It is considered to be a harvest festival connected to the culture and belief system of the land.

3. A variety of mango that is famous in Kerala.

4. Malayalam word for tea.

5. Malayalam word for male elephant.

6. Traditional Kerala feast.

7. The Hindu deity of the Guruvayur temple in Kerala. Referring to Lord Krishna.

8. The force produced by a person's actions in one life that influences what happens to them in future lives (in Buddhism, Hinduism, and some other religions).