

## PHASE 2: CRACKS APPEAR

Read these interviews in order:

#	File	Person	Role
16	16_balu_mane.md	Aarav More	<b>SURVIVOR - 8 years old</b>
17	17_parubai_kadam.md	Sarla Shirke	Leena's mother, village elder
18	18_anna_patil.md	Devrao Gokhale	Kiln owner, elder brother
19	19_bhau_patil.md	Madhav Gokhale	Kiln operator, younger brother
20	20_natha_shinde.md	Prakash Kore	Kiln worker, transport
21	21_ganesh_jagtap.md	Nilesh Raut	Inherited kiln, pays "charity"
22	22_postmaster_joshi.md	Postmaster Ramesh	Sees money order patterns
23	23_talathi_bhosle.md	Talathi Anand	Land records officer
24	24_rama_kamble.md	Rukmini Lokhande	Old kiln worker
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28	28_govinda.md	Haribhau	Cook at Wada
29	29_havaladar_jadhav.md	Havaladar Phadke	Junior police officer
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**Key witness this phase:** Aarav More (#16) - the only survivor

**After completing all interviews, proceed to PHASE\_3/**

# INTERVIEW #16

**Person:** Aarav More **Age:** 8 **Role:** T3 survivor, key witness **Location:** Sarla's house, Vasti (hidden location) **Interviewer:** Leena **Phase:** 2

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## UNLOCK CONDITION

After discovering Aarav's location through Sarla (Interview 17)

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## PRE-INTERVIEW NOTES

Leena has learned from her mother that Aarav is hidden in Vasti. The boy is traumatized and has barely spoken since the incident. Leena approaches as a doctor and someone he might remember from the village. This interview must be handled gently.

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## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

**LEENA:** (kneeling to his level) Aarav? Do you remember me? I am the doctor from the davakhana.

**AARAV:** (small nod, doesn't speak)

**LEENA:** Your father said you like drawing. Is that true?

**AARAV:** (another small nod)

**LEENA:** I brought paper. And pencils. If you want.

**AARAV:** (reaches for them slowly, holds them)

**LEENA:** Aarav, I know you are scared. I am scared too sometimes. But I want to help. Can you tell me what happened that night?

**AARAV:** (long silence, then whispers) They came.

**LEENA:** Who came?

**AARAV:** The twins. The two girls from the lake. They came for us.

**LEENA:** What did they look like?

**AARAV:** (shaking slightly) Big. Not like girls. Big like... like shadows. They had no face. Just... dark.

**LEENA:** Big? How big?

**AARAV:** (gestures above his head, indicating adult height) Taller than Baba. One was very tall. One was little shorter. But both big. Not like children.

**LEENA:** You said they had no face. What do you mean?

**AARAV:** Covered. Something covered. Like... (thinks) ...like gamcha. Cloth over face. I couldn't see eyes.

**LEENA:** Did they say anything?

**AARAV:** No words. Just... (makes heavy breathing sound) ...like this. Breathing. Heavy. Like they were tired from running.

**LEENA:** They were running?

**AARAV:** No. After. When I ran. I heard them behind me. Running. But not fast. Like... like they wanted me to run. Like they let me go.

**LEENA:** Aarav, think very carefully. Did you see anything else? Anything about them? Clothes? Hands? Anything?

**AARAV:** (screws up face, concentrating) Smell. Bad smell. Like... (sniffs) ...burning plastic. Like hospital cleaning smell.

**LEENA:** The disinfectant smell?

**AARAV:** (nods vigorously) Yes! Gauri said it too. Before they came. She said "Aarav, it smells like a clinic." Then... then they came.

**LEENA:** Your sister smelled it before you saw them?

**AARAV:** Yes. She held my hand tight. She was scared. She said we should run. But then they were there. In front of us.

**LEENA:** Aarav, why did you and Gauri go to the lake that night?

**AARAV:** (looks down) We saw something. From our house. Near the lake. Lights. Moving lights. Gauri wanted to see what it was.

**LEENA:** Lights?

**AARAV:** Like torch. But on ground. Moving. We thought... Gauri thought maybe it was her friend playing game. So we went to see.

**LEENA:** And what did you find?

**AARAV:** (starts trembling) Not friends. Something else. Big thing with lights. Making noise. And then... then the shadows saw us. They came at us. I ran. Gauri... (starts crying) ...Gauri fell. She fell and they got her. I kept running. I didn't help her. I left her.

**LEENA:** (holds his hand) You were brave to run. You survived. That is not your fault.

**AARAV:** (through tears) The twins took her. Because I didn't help. Because I ran.

**LEENA:** Aarav, what was the big thing with lights? The thing making noise?

**AARAV:** (still crying) I don't know. Like truck maybe. But by the lake. Why truck at night by lake?

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## INTERVIEW #17

**Person:** Sarla Shirke **Age:** 52 **Role:** Leena's mother, hides Aarav, knows village secrets **Location:** Shirke home, Vasti **Interviewer:** Leena (her daughter) **Phase:** 2

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## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*Leena's childhood home. Small but clean. Sarla is preparing dinner. She knows why her daughter is here. The tension between duty and secrecy is visible in every movement.*

**LEENA:** Aai, where is Aarav More?

**SARLA:** (doesn't stop cooking) Why do you ask?

**LEENA:** Because he's the only witness. Because everyone is lying about where he is. Because I think you know.

**SARLA:** (long pause) Eat something first. You are too thin. City food has ruined you.

**LEENA:** Aai. Please.

**SARLA:** (sits down, faces her daughter) If I tell you, it stays with us. That child has suffered enough. He doesn't need CID officers and constables treating him like criminal.

**LEENA:** I won't bring the police. Just me. I promise.

**SARLA:** He is here. In Vasti. I am keeping him. His mother brought him to me the night after... after his sister was found. She said "Sarla-mavshi, save my son. They will come for him too."

**LEENA:** Who will come for him?

**SARLA:** (looks at her hands) She didn't say. But she was terrified. Real terror, not ghost fear. She has not visited once since. Too scared to lead anyone here.

**LEENA:** I need to talk to him.

**SARLA:** He doesn't speak much. He screams at night. He thinks the ghosts will find him. But... (hesitates) ...some things he said make me think it wasn't ghosts.

**LEENA:** What things?

**SARLA:** He talks about smell. Burning smell. Kiln smell. He talks about a truck. He talks about two big shadows, not small girls. (looks at Leena) Ghosts don't smell like bhatti. Ghosts don't drive trucks.

**LEENA:** Will you let me see him?

**SARLA:** Tomorrow. In daylight. Not now - he doesn't sleep until very late. Too scared.

**LEENA:** Aai... the twins. The first ones. Ira and Asha. People in Vasti told me about the zamindar and Kalyani.

**SARLA:** (stiffens) What people?

**LEENA:** Everyone. They said you know more. You were friends with Kalyani. You were there.

**SARLA:** (gets up, returns to cooking) That was long time ago. Different life.

**LEENA:** Aai, those twins might have been murdered too. By someone at Wada. If there's a connection-

**SARLA:** (turns sharply) There is no connection! Those deaths are different. The twins... (stops, controls herself) The twins died because of old sins. The new children died because of new sins. Don't mix them.

**LEENA:** How do you know they're different?

**SARLA:** (long silence, then quiet) Because I saw Kalyani the night the twins died. Before anyone knew. Before the bodies were found. She came to my door. Couldn't speak - she was already mute by then. But she drew in the dirt. Drew a woman in white. Drew a man with beard. Pointed toward Wada.

**LEENA:** She saw who killed them?

**SARLA:** She didn't see. But she knew. A mother knows. The zamindar's wife had been... watching her. Watching the twins. And there was an old servant - Raghoba - he had been following the children for days before they died. Kalyani noticed. She was going to take them away, to her sister's village. But she waited one day too long.

**LEENA:** Did Kalyani ever accuse anyone?

**SARLA:** How? She cannot speak. And who would believe a Vasti woman against zamindar's wife? The police? The sarpanch? (bitter laugh) They would have put HER in jail for making trouble.

**LEENA:** And you never told anyone?

**SARLA:** (sits down heavily) I told Kalyani to forget. I told her the children were gone and nothing would bring them back. I told her to take the money from Wada and survive. I was trying to protect her. (voice breaks) I was protecting everyone but those dead children.

**LEENA:** The money from Wada. It still comes?

**SARLA:** Every month. Has come for fifteen years. The zamindar sends it through the postmaster. Thinks it is charity. Guilt. But his wife... I think his wife sends it to keep Kalyani quiet. Buying silence one month at a time.

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## INTERVIEW #18

**Person:** Devrao Gokhale **Age:** 58 **Role:** Kiln family head, elder brother **Location:** Gokhale family home, Bhatti **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 2

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### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*The Patil home is the largest in the kiln area. Comfortable but not ostentatious. Devrao Gokhale sits on a wooden chair, gracious but cautious. He has the bearing of a man used to respect.*

**DEVRAO PATIL:** CID officer. Please, sit. My wife will bring chai.

**ARJUN:** Thank you. I want to ask about the kiln operations.

**DEVRAO PATIL:** (relaxes slightly) The kiln? Of course. Family business. Four generations now. We make bricks. Supply all the villages in the area. Nothing special, but honest work.

**ARJUN:** How many people work at the kiln?

**DEVRAO PATIL:** Fifty, sixty. Depends on season. Monsoon is slow. Summer is busy. We take care of our workers. Ask anyone - Gokhale kiln is a good place to work.

**ARJUN:** Your brother Madhav runs the day-to-day operations?

**DEVRAO PATIL:** (slight hesitation) Yes. Madhav handles the operations. I handle the business side. Accounts, supplies, customers. Division of labor.

**ARJUN:** Madhav returned from the city about ten years ago?

**DEVRAO PATIL:** Yes. He was in Mumbai. Business didn't work out. He came home. Family is family. I gave him responsibility at the kiln.

**ARJUN:** What kind of business in Mumbai?

**DEVRAO PATIL:** (waves hand) This and that. He doesn't talk about it. City life didn't suit him, he said. Came home with some money, some ideas. The kiln has grown since he took over operations. More customers, more efficiency.

**ARJUN:** What about waste disposal? Where does the ash go?

**DEVRAO PATIL:** Ash? We have a designated area. Rakhe site. East of here. Government approved. We follow all rules.

**ARJUN:** Do trucks go to the lake at night?

**DEVRAO PATIL:** (frowns) Lake? No. Why would we take ash to the lake? That's in the opposite direction. Who told you this?

**ARJUN:** I've heard rumors. Night trucks. Lake burning.

**DEVRAO PATIL:** (shakes head firmly) Rumors. This village runs on rumors. There is no night disposal at lake. If anyone is going there at night, it is not for kiln business.

**ARJUN:** Could your brother be doing something without your knowledge?

**DEVRAO PATIL:** (uncomfortable pause) Madhav is... Madhav. He has his own ways. But he is not stupid. Illegal burning would destroy our reputation. Destroy the business. He knows this.

**ARJUN:** What about the talbed connection? I've heard the kiln uses encroached land and trucks at night.

**DEVRAO PATIL:** (stands up, agitated) Who is saying these things? We buy from licensed suppliers. We have papers. Receipts. Everything is documented.

**ARJUN:** Then you won't mind showing me those documents?

**DEVRAO PATIL:** (calms himself) Of course. I will have them ready for you. Give me a day. All records are in order.

**ARJUN:** One more question. The children who died. Did any of them have contact with the kiln? With your family?

**DEVRAO PATIL:** (sits back down) The curse victims? No. Why would they? We are brick makers, not... (stops)

**ARJUN:** Not what?

**DEVRAO PATIL:** Nothing. I was going to say we are not connected to that tragedy. We gave donations after each death. We are community people. But we were not involved. How could we be?

**ARJUN:** The More girl, Gauri. Her father sometimes worked at the kiln.

**DEVRAO PATIL:** Raghunath? Yes. Casual labor. Many people work here casually. That doesn't mean anything.

**ARJUN:** Did Gauri ever come to the kiln?

**DEVRAO PATIL:** (thinks) Maybe. Children come sometimes. To see their fathers. We don't encourage it - kilns are dangerous places. But yes, children wander through.

**ARJUN:** Gauri specifically. In the weeks before she died.

**DEVRAO PATIL:** (carefully) I don't remember. I don't track every child who passes through. Ask the workers. Ask Madhav. He knows the operations better.

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# INTERVIEW #19

**Person:** Madhav Gokhale **Age:** 52 **Role:** Kiln operator, younger brother of Devrao Gokhale **Location:** Bhatti, kiln office **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 2

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## UNLOCK CONDITION

Available after Phase 2 begins

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## PRE-INTERVIEW NOTES

Arjun is interviewing prominent village figures. Madhav Gokhale runs the day-to-day kiln operations. The kiln is the economic heart of the region. At this point, investigators have suspicions about kiln connection but no proof.

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## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

**ARJUN:** Thank you for meeting me, Madhav-saheb.

**MADHAV:** (warm smile) Of course, of course. Anything to help. This curse business is very bad for everyone. Very bad for the village. I won't lie - bad for business also. Workers are scared. Some have left.

**ARJUN:** How long have you been running the kiln?

**MADHAV:** My family has been in this business for three generations. My father started. My elder brother Devrao is the head of family. I manage the daily work. The boring work, as I call it. (laughs)

**ARJUN:** You and your brother both run it?

**MADHAV:** Devrao-dada handles the business side. Accounts, sales, contacts in the city. I am here on the ground. Workers, production, fuel supply. We are good team.

**ARJUN:** The More family - did you know them?

**MADHAV:** (expression shifts to sorrow) Everyone knows everyone here, saheb. Raghunath worked for us sometimes. Daily wage work. Good man. Hard worker. Very honest. What happened to his children... (shakes head) ...no parent should suffer like this.

**ARJUN:** Did his children ever come near the kiln?

**MADHAV:** Children come and go in village. We don't allow them inside - too dangerous, very hot. But they play around sometimes. All village children do.

**ARJUN:** Did you ever see Gauri or Aarav near the kiln?

**MADHAV:** (thinks) Maybe. I cannot say for certain. Many children look same at that age. But we always chase them away. For their safety.

**ARJUN:** What about the lake? Korde Tal? Do your workers go there?

**MADHAV:** (slight pause, then casual) The lake? No, no. The lake is cursed, everyone knows. We stay away. Workers stay away. No reason to go there.

**ARJUN:** The kiln produces waste. Ash, chemicals. Where does it go?

**MADHAV:** (confident) We have proper ash site. Rakhe, we call it. Other side of kiln. Away from water, away from village. We follow all rules. I can show you.

**ARJUN:** I'd like to see it.

**MADHAV:** Of course! Nothing to hide here, sahab. We are simple businessmen. Come, I will take you personally.

**ARJUN:** Later. First, some more questions. The night the More children died - where were you?

**MADHAV:** (without hesitation) Here. At the kiln. Night shift that day. We had big order to complete. I was here until morning. Prakash was with me. Many workers saw us.

**ARJUN:** Prakash?

**MADHAV:** Prakash Kore. He handles transport. Brings materials, takes finished bricks to buyers. Good man. Very reliable.

**ARJUN:** And he was with you all night?

**MADHAV:** Yes. Both of us. You can ask anyone. Ten, fifteen workers will tell you same thing.

**ARJUN:** The Karande children, eight years ago. Do you remember them?

**MADHAV:** (pauses, seems to think) Karande... yes, I remember. Very sad. Two children, brother and sister. Same thing - went to lake, drowned. That was when people started saying curse is real. Two incidents, same pattern.

**ARJUN:** Did you know that family?

**MADHAV:** Not closely. They lived in Talegaon. Different area. I heard about it like everyone else.

**ARJUN:** And the original twins? Fifteen years ago?

**MADHAV:** (crosses himself) That is when it started. Those poor girls. Flash flood took them. Some say they were unlucky. Some say... something else. After that, the lake changed. Became dark place. No one goes there now if they can help it.

**ARJUN:** You believe in the curse?

**MADHAV:** (measured) Saheb, I am a practical man. I believe in what I see. But I have lived here all my life. I have seen things that have no explanation. Three times now, children have died same way. Maybe science has answer. Maybe God has answer. I don't know. I just know - that lake is not a good place.

**ARJUN:** One last question. If someone wanted to go to the lake at night without being seen, how would they do it?

**MADHAV:** (eyes narrow slightly, then relaxes) I wouldn't know, saheb. I told you - I stay away from there. Everyone does. Only the spirits go to that lake at night.

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## INTERVIEW #20

**Person:** Prakash Kore **Age:** 45 **Role:** Transport, kiln operations, T3 accomplice  
**Location:** Near kiln loading area, Bhatti **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 2

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## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*Prakash is loading bricks onto a truck. He is shorter than average, muscular from years of labor. When he sees Arjun, he stops. His eyes dart to the main building, as if looking for someone.*

**ARJUN:** Prakash Kore?

**PRAKASH:** (gruff) Yes. What do you want?

**ARJUN:** CID Pune. I'm asking about the night operations at the lake.

**PRAKASH:** (freezes momentarily, then resumes loading) What operations? There are no operations at the lake.

**ARJUN:** I've been told trucks go there at night. Your trucks.

**PRAKASH:** (doesn't look at him) Who told you? People talk nonsense. We deliver bricks. That's all.

**ARJUN:** Where do you deliver at night?

**PRAKASH:** We don't deliver at night. Kiln work is daytime work.

**ARJUN:** But you work at night sometimes?

**PRAKASH:** (pause) Maintenance. Sometimes. The kiln doesn't stop. Fires need watching.

**ARJUN:** On September 14th, four months ago. Where were you?

**PRAKASH:** (sets down bricks, wipes hands) September? How should I remember? Four months is long time. I was here. Working. Like always.

**ARJUN:** That's the night the More children went missing. Gauri was found dead. Aarav survived.

**PRAKASH:** (face carefully blank) Sad thing. Curse took another one. Nothing to do with me.

**ARJUN:** The boy described two figures. Adult-sized. One taller, one shorter.

**PRAKASH:** (shifts weight) Ghosts come in all sizes, they say. I wouldn't know. I don't go to the lake.

**ARJUN:** He said they smelled like the kiln. Like smoke and fire.

**PRAKASH:** (first sign of nervousness) Children imagine things. Boy was scared. Probably confused.

**ARJUN:** (steps closer) Where does Madhav Gokhale go at night?

**PRAKASH:** (doesn't meet eyes) I don't watch Madhav-saheb. He's the boss. He goes where he wants.

**ARJUN:** But you go with him sometimes?

**PRAKASH:** I drive trucks. I go where he tells me to go. That's my job.

**ARJUN:** So if he told you to go to the lake at night-

**PRAKASH:** (quickly) He never told me that. There's nothing at the lake. Just water. And ghosts. And curse.

**ARJUN:** You believe in the curse?

**PRAKASH:** (meets eyes for first time, something hard there) Everyone believes. It's easier that way.

**ARJUN:** Easier than what?

**PRAKASH:** (looks away) Easier than asking questions. Easier than knowing things you shouldn't know. (begins loading again) I have work. Unless you're arresting me, I have to finish.

**ARJUN:** One more thing. Your wife, Lata. Does she know about the night work?

**PRAKASH:** (stops dead) Leave my wife out of this. She knows nothing. She is good woman. She stays home.

**ARJUN:** She told her neighbor she's worried about you. Says you come home late. Can't sleep. Have nightmares.

**PRAKASH:** (voice low, dangerous) People should mind their own business. My wife should mind hers. Tell the neighbors to do the same. (looks directly at Arjun) Some questions are dangerous, saheb. For everyone.

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# INTERVIEW #21

**Person:** Nilesh Raut **Age:** 32 **Role:** Inherited kiln from father Vishnu **Location:** Raut kiln (smaller operation), Bhatti area **Interviewer:** Leena **Phase:** 2

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## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*Nilesh's kiln is smaller than the Patil operation. He sits outside his shed, nervous. He is a slight man, always looking over his shoulder. His father died three years ago; he's been running the kiln since.*

**LEENA:** Nilesh-bhai, I need to ask about your father.

**NILESH:** (startles) My father? He's dead. Three years now. What about him?

**LEENA:** I've heard he made regular payments to certain families. After the children died.

**NILESH:** (face pales) Who told you that?

**LEENA:** Does it matter? Is it true?

**NILESH:** (long silence, then) Yes. He gave money. I still give money. I don't know why.

**LEENA:** You don't know why you're paying people?

**NILESH:** (stands, agitated) He told me - before he died - he said "Nilesh, every month, send money to these families." He gave me names. Amounts. He said it was charity. Good karma. But... (trails off)

**LEENA:** But?

**NILESH:** (sits back down) The families he named. They are all... connected. To the deaths. Karande family gets money. More family gets money. Before that, a woman in Vasti - Kalyani - she got money for years from Wada, but my father also sent her small amounts.

**LEENA:** Your father was paying families of dead children?

**NILESH:** I think so. Yes. I didn't ask him why. He was dying. Cancer. I thought maybe he was guilty about something. Maybe he thought charity would help his soul.

**LEENA:** Did you ask anyone else? Madhav Gokhale? Devrao Gokhale?

**NILESH:** (whispers) Once. I asked Madhav-saheb why my father started this. He laughed. Said my father was soft-hearted. Said some people feel guilty even when they're not responsible. He told me to continue if it made me feel better.

**LEENA:** That didn't seem strange to you?

**NILESH:** Everything seems strange. But I am small kiln. Madhav-saheb is big. I don't ask questions. (looks directly at her) My father... he changed after the Karande children died. Eight years ago. He was never the same. He stopped sleeping well. He would wake up crying sometimes. He never explained.

**LEENA:** Did he know something about those deaths?

**NILESH:** (in anguish) I don't know. I was afraid to ask. What if my father... what if he was involved in something? He's dead now. What good does it do to dig up his sins?

**LEENA:** Were there specific amounts? Same every month?

**NILESH:** Different for each family. Postmaster Ramesh Bhat handles it. He's been doing it since my father's time. He doesn't ask questions either. Just sends the money orders.

**LEENA:** What about the kiln network? The talbed encroachment operation?

**NILESH:** (genuinely confused) Talbed? We make bricks. The Gokhale kiln handles the big contracts. We handle local orders. I don't know about talbed papers.

**LEENA:** You've never seen trucks at night going to the lake?

**NILESH:** (shakes head) I go home at sunset. I don't stay at the kiln at night. Dinesh watches - he's the night man. But I don't ask him what he sees. I don't want to know. (pleading) I just want to run a small kiln, pay my workers, take care of my family. Whatever my father did, whatever the Gokhales do - I'm not part of it. Please believe me.

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## INTERVIEW #22

**Person:** Postmaster Ramesh Bhat **Age:** 62 **Role:** Village postmaster, handles money transfers **Location:** Post office, Talegaon **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 2

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## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*The post office is a single room with barred windows. Dusty ledgers line the shelves. Postmaster Ramesh Bhat sits behind his counter, spectacles on nose, studying Arjun with curiosity.*

**POSTMASTER:** CID officer wants to see a postmaster? This is unusual. Usually it's the other way around.

**ARJUN:** I'm interested in money orders. Specific patterns of payment.

**POSTMASTER:** (adjusts spectacles) Money orders are private matters. I cannot share details without proper authorization.

**ARJUN:** I'm investigating the deaths of six children over fifteen years. If there's a pattern of payment connected to those deaths, I need to know.

**POSTMASTER:** (long pause) You are careful with your words. I respect that. (looks around, then leans forward) What pattern are you asking about?

**ARJUN:** Regular payments from kiln families to victims' families. Starting after each death.

**POSTMASTER:** (sighs) I wondered when someone would notice. Forty years I have been here. I see everything. I say nothing. But... six children. Even I have limits.

**ARJUN:** Tell me what you've seen.

**POSTMASTER:** The first pattern started fifteen years ago. Right after the twin girls drowned. Money started coming to Kalyani - the mother - from the Wada. Regular. Monthly. I assumed - everyone assumed - the zamindar was being charitable.

**ARJUN:** Just the zamindar?

**POSTMASTER:** Later, small amounts from Raut. The father, Vishnu. To Kalyani and also to... (checks old ledger) ...to Sarla Shirke. Not much. But regular.

**ARJUN:** Sarla? Why her?

**POSTMASTER:** I don't know. She was Kalyani's friend. Maybe to help take care of her.

**ARJUN:** And after the Karande children?

**POSTMASTER:** Same thing. Money to the Karande family started coming from Raut. Also from... (hesitates) ...anonymous sender. Cash deposit. I never saw who brought it.

**ARJUN:** Anonymous?

**POSTMASTER:** It happens. Someone comes late in the day, leaves cash with instruction, doesn't give name. I process it. Rules say I should record sender, but... (shrugs) ...village ways.

**ARJUN:** And the More family?

**POSTMASTER:** After four months, money started. Raut family again. And anonymous again. Same pattern. Always same amounts. Always same dates. First of every month.

**ARJUN:** Why would kiln families pay victims' families?

**POSTMASTER:** (removes spectacles, rubs eyes) I have asked myself this many times. Charity doesn't work this way. Charity is public. This is hidden. Systematic. It looks like... (careful) ...guilt. Or payment for silence.

**ARJUN:** Did Madhav Gokhale ever send money?

**POSTMASTER:** (thinks) No. Never directly. But the anonymous money... I noticed something. The paper it was wrapped in. Old newspaper. Had kiln advertisement at the bottom. Gokhale Brothers Bricks.

**ARJUN:** You think Madhav was the anonymous sender?

**POSTMASTER:** I think someone at that kiln was. Could be anyone. But Madhav... he's the one with money to spare. Devrao keeps accounts clean. Madhav handles the cash.

**ARJUN:** Why haven't you told anyone this before?

**POSTMASTER:** (puts spectacles back on) Tell whom? Constable Mohan Ghadge, who closes cases in two days? Sarpanch Vilas Patre, who takes money from everyone? (shakes head) I am old man. I want to finish my service, take my pension, go live with my daughter in Pune. Speaking up gets you trouble. Silence gets you pension.

**ARJUN:** But you're speaking now.

**POSTMASTER:** (looks at him) Because you are CID. Because you came from outside. Because maybe - finally - someone will actually look at what happened. Those children deserved justice. All six of them.

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## INTERVIEW #23

**Person:** Talathi Anand Sathe **Age:** 45 **Role:** Land records officer **Location:** Talathi office, regional government building **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 2

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## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*The talathi's office is cramped, filled with maps and land documents. Sathe is a bureaucrat through and through - cautious, procedural, protecting himself.*

**TALATHI:** You want land records for the kiln area? May I ask why?

**ARJUN:** Connected to an investigation. Child deaths in Talegaon.

**TALATHI:** (confused) Land records... and child deaths? What is the connection?

**ARJUN:** I'm trying to understand the power structures. Who owns what. Who transferred land to whom.

**TALATHI:** (pulls out large register) This is unusual request. But you are CID. I cannot refuse. (opens to relevant section) What specifically?

**ARJUN:** The Gokhale family. Devrao and Madhav. Their kiln land.

**TALATHI:** Gokhale Brothers Bricks. Yes. Here. (points) Original land grant from pre-Independence. British era license. Family has been here for generations. Devrao Gokhale is current registered owner.

**ARJUN:** Any transfers in the last fifteen years?

**TALATHI:** (flips pages) Yes. Actually. Here. Ten years ago. Large parcel transferred from... (squints) ...from zamindar estate to Gokhale family. Below market rate.

**ARJUN:** Zamindar sold land to Gokhales? Why?

**TALATHI:** Document says “family settlement.” But... (hesitates)

**ARJUN:** But?

**TALATHI:** Zamindar was not selling land. He was accumulating. For decades. This is the only transfer OUT in all my records. And it went to Madhav Gokhale specifically, not to Devrao or the family trust.

**ARJUN:** Madhav personally received land from the zamindar?

**TALATHI:** Yes. And immediately, the land was converted from agricultural to industrial. For “kiln expansion.” But... (flips to another section) ...here’s something strange. The land includes Korde Tal common land. That area is protected. You cannot convert talbed land to industrial. Someone approved it anyway.

**ARJUN:** Who approved it?

**TALATHI:** Revenue office. Surveyor Bendre. He’s retired now. But he signed off on the conversion despite regulations.

**ARJUN:** Was there payment recorded?

**TALATHI:** (points at small notation) “Facilitation fee.” Twenty thousand rupees. To revenue office account. But... (looks around) ...I have heard the actual amount was much higher. Off the books.

**ARJUN:** Bribery.

**TALATHI:** (holds up hands) I didn’t say that. I am land records only. I don’t know about payments outside my records.

**ARJUN:** Any other unusual transfers? To any of the kiln families?

**TALATHI:** (checks) Kore family received small parcel five years ago. Also from zamindar. Also below market. And Raut... Raut father received nothing. But here - after his death, his son Nilesh somehow has clear title to disputed land. The dispute was with... (reads) ...Karande family.

**ARJUN:** Karande? The family whose children died?

**TALATHI:** (nods slowly) Harish Karande had claim on that land. Old family dispute. After his children died, he withdrew the claim. Document says “voluntary settlement.” But there’s no record of payment to him.

**ARJUN:** So a grieving father gave up his land claim for nothing?

**TALATHI:** That's what the paper says. Whether it's true... (shrugs) ...I just keep the records. I don't interpret.

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## INTERVIEW #24

**Person:** Rukmini Lokhande **Age:** 58 **Role:** Old kiln worker, retired **Location:** Her home, Bhatti area **Interviewer:** Leena **Phase:** 2

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### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*Rukmini sits on a cot outside her small house, sorting dried chilies. Her hands are rough and cracked from decades of kiln work. She doesn't look up when Leena approaches.*

**LEENA:** Rukmini mavshi, may I speak with you?

**RUKMINI:** (continues sorting) Speak. My ears still work even if my eyes are failing.

**LEENA:** I'm asking about the children who died at the lake.

**RUKMINI:** (hands pause briefly) Which ones? Many children have died. This place eats children like the kilns eat coal.

**LEENA:** Any of them. All of them. What do you remember?

**RUKMINI:** I remember working. Always working. From before sun up until after sun down. Brick by brick. Year by year. That is what I remember.

**LEENA:** But you lived near the lake for many years. You must have seen things.

**RUKMINI:** (shifts uncomfortable) I saw bricks. I saw fire. I saw my husband grow old and die. I saw my sons leave for city work. What else is there to see?

**LEENA:** Trucks maybe? At night?

**RUKMINI:** (hands shake slightly) Trucks come and go. This is brick business. Trucks are normal.

**LEENA:** Trucks going toward the lake? Not the highway?

**RUKMINI:** (long pause) Sometimes trucks get lost. Bad roads. Dark nights. Who can say where trucks go in the dark?

**LEENA:** Mavshi, I'm not here to make trouble for anyone. I just want to understand what happened to those children.

**RUKMINI:** (finally looks up) You want to understand? Then understand this - some things should not be understood. Some questions should not be asked. Those children... all of them... they asked questions. They saw things. They talked. And now they are silent forever.

**LEENA:** What did they see? What did they talk about?

**RUKMINI:** (shakes head) I am old. I am scared. I have buried one husband and I want to die in my bed, not floating in that cursed water. Ask someone younger. Ask someone braver.

**LEENA:** Madhav Gokhale? Should I ask him?

**RUKMINI:** (face goes white) Don't say that name here. Don't say it anywhere. (grabs Leena's wrist with surprising strength) His ears are everywhere. His eyes too. Even the bricks have ears when he is angry.

**LEENA:** You're afraid of him specifically. Why?

**RUKMINI:** (releases grip, returns to sorting) I said nothing. You heard nothing. Now go. I have work.

**LEENA:** One more question. The smell at the lake - people say it's different now. Chemical smell. Burning smell.

**RUKMINI:** (stops sorting entirely) That is not a question.

**LEENA:** No. But you know what it is, don't you?

**RUKMINI:** (very quietly) My son works at district hospital in Sangli. Three years ago, he asked if I know any "disposal" people. For waste. Medical waste. Things that cannot go in regular garbage. I said no. I said I don't know such people. (pause) I lied. I knew. But I said nothing. Because I wanted my son to stay in his clean hospital job and never come back to this place.

**LEENA:** Medical waste is being burned at the lake?

**RUKMINI:** I said nothing. I heard nothing. You should do the same if you want to keep breathing. Now go. The chilies won't sort themselves.

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## INTERVIEW #25

**Person:** Dinesh Pote **Age:** 42 **Role:** Night watchman at Gokhale kiln **Location:** Kiln grounds, near the ash pits **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 2

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# INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*Dinesh is a wiry man with bloodshot eyes - the result of years of night shifts. He carries a lathi and keeps glancing toward the kiln office where Madhav Gokhale works.*

**ARJUN:** You've been the night watchman here for how long?

**DINESH:** Eleven years, saheb. Since my father died. He had this job before me.

**ARJUN:** So you work nights. What exactly do you watch?

**DINESH:** The kilns. The stock. The trucks. Making sure no one steals bricks. Making sure fires don't spread.

**ARJUN:** And the lake? The path goes past here to reach Korde Tal.

**DINESH:** (nervous glance) Yes. Lake is that side. Maybe half kilometer.

**ARJUN:** Do you ever see anything at night? Near the lake?

**DINESH:** (swallows) Ghosts, saheb. Everyone knows. The twin girls. They walk at night. I have seen them myself.

**ARJUN:** Describe what you saw.

**DINESH:** White shapes. Moving. Sometimes near the water, sometimes on the path. Making no sound. Just... floating. The way ghosts float.

**ARJUN:** How far away were you when you saw this?

**DINESH:** Maybe hundred meters. I don't go close. Why would I go close? To die?

**ARJUN:** Did these ghosts ever carry anything? Wear specific clothing?

**DINESH:** (confused) Carry? Ghosts don't carry things.

**ARJUN:** But you saw them clearly enough to say they were twin girls. From hundred meters. At night.

**DINESH:** (hesitates) Everyone knows the story. When you see white shapes at the lake, you know what they are.

**ARJUN:** What about trucks? Do trucks pass here at night?

**DINESH:** Sometimes. Brick orders don't follow clock. When customer wants, truck goes.

**ARJUN:** And trucks going toward the lake specifically?

**DINESH:** (long pause, shifts weight) Some trucks... they don't carry bricks. They carry... other things. I don't ask what. Madhav-saheb told me - what goes in those trucks is not your business. Just watch the kilns. So I watch the kilns.

**ARJUN:** How often do these "other" trucks come?

**DINESH:** Maybe twice in month. Maybe more. I don't count. I don't watch.

**ARJUN:** The smell. What about the smell?

**DINESH:** Which smell? Kilns smell. Burning coal smells. Everything smells here.

**ARJUN:** The smell from the lake direction. On nights when those trucks come.

**DINESH:** (face tightens) Burning plastic. Burning... I don't know what. Bad smell. Makes eyes water. Makes throat hurt. But it comes with wind. When wind changes, it goes.

**ARJUN:** And you never investigated?

**DINESH:** I am paid to watch kilns. I watch kilns. What happens at lake is lake's business. Ghosts' business. Not Dinesh's business.

**ARJUN:** The night the More children disappeared. Four months ago. Where were you?

**DINESH:** (stands very still) Here. At kilns. Watching.

**ARJUN:** Did you see anything? Anyone?

**DINESH:** (quietly) I saw ghosts. Two small white shapes near the water. And then... one shape less. And then later... no shapes. Just darkness.

**ARJUN:** You saw the children disappear and you did nothing?

**DINESH:** I saw GHOSTS disappear. What can man do against ghosts? Nothing. So I did nothing. I went back to watching kilns. That is my job.

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## INTERVIEW #26

**Person:** Raghoba **Age:** 62 **Role:** Head servant at Gadkari Wada **Location:** Servants' quarters behind the Wada **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 2

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## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*Raghoba is a large man, still strong despite his age. He sits outside the servants' quarters, polishing brass lamps for the Wada's evening prayers. His hands are calloused, his movements practiced. He does not rise when the CID officer approaches.*

**ARJUN:** Raghoba? I'm from CID. I need to ask some questions.

**RAGHOBA:** (continues polishing) CID asking servants now. Times have changed.

**ARJUN:** You've served the Gadkari family for how long?

**RAGHOBA:** All my life. My father served before me. His father before him. We are Wada people. We are born here. We die here.

**ARJUN:** You were here fifteen years ago. When the twin girls drowned.

**RAGHOBA:** (polishing stops briefly) Yes. Terrible day. Terrible thing. The whole Wada was in mourning.

**ARJUN:** Why was the Wada in mourning? The girls were from Vasti settlement. Not connected to the zamindar's family.

**RAGHOBA:** (pause) Every death is mourned. Every child is precious. Gadkari Saheb has big heart for all people, high and low.

**ARJUN:** You helped search for them that night, didn't you? The police report mentions your name.

**RAGHOBA:** Yes. I was... I was with the search party. We looked everywhere. Found them in the morning. In the lake. (voice catches, continues polishing harder)

**ARJUN:** Strange that you're still emotional about it after fifteen years.

**RAGHOBA:** Some things you don't forget. Small bodies in the water. Their mother screaming. Gopal-bhau collapsing. These memories don't fade.

**ARJUN:** Tell me about Kalyani. The mother. Did you know her before the children died?

**RAGHOBA:** (shifts position) Everyone knew everyone. It's small place. She was... she was from Vasti. Young woman. Married to Gopal who worked at kilns.

**ARJUN:** And her relationship with the Wada? With your employers?

**RAGHOBA:** (pause, continues polishing) What relationship? She was village woman. Wada is Wada. There is... distance.

**ARJUN:** Then why did Vasundhara-bai take special interest in her? In her children?

**RAGHOBA:** (hands stop, voice hardens) Who told you that?

**ARJUN:** Several people mentioned it. The lady of the house paying for the children's education. Their clothing. Giving Kalyani work. That's unusual generosity for "distance."

**RAGHOBA:** Bai is generous. Dharmic. She does charity. For temple, for poor, for children. This is not unusual. This is duty.

**ARJUN:** The morning you found the bodies. You were the first to spot them. How?

**RAGHOBA:** I was... I was checking the lake edge. Walking. Looking. And I saw.

**ARJUN:** But the constable's report says you found them in the northern area. That's not where search parties were looking. That's far from the usual path.

**RAGHOBA:** (long pause) I had... I had feeling. Sometimes you have feeling where to look.

**ARJUN:** A feeling. After searching all night, you suddenly had a feeling to check a remote area. And there they were.

**RAGHOBA:** I found them. That's what matters. (stands abruptly) I have work. The lamps need to be ready before sunset.

**ARJUN:** One more question. The night the twins died - where were you exactly? Not during the search. Before. When they actually went to the lake.

**RAGHOBA:** (back turned) I was at Wada. Doing my duties. I am always at Wada.

**ARJUN:** Can anyone confirm that?

**RAGHOBA:** (walks toward Wada, voice drifting back) Ask Bai. She will tell you. I was here. I am always here.

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## INTERVIEW #27

**Person:** Kisan **Age:** 24 **Role:** Young servant at Gadkari Wada, Raghoba's nephew

**Location:** Wada kitchen courtyard **Interviewer:** Leena **Phase:** 2

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## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*Kisan is chopping vegetables for the evening meal. He's a quiet young man, thin, with watchful eyes. He keeps glancing toward the main house as he talks.*

**LEENA:** You're Raghoba's nephew?

**KISAN:** Sister's son. He got me this work when I was sixteen. Eight years now.

**LEENA:** You live in the servants' quarters with him?

**KISAN:** Yes. Same room. Separate cots. He snores. (small smile that fades quickly)

**LEENA:** I wanted to ask about your uncle. About his... health. His state of mind.

**KISAN:** (knife pauses) Why? Is he in trouble?

**LEENA:** No. I'm a doctor. I notice things. He seemed tense when I saw him earlier.

**KISAN:** Kaka is always tense. Has been for years. Long as I can remember.

**LEENA:** Years? Since when exactly?

**KISAN:** (thinks) Since before I came here. My mother says he used to be different. Laughing, singing. Now he just works and prays. Works and prays. That's all.

**LEENA:** He prays a lot?

**KISAN:** Every morning, every evening. Sometimes in the middle of the night too. I wake up and he's sitting on his cot, doing japa with his beads. Mumbling names of gods.

**LEENA:** That's unusual for him?

**KISAN:** My mother says he never used to pray. Said gods are for rich people who have time. Now... now he acts like gods are the only thing between him and... (trails off)

**LEENA:** And what?

**KISAN:** I don't know. Something. He has bad dreams sometimes. Shouts in his sleep. Names I don't know.

**LEENA:** What names?

**KISAN:** Once he said "Ira" and "Asha." Over and over. Who are they?

**LEENA:** (carefully) Those were the twin girls. The ones who drowned fifteen years ago.

**KISAN:** (eyes widen) The ghost children? He dreams about ghost children? (makes sign to ward off evil)

**LEENA:** He found their bodies. Maybe that's why.

**KISAN:** Maybe. But... (lowers voice, stops chopping) ...there's something else. He won't let me go near the lake. Ever. If I even mention it, he gets angry. Once I said I wanted to swim there - I was new, I didn't know the stories - and he grabbed me so hard he left marks. Said if I ever went there, he would break my legs himself.

**LEENA:** Strong reaction.

**KISAN:** Too strong. I thought at first he was protecting me from ghosts. But now I wonder...

**LEENA:** Wonder what?

**KISAN:** (voice barely audible) What if he's protecting ghosts from me? What if he doesn't want me to find something there?

**LEENA:** That's an interesting thought.

**KISAN:** (resumes chopping quickly) It's a stupid thought. Forget I said it. Kaka is good man. Takes care of family. He just has... weight on him. Weight of the Wada. This place has weight.

**LEENA:** Does he spend time with Vasundhara-bai?

**KISAN:** He attends her. Takes orders from her. She trusts him more than anyone. More than her own son who left for Bombay. More than Gadkari Saheb even.

**LEENA:** She trusts a servant that much?

**KISAN:** He has been with her for forty years. He knows things. (pause) She has told him things. Things she cannot tell anyone else. That is what he says when he is... (stops himself)

**LEENA:** When he is what?

**KISAN:** (shakes head) I should not say. He drinks sometimes. Late night. Then he talks. Talks about burden. About debt that cannot be paid. About how some things cannot be undone.

**LEENA:** Debts to whom?

**KISAN:** To Bai. To this Wada. He says he sold something long ago. Something he cannot buy back. Then he cries. I pretend to sleep. It is not my place to see a man like him cry.

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## INTERVIEW #28

**Person:** Haribhau **Age:** 67 **Role:** Senior cook at Gadkari Wada **Location:** Wada kitchen **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 2

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### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*Haribhau is the oldest servant in the Wada. He sits by the clay stove, stirring dal with a wooden ladle. The kitchen smells of turmeric and woodsmoke. He speaks slowly, choosing words carefully.*

**ARJUN:** Thirty-five years in this Wada, I'm told.

**HARIBHAU:** Thirty-seven. I came when old Gadkari Saheb was alive. Before the son married. Before this Vasundhara came into the house.

**ARJUN:** You've seen many things then.

**HARIBHAU:** (stirs slowly) Kitchen sees everything. Food goes to every room. Cook sees who eats, who doesn't. Who is happy, who is sick. Who whispers in corners.

**ARJUN:** What have you seen that others haven't?

**HARIBHAU:** (long pause) I am old. I want to finish my life in peace. Why are you asking these questions?

**ARJUN:** Because children have been dying for fifteen years and no one has stopped it.

**HARIBHAU:** (ladle stops) Dying. Yes. Dying by that cursed lake. Every few years, more small bodies. (shakes head) When I was young, that lake was just water. We swam there. Fished there. Nothing happened.

**ARJUN:** So what changed?

**HARIBHAU:** The Wada changed. After old Saheb died. The new Saheb married Vasundhara. She came from Kolhapur. Big family, much land, much pride. Too much pride for this small village.

**ARJUN:** What does the lady of the house have to do with children drowning?

**HARIBHAU:** (careful) I didn't say she has anything to do with it. I said things changed after she came. The feeling of this house changed. It became... colder. More calculating. Even the walls learned to be silent.

**ARJUN:** Tell me about Kalyani. The mother of the twins who died first.

**HARIBHAU:** (stirs again, eyes on pot) She used to work here. Before her children died. Kitchen help. Young. Beautiful. Too beautiful maybe.

**ARJUN:** Too beautiful for what?

**HARIBHAU:** Too beautiful for her own safety. This is village, saheb. A beautiful low-caste woman in a big house full of men... you understand what I am saying.

**ARJUN:** Are you saying something happened between Kalyani and someone in this house?

**HARIBHAU:** I am saying what my eyes saw. Which was nothing. But what my ears heard... that is different.

**ARJUN:** What did your ears hear?

**HARIBHAU:** Crying. From Bai's room. Night before that puja happened. The night before the twins died. Vasundhara-bai was crying. Shouting. I couldn't hear words but I heard rage. I never heard her cry before or after. She is stone, that woman. But that night... something broke her stone.

**ARJUN:** And Raghoba? Where was he that night?

**HARIBHAU:** (stops stirring entirely) Raghoba was... not in his room. I went to give him food - he had skipped dinner - and his room was empty. Cot was cold.

**ARJUN:** What time was this?

**HARIBHAU:** Late. After everyone slept. Maybe eleven, twelve at night.

**ARJUN:** The twins were last seen around eight in the evening.

**HARIBHAU:** (meets Arjun's eyes) I know.

**ARJUN:** You never said anything?

**HARIBHAU:** Said what? To whom? That Raghoba's bed was empty? This is not crime. Man can walk at night. Man can have reasons. (pause) I had no proof. I had no words. I just had... feeling. And feelings are not evidence.

**ARJUN:** What was your feeling?

**HARIBHAU:** (very quiet) That this house killed those children. Not the lake. Not the curse. This house. And if I said anything, this house would kill me too.

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## INTERVIEW #29

**Person:** Havaldar Pradeep Phadke **Age:** 36 **Role:** Junior police officer, posted to Talegaon 3 years ago **Location:** Police chowki, outside **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 2

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### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*Havaldar Phadke is young for his position. He smokes nervously, pacing near the police jeep. He keeps looking to make sure Constable Ghadge isn't nearby.*

**ARJUN:** You requested to speak with me privately. Why?

**PHADKE:** (smoking fast) Because Ghadge-saheb has been here thirty years. He has... arrangements. I am outsider. I see things differently.

**ARJUN:** What do you see?

**PHADKE:** The cases are wrong. All of them. Every child death. Wrong conclusions. Wrong rulings.

**ARJUN:** That's a serious accusation against a senior officer.

**PHADKE:** (laughs bitter) He is not officer. He is village man who wears uniform. He does what he is told. By sarpanch. By zamindar. By kiln people. Whoever has money and power, he does their bidding.

**ARJUN:** You have evidence of this?

**PHADKE:** I have eyes. I have brain. Four months ago, when the More children... when the girl died and boy nearly died... I went to scene before Ghadge. I saw things.

**ARJUN:** What things?

**PHADKE:** Footprints. Adult footprints. Near the water. Two sets. Going toward lake. Not coming back. But in report? No mention. Ghadge wrote "no signs of struggle, no witnesses."

**ARJUN:** Why didn't you file your own observation?

**PHADKE:** (throws cigarette) Because I am havaldar. He is senior. And when I raised question, he took me aside and said very clearly - "This village has traditions. We follow traditions. If you want to stay here, you follow too. If not, I can arrange transfer to Gadchiroli. You know what Gadchiroli is."

**ARJUN:** Naxal territory. Dangerous posting.

**PHADKE:** Exactly. So I shut up. I filed nothing. I let him write what he wanted. But it eats me. Every day it eats me.

**ARJUN:** The eight-year-old cases. Did Ghadge handle those the same way?

**PHADKE:** I wasn't here. But I read files. Same pattern. Minimal investigation. Quick closure. And always - always - the same ruling. Suicide or accident. Never murder. As if murder is not possible in this village.

**ARJUN:** The medical reports?

**PHADKE:** (bitter) What reports? Post-mortems were waived. "Family request." "Religious concerns." Convenient, no? No autopsy means no evidence. No evidence means no questions.

**ARJUN:** Who authorized the waiver?

**PHADKE:** Sub-Inspector More at taluka level. His family is connected to sarpanch. Everyone is connected to everyone here. It's like a web. You pull one thread, the whole thing shakes. So no one pulls.

**ARJUN:** You're pulling now. By talking to me.

**PHADKE:** (looks around) Because you are CID. Outside web. Maybe you can break it. Maybe you can't. But I cannot live with myself if I don't tell someone. Those children... someone killed them. And everyone here knows. Everyone is pretending ghosts did it because ghosts don't go to jail.

**ARJUN:** The kiln area. What do you know about that?

**PHADKE:** Trucks at night. Going wrong direction. Smoke from lake side on certain nights. Smell that shouldn't be there. I reported it to Ghadge. He said it's just brick-burning waste. Normal practice. But brick waste doesn't smell like burning plastic. Brick waste doesn't make your eyes water from half kilometer away.

**ARJUN:** Will you testify to this? Officially?

**PHADKE:** (long pause) If you can guarantee protection. Transfer after. Somewhere safe. Somewhere this web doesn't reach. Then yes. I will tell everything.

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## INTERVIEW #30

**Person:** Sanjay Nimkar **Age:** 38 **Role:** Raghav Nimkar's son (Raghav was survey clerk who died of "snakebite") **Location:** Country liquor shop, edge of Babhul  
**Interviewer:** Leena **Phase:** 2

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# INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*Sanjay is half-drunk when Leena finds him. The country liquor shop is a shed with three wooden benches. He sits alone, staring at his glass. He's unkempt, eyes hollow.*

**LEENA:** Sanjay? I'm Doctor Leena. Can I sit?

**SANJAY:** (gestures vaguely) Free country. Sit anywhere.

**LEENA:** I want to ask about your father. Raghav Nimkar.

**SANJAY:** (laughs hollow) Father. Survey-wala. Snake-killed man. What about him?

**LEENA:** He died eleven years ago. Snakebite.

**SANJAY:** That's what they say. Snakebite. Very convenient, snakebite. No investigation needed. Man goes to the talbed, snake bites, man dies. Simple story. (drinks)

**LEENA:** You don't believe it was snakebite?

**SANJAY:** I was seventeen. In school in Satara. Got message - come home, your father is dead. I came. They had already cremated him. Already burned. No body to see. Just ashes. And my mother crying. And people saying how sad, how terrible, the scrubland is so dangerous.

**LEENA:** Did your mother believe it?

**SANJAY:** (face darkens) Mother believed nothing. She asked questions. Too many questions. Asked why father was in that part of the talbed. Asked why doctor didn't check him properly. Asked why revenue officer was so quick to close file.

**ARJUN:** What happened to her questions?

**SANJAY:** First they ignored her. Then they threatened her. Said she was creating trouble, disturbing peace. Said if she kept asking, we would lose the house. Father's job was gone - she had no income. I was in school. She had no choice.

**LEENA:** She stopped asking?

**SANJAY:** She stopped talking. Period. For months she didn't speak. Just sat. Just stared. Then one morning... (drinks heavily) ...one morning I woke up and she was gone. They found her in the well three days later.

**LEENA:** Oh god. I'm sorry.

**SANJAY:** Everyone said suicide. Just like children in lake. Everyone in this area dies of suicide apparently. Very sad people we are. Very fond of dying.

**LEENA:** You think she was killed too?

**SANJAY:** I think she found something. Those questions she asked? They weren't random. Father had papers. She found them after he died. Old papers. Survey documents. Something about land. She hid them. Wouldn't show me. Said I was too young, too hot-headed, I would do something stupid.

**LEENA:** Do you know where those papers are now?

**SANJAY:** (shakes head) After she died, I searched everywhere. Nothing. Either she destroyed them or someone took them. House was empty for three days after she disappeared. Anyone could have come.

**LEENA:** What was your father working on before he died?

**SANJAY:** Some survey. Talbed boundary verification. He was excited about it. Said he found discrepancies. Land that should be protected was being used. He was going to file report. Make formal complaint. Said it would make big names uncomfortable. (laughs bitter) It made him dead instead.

**LEENA:** Did he mention any names? Who was using the protected land?

**SANJAY:** Never said directly. But week before he died, he had argument with someone at the kiln. I wasn't there but neighbor told me. Shouting. Father saying "this is government land" and other man saying "stay out of what you don't understand."

**LEENA:** Which kiln? Which man?

**SANJAY:** The big one. Gokhale kiln. And the man... (thinks, drinks) ...the younger brother. Not the one who runs it now. The other one. Madhav.

**LEENA:** Madhav Gokhale argued with your father about protected land. Week before your father died.

**SANJAY:** (meets her eyes, surprisingly clear) Now you understand why I drink. I have known for eleven years who killed my father. I have known for eleven years who drove my mother to death. And I can do nothing. Because I have no proof. Because I am drunk son of dead clerk. Who will believe me?

**LEENA:** Do you know what happened to the Karande children? Eight years ago?

**SANJAY:** Those two? The curious ones? (nods) They came to me once. Asking about my father. Asking about his work. Asking about papers they found somewhere. I told them to leave it alone. Said look what happened to people who ask questions. They didn't listen.

**LEENA:** They found your father's report?

**SANJAY:** Maybe. They wouldn't show me. But they knew things. Names. Places. (voice drops) I told them to be careful. Told them this village swallows people who know too much. Two weeks later... (finishes drink) ...lake swallowed them too.

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