

PHASE 1: THE CURSE

Read these interviews in order:

#	File	Person	Role
01	01_constable_patil_report_t3.md	Constable Ghadge	Police report - recent deaths
02	02_constable_patil_report_t2.md	Constable Ghadge	Police report - 8 years ago
03	03_constable_patil_report_t1.md	Constable Ghadge	Police report - 15 years ago
04	04_sarpanch_desai.md	Sarpanch Vilas	Village head
05	05_father_pradhan.md	Father Pradhan	Local priest
06	06_dagdu_mane.md	Raghunath More	T3 victim's father
07	07_suman_mane_mother.md	Meena More	T3 victim's mother
08	08_tukaram_mane.md	Mahesh More	T3 victim's uncle
09	09_maruti_pawar.md	Harish Karande	T2 victims' father
10	10_yamuna_pawar.md	Nirmala Karande	T2 victims' mother
11	11_bayabai.md	Rangubai	Death ritual woman
12	12_teacher_kulkarni.md	Teacher Shaila	Village teacher
13	13 Vasudev_Buwa.md	Gajanan Buwa	Wandering holy man
14	14_villagers_talegaon.md	Talegaon Villagers	Group testimony
15	15_villagers_vasti.md	Vasti Villagers	Group testimony

After completing all 15 interviews, proceed to PHASE_2/

Note: Skip the “Post-Interview Notes” section at the end of each file - that’s for moderators only.

INTERVIEW #01

Person: Constable Mohan Ghadge **Age:** 48 **Role:** Local police officer, Talegaon chowki **Location:** Police chowki, Talegaon **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 1

UNLOCK CONDITION

Available from start

PRE-INTERVIEW NOTES

Arjun has arrived from Pune CID to investigate the pattern of child deaths. This is his first official interview. He's reviewing the most recent case (Timeline 3 - More children, 4 months ago).

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ARJUN: Constable Mohan Ghadge, I am here from CID Pune. I need to review the More children case.

CONSTABLE GHADGE: Yes, sir. I received message you are coming. Please sit. Chai?

ARJUN: No, thank you. The file, please.

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (pulls out thin file) Here, sir. Gauri More, age twelve. Aarav More, age eight. Incident date: four months ago. September 14th.

ARJUN: What happened?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: The children went to the lake. Korde Tal. At night. The girl drowned. The boy survived. He was found next morning in the mist area. Dhuke, we call it.

ARJUN: Your report says suicide. Both children attempted suicide?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (shifts in chair) Sir, you are from city. You don't understand this place. This village has a curse. The lake has spirits. Twin girls who drowned many years ago. They come back. They take children.

ARJUN: You're saying ghosts killed Gauri More?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: I am saying... the curse took her. Like it took others before.

ARJUN: How many others?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (counts on fingers) Fifteen years ago, two twin girls. Eight years ago, one boy and one girl - siblings. Now these two. Six children total. Always pairs. Always siblings or twins. Always the lake.

ARJUN: And you ruled all of them suicide?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: Sir, what else to write? No weapon. No wounds. No robbery. No witness. Just... children walking to lake and drowning. The first one, the twins, that was accident - flash flood. After that, the curse started. People say the twins' spirits are angry. They take other children.

ARJUN: The boy, Aarav. He survived. What does he say?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (crosses arms) The boy is disturbed, sir. His mind is broken from what he saw. He talks about shadows. Two figures coming for them. He says the twin ghosts came.

ARJUN: Two figures. Did he describe them?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: He says they were big. Dark. No face. He was scared, sir. Children imagine things when scared.

ARJUN: I want to interview him.

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (pause) The boy is not in the village. His mother's people took him away. For safety. The spirits might come back for him.

ARJUN: Where did they take him?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: I don't know, sir. Maybe her sister's village. Maybe somewhere else. The family is not talking.

ARJUN: You didn't find this important to follow up?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: Sir, the boy saw his sister die. He is traumatized. What will questioning do? Bring back the dead? The case is clear. The curse took another child. It is tragedy, not crime.

ARJUN: I'll need copies of all three case files. The twins, the Karande children, and the More children.

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (hesitates) Sir, why? These are old cases. Closed cases. Why is CID interested?

ARJUN: Pattern, Constable. When the same thing happens three times in fifteen years, someone in Pune notices. That's all you need to know.

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (quietly) Some patterns are not for humans to solve, sir. Some patterns are... from above.

INTERVIEW #02

Person: Constable Mohan Ghadge **Age:** 48 **Role:** Local police officer, Talegaon chowki **Location:** Police chowki, Talegaon **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ARJUN: The Karande children. Eight years ago. Tell me about that case.

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (pulls out older, thinner file) Neelam Karande, age fourteen. Omkar Karande, age twelve. March 1995.

ARJUN: What happened?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: Same as the others, sir. They went to the lake at night. Did not return. Bodies found next morning. Drowned.

ARJUN: Both of them? A fourteen-year-old and twelve-year-old drowned together?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: The curse, sir. I told you. Once the twins died, the lake became... hungry.

ARJUN: Your file says suicide.

CONSTABLE GHADGE: What else to write? No marks. No struggle. No witness. Just two children floating in the water. The parents said they were good children. Happy. No reason to die. But they died anyway.

ARJUN: You didn't find that strange? Happy children with no problems suddenly decide to drown themselves?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (uncomfortable pause) Sir, I am village police. I write what I see. I cannot write what I feel.

ARJUN: What did you feel?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (lowers voice) Those children were not ordinary. Before they died, they were asking questions. Strange questions. About trucks. About the talbed. About papers they found somewhere.

ARJUN: What kind of papers?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: I don't know, sir. The teacher mentioned it. Said the children were very excited about some old papers. Then... then they died. I thought maybe the papers made them go somewhere dangerous. The scrubland is not safe at night.

ARJUN: Did anyone look for these papers?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (long pause) No. The parents were broken. The village was afraid. Everyone just wanted to forget. The papers... no one asked about papers after that.

ARJUN: The father, Harish Karande. Is he still in the village?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: Yes. He became very religious after. Stopped working. Sits at temple all day. His mind is half gone, they say. His wife takes care of everything now.

ARJUN: I want to speak to him.

CONSTABLE GHADGE: You can try, sir. But he doesn't talk much anymore. Says the gods took his children as punishment. He believes he did something wrong.

ARJUN: Did he?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (shifts eyes) Who am I to say, sir. Every man has sins. Whether his sins killed his children... that is for gods to know.

INTERVIEW #03

Person: Constable Mohan Ghadge **Age:** 48 **Role:** Local police officer, Talegaon chowki **Location:** Police chowki, Talegaon **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ARJUN: The first one. The twins. Fifteen years ago.

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (takes a breath) That is where it all started, sir. Ira and Asha. Twin girls. Age eight. 1988.

ARJUN: You were police here then?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: I was junior then. But yes. I was here. I remember that day like it was yesterday.

ARJUN: What happened?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: It was monsoon season. Heavy rains that year. The lake was full. The girls went out to play near the water. Their mother was... she was not well that day. She could not watch them properly. When evening came and girls did not return, everyone searched.

ARJUN: And?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (voice drops) Found them in the lake. Both together. Holding hands. Even in death, they did not let go of each other.

ARJUN: That was ruled accidental drowning?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: What else? Flash flood. Children playing near water. Tragedy. The mother... she never spoke again after that. Literally. Her voice left her.

ARJUN: Never spoke again? You mean she became mute?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: From grief, sir. Some people... when pain is too much, the body shuts down. She sits alone in Vasti. Has not said a word in fifteen years. Only her hands move. She makes gestures. Her neighbors understand her somehow.

ARJUN: The father?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (pauses oddly) Died. Accident at the kiln. Few months after the girls.

ARJUN: Few months? That's quick.

CONSTABLE GHADGE: Bad luck follows bad luck, sir. Some families are cursed.

ARJUN: Was he a kiln worker?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: Yes. Worked at Gokhale family kiln. They gave good money to his widow. Still do, I think. They are kind people, the Gokhales.

ARJUN: Tell me about the curse. When did that start?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: After the twins died. People started seeing things at the lake. Two small figures in white. Walking on water. Some say they heard children laughing at night. Then the Gokhale's servant - old Raghoba - he had some kind of... attack. Started screaming about seeing the girls near the lake. After that, everyone believed.

ARJUN: This Raghoba. Where is he now?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: Still at Wada. Still serving the zamindar family. Very old now. Seventy maybe. Quiet man. Keeps to himself.

ARJUN: The zamindar. Gadkari Saheb. What is his connection to this?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (careful) The zamindar is good man, sir. He was very affected by the twins' death. He paid for the funeral. Gave money to the mother. Even now, he does puja at the lake every year on the death anniversary. He believes his family's land is cursed.

ARJUN: Why would HIS family be cursed because of those girls?

CONSTABLE GHADGE: (uncomfortable) Old families have old connections, sir. In villages, everyone is connected somehow. The girls' mother worked at Wada before she married. The zamindar felt... responsible. Like a good landowner should.

INTERVIEW #04

Person: Sarpanch Vilas Patre **Age:** 50 **Role:** Village head, Talegaon **Location:** Panchayat office, Talegaon **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

SARPANCH: (standing behind desk, not offering seat) CID officer, yes? My constable informed me. What is this about?

ARJUN: Three incidents of child deaths in fifteen years. I'm reviewing the pattern.

SARPANCH: Pattern? (laughs dismissively) Pune people see patterns everywhere. This is village, officer. Things happen differently here.

ARJUN: Six children are dead. All siblings or twins. All at the same lake. All ruled suicide or accident. That's not a pattern?

SARPANCH: (sits down, sighs) Sit. I will explain.

ARJUN: (sits)

SARPANCH: Korde Tal - the lake - has been here since before my grandfather's grandfather. Stories of that lake are even older. Sometimes it gives water, sometimes it takes lives. This is how village works. We do not question the lake.

ARJUN: So you believe in the curse?

SARPANCH: Believe? Officer saheb, I don't need to believe. I have seen. My own cousin - when I was young - he went swimming in that lake during full moon. He came back different. Stopped talking. Stared at walls. Within a year, he was dead.

ARJUN: What killed him?

SARPANCH: (shrugs) Fever. But the lake took his spirit first. The body just followed.

ARJUN: And the twin girls? The Karande children? The More children? The lake took them too?

SARPANCH: The twins' death woke something in that lake. Something that was sleeping. Now it takes children in pairs. Siblings. Those connected by blood. The lake likes to take two at a time now.

ARJUN: That's a very specific curse.

SARPANCH: Curses are specific, officer. They have rules. Ghosts have rules. Only city people think death is random. Here, we know better.

ARJUN: Has anyone tried to... break the curse? Do something about it?

SARPANCH: (laughs bitterly) The zamindar tried. Every year he does puja. Brings priests from Kolhapur. Spends lakhs. Nothing changes. You cannot buy off a curse.

ARJUN: Why does the zamindar take such interest?

SARPANCH: (careful pause) Old family, officer. They feel responsible for the land. For everyone on it. It is... how to say... paternalistic duty.

ARJUN: Seems like expensive paternalism.

SARPANCH: Gadkari Saheb is good man. His wife... (trails off)

ARJUN: His wife?

SARPANCH: Nothing. She is also good. Very strict. Traditional. She does not like outsiders asking questions about family matters.

ARJUN: I'm not asking about family matters. I'm asking about dead children.

SARPANCH: (stands up) And I have told you. The curse. The lake. These are the answers. If you want something else, you will not find it here. We are simple village people. We don't have your city mysteries.

ARJUN: One more question. The boy who survived the last incident. Aarav More. Where is he?

SARPANCH: (slight hesitation) Gone. His mother's people took him. For safety.

ARJUN: For safety from what?

SARPANCH: The curse might come back for him. He saw the ghosts and lived. That is not natural. He needs to be far from here.

ARJUN: Do you know where?

SARPANCH: (shakes head) I am sarpanch, not postmaster. I do not track where families send their children.

INTERVIEW #05

Person: Pandit Venkatesh **Age:** 40 **Role:** Current temple priest, Harish Mandir

Location: Temple premises, Talegaon **Interviewer:** Leena **Phase:** 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

LEENA: Namaskar, Pandit Venkatesh. I am Dr. Leena Shirke from the PHC.

PANDIT VENKATESH: (looks up from oil lamp) Doctor-bai. Yes. I know you. Sarla's daughter. The one who left and came back.

LEENA: I need to ask about the children who died. The ones people say the curse took.

PANDIT VENKATESH: (sets down the lamp carefully) Why does a doctor ask about curses?

LEENA: Because I knew them. The first twins. Ira and Asha. We played together when I was small.

PANDIT VENKATESH: (softens) Ah. Then you know the grief of this village is real.

LEENA: I want to understand, Father. What do people believe happened?

PANDIT VENKATESH: (gestures to sit on temple steps) What do they believe? What do I believe? These are different questions.

LEENA: Both, then.

PANDIT VENKATESH: (sighs) The people believe the twins' spirits live in the lake. They believe these spirits are angry. They take children to play with them. Children who go in pairs, like they were. Siblings. Twins. The lake calls them.

LEENA: And what do you believe?

PANDIT VENKATESH: (long pause, looks at the deity) I believe in karma. I believe actions have consequences. I believe when sins are hidden, they fester. And festering sins poison everything around them.

LEENA: That's not an answer about ghosts.

PANDIT VENKATESH: No. It isn't. (quiet) Doctor-bai, I was not priest here when the twins died. Pandit Dattatray was. He died the same year. Heart attack, they said. But I read his diary when I took over.

LEENA: What was in the diary?

PANDIT VENKATESH: Ramblings mostly. He was old. But there was one entry... He wrote: "The lake holds the truth. The water knows what was done. Heaven forgive them."

LEENA: "Them"? Who is them?

PANDIT VENKATESH: I don't know. He never wrote more. He died two weeks after writing that.

LEENA: Where is this diary?

PANDIT VENKATESH: (shakes head) Gone. His family burned it with his belongings. As is custom. I only remember because I read it once, before the cremation.

LEENA: Father, you've been here eleven years now. You must have seen things. Heard things.

PANDIT VENKATESH: (stands, walks to lamp) I hear confessions. People tell me their sins. I cannot repeat them. But I can tell you this - the fear in this village is not just fear of ghosts. It is fear of each other. Fear of what neighbors know. Fear of what might be spoken.

LEENA: Someone knows what really happened?

PANDIT VENKATESH: Someone always knows. The question is whether they will ever speak. Most take their secrets to the grave. Some... (looks at her meaningfully) ...some are waiting for someone to ask the right questions.

LEENA: Who should I ask?

PANDIT VENKATESH: The ones who don't want to talk. The ones who look away when you mention the children. The ones who have nightmares.

LEENA: Does anyone here have nightmares?

PANDIT VENKATESH: (returns to his lamp) I have seen people come to temple before dawn. Servants, workers, all kinds. Some pray for blessings. Some pray for other things. The ones who pray for forgiveness... they are the ones who cannot sleep. This village has many who cannot sleep. (pauses) Fifteen years is a long time to carry weight on one's shoulders.

INTERVIEW #06

Person: Raghunath More **Age:** 48 **Role:** Father of T3 victims (Gauri died, Aarav survived) **Location:** More house, Talegaon **Interviewer:** Leena **Phase:** 1

UNLOCK CONDITION

Available from start

PRE-INTERVIEW NOTES

Leena visits the grieving family. Raghunath lost his daughter four months ago. His son survived but is traumatized. Leena approaches gently, as a doctor and fellow villager.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

LEENA: Raghunath-kaka, I am sorry for your loss. I need to ask some questions. Is that okay?

RAGHUNATH: (staring at floor) Ask. Nothing matters now.

LEENA: Tell me about that day. September 14th.

RAGHUNATH: (long pause) It was normal day. Morning, Gauri helped her mother. Aarav was playing. I went to fields early. The pump was giving trouble.

LEENA: The children - how were they?

RAGHUNATH: Normal. Gauri was quiet. She was always quiet girl. Good student. Helped in house without asking.

LEENA: And Aarav?

RAGHUNATH: Aarav followed his sister everywhere. Like shadow. He loved her very much.

LEENA: Did either of them say anything unusual that day?

RAGHUNATH: (stops, thinks) Gauri... she said she had bad dream. Night before. About the lake. She said two girls were calling her name in dream.

LEENA: Two girls?

RAGHUNATH: The twins. Everyone knows about the twins. Gauri said they were calling her. I told her it is just dream. Bad food, bad sleep. I told her to forget.

LEENA: What about Aarav? Did he say anything?

RAGHUNATH: Aarav was quiet that day. More than usual. He was watching Gauri. Following her closer than normal. Like... like he knew something.

LEENA: Knew what?

RAGHUNATH: (shakes head) I don't know. Maybe he felt it. Children feel things we cannot.

LEENA: That evening, where were you?

RAGHUNATH: Working. Late. The pump was still not working. I came home after dark. And... (voice breaks) ...and Ira was screaming. Running from direction of lake. Aarav was with her. Wet. Shaking. But Gauri...

LEENA: Take your time.

RAGHUNATH: (quietly) My daughter was floating. Face down. I ran into water. Pulled her out. She was cold already. Cold like... like stone.

LEENA: Did Aarav say what happened?

RAGHUNATH: He was not speaking. Just shaking. Eyes open but not seeing. For two days he didn't speak. Then he started talking about shadows. Two shadows that came for them.

LEENA: Two shadows?

RAGHUNATH: The twins. He saw the twin ghosts. They came for my children. They took Gauri. Aarav escaped somehow.

LEENA: Raghunath-kaka, why would your children go to the lake at night? You said Gauri was scared from her dream.

RAGHUNATH: (anguished) This is what I ask myself every day. Every hour. Why? They never went to lake. They were afraid of it. All children are afraid. But that night... something called them. Something pulled them there.

LEENA: Did anyone see them leave the house?

RAGHUNATH: Ira was cooking inside. I was in field. When she looked up, they were gone. No sound. No goodbye. Just... vanished.

LEENA: Where is Aarav now?

RAGHUNATH: (glances away) Safe. Away from here. The spirits might come back for him. He is the one who escaped. They don't like when one escapes.

LEENA: I need to talk to him. As a doctor. To help him.

RAGHUNATH: (firmly) No. He has suffered enough. Talking brings it back. He screams at night already. Let him forget. Let him live.

INTERVIEW #07

Person: Meena More **Age:** 45 **Role:** T3 victim's mother **Location:** More family home, Talegaon **Interviewer:** Leena **Phase:** 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

The house is small. Dark even in daylight. Curtains drawn. A woman sits in the corner, not looking at anything. Her husband Raghunath stands near the door, protective.

RAGHUNATH: (to Leena) She doesn't talk much. Not since...

LEENA: I understand. I just need to ask few questions.

MEENA: (without looking up) Ask.

LEENA: (kneels near her) Mavshi, I am sorry for your loss. I knew Gauri. She was good girl.

MEENA: (no response)

LEENA: Can you tell me about that night? What you remember?

MEENA: (long silence, then) They went out to play. Evening time. I told them - don't go far. Don't go near water. They said yes, Aai. They always said yes.

LEENA: And then?

MEENA: They didn't come back. (voice breaks) Dinner time came. No children. I went outside. Called their names. Nothing. Only the wind. And somewhere far... I thought I heard... (stops)

LEENA: What did you hear?

MEENA: (whispers) Truck. Engine sound. But then it stopped. I thought I imagined.

RAGHUNATH: (quickly) There was no truck. She is confused. The grief has-

MEENA: (suddenly sharp) I heard what I heard, Raghunath. Don't tell me what I heard.

LEENA: A truck? Near the lake?

MEENA: (returns to flat voice) It doesn't matter. No one believes. Police didn't believe. Sarpanch didn't believe. Just curse, they said. Just ghosts. My daughter is dead and everyone talks about ghosts.

LEENA: What do you believe, Mavshi?

MEENA: (finally looks up, eyes hollow) I believe my daughter's hand was cold when I found her. I believe her face was not peaceful. I believe she was scared when she died. Ghosts don't scare you. People scare you.

LEENA: (gently) And Aarav? Where is he?

RAGHUNATH: (steps forward) Safe. Away from here. My wife's sister took him.

LEENA: Can I speak to him?

MEENA: (grabs Leena's wrist) Leave him alone. Please. He saw them. The people who took his sister. He thinks they were ghosts but I know. I know what he saw. (eyes filling) If you find them, if they think he can identify them... they will come for him too.

LEENA: Mavshi, what did Aarav tell you? What did he see?

MEENA: (releases wrist, looks away again) Two shadows. He says they were big. Not like the twin girls in the stories. But he was scared. Maybe fear makes things seem bigger? And he says... he says there was a strange smell. He couldn't describe it. Just that it wasn't right. It wasn't like the lake. (bitter laugh) But everyone says no, he saw ghosts. He was confused. He is just child. That's what they always say.

RAGHUNATH: Meena, please. Enough. The doctor cannot help with ghosts. No one can.

MEENA: (to Leena, urgent whisper) Find my son. Talk to him. Really listen. He knows. He knows something. But be careful. If they find out... (Raghunath pulls her back)

RAGHUNATH: Thank you for coming, Doctor-bai. We have nothing more to say.

INTERVIEW #08

Person: Mahesh More **Age:** 45 **Role:** T3 victim's uncle (Raghunath's brother)

Location: His field, outside Talegaon **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Mahesh is working in his field. He sees Arjun approaching and straightens, wiping sweat from his forehead. He is a large man, weathered, with angry eyes.

MAHESH: You are the CID man. Asking about my niece.

ARJUN: Yes. You are Raghunath's brother?

MAHESH: (spits on ground) Brother. Yes. We share blood. That is all we share.

ARJUN: I understand there's a land dispute between you.

MAHESH: (laughs harshly) Everyone knows. Everyone talks. The brothers who fight over dirt. (kicks at soil) My father gave Raghunath the better land. I got this. Rocks and clay. He got water. I got dust.

ARJUN: That made you angry?

MAHESH: (eyes narrow) What are you saying, saheb? I killed my own brother's children because of land?

ARJUN: I'm not saying anything. I'm asking.

MAHESH: (steps closer) Ask then. Yes, I am angry. Yes, I fought with Raghunath. Many times. In public. Everyone saw. I even said - may your children suffer like I suffer. Stupid words. Angry words. But I did not touch those children. I would NEVER touch children. My own blood. You understand?

ARJUN: Where were you that night?

MAHESH: Here. In my house. My wife can tell you. My neighbors can tell you. I was sleeping when the news came. They woke me up. And when I saw my niece's body... (voice cracks, quickly hardens again) ...I cried. You think a killer cries?

ARJUN: Sometimes.

MAHESH: (long stare) You city people think everyone is criminal. Fine. Put me in jail. I don't care. But you are wasting time on me while the real killers are laughing somewhere.

ARJUN: Who are the real killers?

MAHESH: (looks around, lowers voice) You want to know what I think? I think the curse is nonsense. I think someone in this village has blood on their hands. Not ghost blood. Real blood. And I think they have done it before.

ARJUN: Any names?

MAHESH: (shakes head) Names get you killed around here. I have wife. I have my own children. I am angry, not stupid.

ARJUN: But you suspect someone?

MAHESH: (returns to his work) I suspect everyone. That is how you survive in a village full of secrets. (pause) The kiln people. The big families. The ones with money. They can do anything and no one asks questions. People like me, like Raghunath - we die and no one cares. But when one of them loses a spoon, police comes running.

ARJUN: The kiln people. The Gokhales?

MAHESH: (doesn't look up) I said nothing. You heard nothing. Now go. I have work.

INTERVIEW #09

Person: Harish Karande **Age:** 55 **Role:** T2 victim's father **Location:** Temple steps, Talegaon **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Harish sits on the temple steps, staring at nothing. He is thin, grey, has the look of a man who stopped living years ago. His lips move in silent prayer.

ARJUN: Harish Karande?

HARISH: (doesn't look up, keeps praying)

ARJUN: I am from CID Pune. I need to ask about your children.

HARISH: (stops praying, finally looks) CID? After eight years? (bitter smile) God has strange timing.

ARJUN: I'm reviewing all the cases. The pattern.

HARISH: Pattern. Yes. There is pattern. God's punishment follows a pattern. Sin, then suffering. Cause, then consequence.

ARJUN: You believe you're being punished?

HARISH: I know it. (returns to staring) What do you want to know? How they died? Police already wrote that. How I feel? No one cares. What I remember? Nothing. Everything. The same thing over and over.

ARJUN: Tell me about that day. The day they disappeared.

HARISH: (long pause) They were happy. I remember that. They came home from somewhere excited. They found something, they said. Some old papers. They wanted to show their teacher.

ARJUN: What kind of papers?

HARISH: I don't know. I was tired from work. I told them later, not now. (voice breaks) I said later. There was no later.

ARJUN: Did you see these papers?

HARISH: (shakes head) Next day, after... after we found them... I looked everywhere. Their things, their secret places. No papers. Nothing. Either they never had them, or someone took them.

ARJUN: Someone took them?

HARISH: (looks at Arjun directly for first time) Officer saheb, my children didn't commit suicide. They were murdered. I have known this for eight years. But who will believe a broken man? Police say curse. Village says curse. Even my wife says curse now - easier to blame ghosts than to hate your neighbors.

ARJUN: If you knew they were murdered, why didn't you pursue it?

HARISH: (laughs, hollow) Pursue? With what? With whom? The constable closed the case in two days. Sarpanch said don't make trouble. Even the zamindar's wife sent message - accept God's will, she said. Accept. As if God's will involves drowning children.

ARJUN: You mentioned papers your children found. Do you have any idea what they were?

HARISH: (hesitates) My children were curious. Smart. They explored places. Old buildings. Abandoned offices. The survey office near Babhul was one of their favorite places. Full of old files, they said. Dusty papers. History of the village.

ARJUN: Did they mention anything specific from those papers?

HARISH: (thinks) Once... once Neelam asked me about a man named Raghav Nimkar. Asked if I knew him. I said yes, he was survey clerk, died long time ago. She asked how he died. I said snakebite. She got quiet after that. Very quiet.

ARJUN: Did she say why she was asking?

HARISH: No. But after that day, they were different. Whispering to each other. Looking at people differently. Like they knew something they shouldn't know. (pause) Week later, they were dead.

ARJUN: The survey office. Is it still there?

HARISH: Building is there. Empty. No one uses it. The new survey officer works from different place now. (suddenly grabs Arjun's arm) Find them. Find whoever killed my children. I have been waiting eight years for someone to ask these questions. Don't fail me like everyone else.

INTERVIEW #10

Person: Nirmala Karande **Age:** 52 **Role:** T2 victim's mother **Location:** Karande home, Talegaon **Interviewer:** Leena **Phase:** 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Nirmala is working in her small kitchen. She is worn but still functioning, unlike her husband. The house is clean but bare - no photos on walls, no decorations. She doesn't stop working while talking.

NIRMALA: You are Sarla's daughter. The doctor.

LEENA: Yes, mavshi. I'm sorry to disturb you.

NIRMALA: (continues grinding spices) Everyone disturbs us. For eight years. Relatives, neighbors, strangers. All wanting to talk about our dead children. As if talking brings them back.

LEENA: I'm trying to understand what happened.

NIRMALA: What happened is simple. My children died. The lake took them. Or God took them. Or someone took them. The result is same - two empty beds in my house.

LEENA: Harish-kaka says he believes they were murdered.

NIRMALA: (grinding stops briefly, resumes harder) Harish believes many things. He believes God is punishing him. He believes he should have been better father. He believes the world is against him. Belief is all he has left.

LEENA: What do you believe?

NIRMALA: (long pause) I believe my daughter's eyes were open when we found her. I believe drowned people's eyes should be closed. I believe the marks on her wrist were not from water.

LEENA: Marks?

NIRMALA: (puts down grinding stone) Small marks. Like fingers. Like someone grabbed. But the police said nothing. The doctor - the old one, before you - he said drowning marks. Mud marks. Normal. (bitter) Everything is normal when poor people die.

LEENA: You told the police about this?

NIRMALA: I tried. The constable wrote something. Nothing came of it. After a week, he said case closed. No one asked any more questions.

LEENA: Do you remember anything else? Anything unusual before that night?

NIRMALA: (thinks) They had been to the scrubland near Babhul. They liked to explore there. Old buildings, the survey office. Neelam said she found something interesting. She was going to show teacher. She was excited. (voice softens) My Neelam was always excited about learning. First in her class.

LEENA: Did she say what she found?

NIRMALA: Papers. Old papers. With names and numbers. She said it was about the kiln. And the Tal land. I told her to throw it - what do we need old papers for? But she said... she said something strange.

LEENA: What?

NIRMALA: She said "Someone did bad things, Aai. And then lied about it. And someone died because of the lies." I said don't talk nonsense. Next day... (stops, composes herself) ...next day they were gone.

LEENA: Someone died because of lies. Did she say who?

NIRMALA: No. And I didn't ask. I thought it was child fantasy. Old papers, old stories. I didn't think... (voice cracks) I should have listened. I should have paid attention. Maybe if I had taken those papers myself, hidden them...

LEENA: The papers are gone?

NIRMALA: Gone. We searched everything. Their secret places, their school bags. Nothing. Either they took them that night, or someone came and took them after.

LEENA: Did anyone come to the house after?

NIRMALA: Many people. Mourning, offering help. (pause) One person came at strange time. Late night. I thought I heard footsteps. Harish was asleep - he took pills to sleep those days. I looked but saw no one. Next morning, I noticed - their school bags were different. Moved. Someone had searched them.

LEENA: You didn't tell anyone?

NIRMALA: Who to tell? The police who closed the case? The sarpanch who tells us to forget? (looks at Leena directly) Some things I keep to myself. Some things I wait to tell the right person.

INTERVIEW #11

Person: Rangubai **Age:** 75 **Role:** Death ritual woman (performs last rites)
Location: Her hut, edge of Vasti **Interviewer:** Leena **Phase:** 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Rangubai's hut is at the edge of the settlement, where the living meet the dead. She prepares bodies for cremation. She sits outside, smoking bidi, eyes clouded with age but sharp with seeing. The smell of neem and something else - ash, maybe death itself - hangs in the air.

LEENA: Rangubai, I am-

RANGUBAI: I know who you are. Sarla's girl. The one who touches the sick but fears the dead.

LEENA: I don't fear-

RANGUBAI: (waves hand dismissively) Everyone fears. It is natural. Sit. I know why you came.

LEENA: (sits on the ground) You prepared the bodies. All six children.

RANGUBAI: (exhales smoke) All six. Yes. My hands cleaned them. My prayers sent them. I know death. I know what water does to a body. I know what time does. (pause) I know what is wrong.

LEENA: What was wrong?

RANGUBAI: (leans forward) The twins. Fifteen years ago. They were the first. Everyone said - drowned, accident, flash flood. But bodies that drown in flood look different. Battered. Bruised. Water throws them against things.

LEENA: And the twins?

RANGUBAI: Perfect. Like sleeping. No bruises from water. Only... (touches her own throat) ...here. Small marks. Like someone pressed. But the light was bad. No one looked close. Only me.

LEENA: You think someone strangled them?

RANGUBAI: (shakes head) Not strangle. Held. Under water. (demonstrates with hands) Push down, hold until stillness comes. Different marks. Deeper in throat, lighter on neck. I have seen it before. Long time ago. When a mother drowned her own child in the river. Same marks.

LEENA: Did you tell anyone?

RANGUBAI: (laughs bitterly) Tell who? The police who came for five minutes? The families who were crying too much to see? (becomes serious) There was one person I told. The old priest. Pandit Dattatray.

LEENA: What did he say?

RANGUBAI: He said he knew. He said... (stops, looks around nervously) He said the water knows what was done. He said heaven would forgive but the lake never would. And then... (voice drops to whisper) ...then he died too. Two weeks. Heart stopped in his sleep.

LEENA: You think his death was connected?

RANGUBAI: I think when you see too much in this village, you die soon. (stubs out bidi) That is why I say nothing. Seventy-five years I have lived by saying nothing.

LEENA: The other children. The Karande siblings. The More girl. What did you see on them?

RANGUBAI: (closes eyes, remembering) Karande children - same as twins. No struggle marks. Peaceful faces but terrified bodies. Eyes wanted to be open. Someone closed them. Forced them closed. (shudders) And smell. Wrong smell.

LEENA: What smell?

RANGUBAI: Lake water smells like lake. Mud, fish, rot. But those children... under the lake smell... there was another smell. Faint. (shakes head) Like something had been burning nearby. I thought maybe someone had a fire. Or maybe... (trails off, waves hand dismissively) Old woman's imagination. Seventy-five years of death have confused my nose.

LEENA: The More girl?

RANGUBAI: Same strange smell. Faint. Under the water smell. And something else. Her hands. (holds up own hands) When someone tries to run, they fall. Hands get scraped. Her palms were torn. She ran. She fell. (pause, falls silent) Some things I keep to myself. The dead speak in their own way. I have listened long enough to know when not to repeat what they say.

LEENA: Why haven't you told anyone this?

RANGUBAI: (opens eyes, stares at Leena) Because I want to live, child. The ones who killed those children - they are still here. In this village. Watching. Waiting. If they knew I saw... (shakes head) The dead are gone. I cannot help them. But I can help myself by staying quiet. Until now.

LEENA: Why tell me now?

RANGUBAI: (strange smile) Because you are Sarla's daughter. Because your mother knows things too. Because maybe... maybe it is time for truth. I am old. Death comes for me soon anyway. What can they do to an old woman who already has one foot in the other world?

INTERVIEW #12

Person: Teacher Shaila Jore **Age:** 65 **Role:** Village school teacher, local historian
Location: School building (after hours), Talegaon **Interviewer:** Arjun and Leena
Phase: 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Teacher Shaila Jore sits at his old wooden desk, surrounded by papers and books. The classroom is empty, chalk dust floating in the evening light. He is a thin man with spectacles, careful with his words.

TEACHER: Both investigators together. This must be important.

ARJUN: You taught all six children who died.

TEACHER: (removes spectacles, cleans them) Not the twins. They were too young for my classes. But the others - yes. Neelam, Omkar, Gauri. Good students. Curious minds.

LEENA: You mentioned to the constable that the Karande children were asking questions before they died.

TEACHER: (puts spectacles back on) I may have said that. Yes.

ARJUN: What kind of questions?

TEACHER: (long pause) They asked about the talbed. About the trucks that come at night. About old records.

LEENA: What trucks?

TEACHER: I don't know. I told them I don't know. But they said they saw trucks at night. Going toward the Tal. Coming from somewhere in the village. They asked why trucks move at night when no work happens.

ARJUN: What did you tell them?

TEACHER: I told them to ask their parents. I told them children should not worry about adult matters. (looks down) I told them the wrong thing.

LEENA: Why do you say that?

TEACHER: Because one week later, they were dead. And I have spent eight years wondering - if I had asked more questions instead of telling them to be quiet, would they still be alive?

ARJUN: You think their questions got them killed?

TEACHER: (looks directly at Arjun) I think in this village, asking the wrong questions is dangerous. I have lived here forty years. I have seen things. I have learned when to speak and when to stay silent.

LEENA: What have you seen?

TEACHER: (stands, walks to window) The old families have been here since before the British left. Powerful families. Good people among them, honest people. But power... (hesitates) ...power changes people. Things changed in this village about ten years ago. New trucks. Night movements. Money flowing in ways I don't understand.

ARJUN: You're suggesting someone powerful is involved in something illegal?

TEACHER: I am suggesting nothing. I am a teacher. I teach history. And history teaches me that power protects itself. The powerful have always found ways to silence those who threaten them.

LEENA: The twins who died fifteen years ago. Did they ask questions too?

TEACHER: (turns back) The twins were different. Young. Innocent. They were killed for a different reason.

ARJUN: How do you know?

TEACHER: (sits back down heavily) Because I knew who they really were. Everyone knew, but no one said. The worst kept secret in the village.

LEENA: What secret?

TEACHER: (looks at Leena meaningfully) You are from Vasti. Your mother knew Kalyani. Ask her. Some things I cannot say. But your mother... she was there. She saw. She knows whose children those twins really were.

ARJUN: You're saying the twins were not who we think they were?

TEACHER: I am saying that zamindar family's pain at their death was... disproportionate. I am saying money flowed to Kalyani that came from unusual source. I am saying... (stops) I have said too much. Some truths are not mine to tell.

LEENA: One more question. Gauri More. The recent victim. Did she ask questions too?

TEACHER: (nods slowly) Same pattern. Curiosity about night trucks. Questions about the lake. She once asked me - "Master, why do trucks go near the lake at night?" I told her maybe farmers are working late, moving supplies. She got quiet after that. Very quiet. She didn't mention it again, but she seemed... worried. Like she knew I wasn't telling her the truth.

ARJUN: What did you do?

TEACHER: I told her to stop watching. To mind her own business. I thought I was protecting her. (voice breaks) I was wrong. Again.

INTERVIEW #13

Person: Gajanan Buwa **Age:** 70 **Role:** Wandering holy man **Location:** Banyan tree near lake, Talegaon **Interviewer:** Leena **Phase:** 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Gajanan Buwa sits under the ancient banyan tree near Korde Tal. The lake is visible in the distance, shrouded in evening mist. He is ash-covered, with matted hair; but his eyes are startlingly clear. He speaks in riddles, mixing Hindi and Marathi with Sanskrit verses.

LEENA: Buwa-ji, I need to ask you about the lake. About the children who died.

GAJANAN BUWA: (doesn't look at her, stares at lake) The one who asks also knows. The one who knows is afraid to say. Why ask an old fool when the truth walks among you?

LEENA: I don't understand.

GAJANAN BUWA: (chuckles) Good. Understanding is dangerous. See what understanding did to those little ones? They understood too much. Now they swim with the fish.

LEENA: You knew the children who died?

GAJANAN BUWA: I know all children. I know all sinners. I know the ones who pray for forgiveness at dawn and cannot sleep at night. The sins of the fathers fall upon the children. The sins of the powerful crush the weak. (stares into distance) Many hands. Many motives. The same lake receives all secrets.

LEENA: (carefully) Who are these people you're describing?

GAJANAN BUWA: (finally looks at her) You want names? Names are cages. The truth is bigger than names. But since you ask - look to where fire burns without light. Look to where water holds secrets. Look to where the great house hides its shame behind charity.

LEENA: The kiln? The lake? Wada?

GAJANAN BUWA: (smiles mysteriously) The wise one speaks. See? You don't need old Gajanan. You already know. You are afraid to know that you know.

LEENA: The children who died. What can you tell me about them?

GAJANAN BUWA: (becomes serious, rocks back and forth) Three deaths. Three patterns. (mumbles incoherently) The lake remembers all sins. The water keeps what the land rejects. The mud holds what the air cannot carry. (laughs mysteriously) The mad see many things. Most are shadows. Some are flesh. Who can tell which is which?

LEENA: What do you mean by patterns?

GAJANAN BUWA: (ignores question, stares at water) The first pair - those tiny girls - they were special. Everyone knows. No one says. (taps his chest) Some deaths have roots in the heart. Some in the pocket. (shrugs mysteriously) Ask the water. Ask the walls of the big house. Ask why charity flows to the silent mother.

LEENA: And the others?

GAJANAN BUWA: The others saw. They knew. They asked. (makes drowning gesture) In this village, seeing is dangerous. Knowing is fatal. Asking... (draws finger across throat) ...asking is suicide.

LEENA: Who should I talk to? Who knows the truth?

GAJANAN BUWA: (laughs wildly) Everyone! Everyone knows! The mother who lost her voice. The servant who screams names in his sleep. The worker who carries food but also carries fear. The one who watches the lake at night and tells himself he sees ghosts. Everyone knows. No one speaks. This is the curse - not ghosts, not spirits - just silence. The village is cursed with silence.

LEENA: Will you tell me directly? No riddles?

GAJANAN BUWA: (suddenly serious, grabs her hand) Sarla's daughter. Your mother knows about the twins. Ask her. (releases hand, returns to mad saint mode) Now go. The lake is listening. The trees have ears. The dead children watch from the water. Go and find what you already know.

INTERVIEW #14

Person: Villagers of Talegaon (Group) **Age:** Various **Role:** Collective testimony

Location: Village square, evening, Talegaon **Interviewer:** Arjun **Phase:** 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Evening in the village square. Men sit on the panchayat steps, smoking bidis. Women gather water from the pump. Children play at a distance. Arjun approaches the group. Conversation stops.

ARJUN: I am from CID Pune. I want to understand what people believe about the children who died.

Silence. People exchange glances.

OLD MAN (KAKA BHOSLE): What is there to believe? The curse is real. We have all seen.

ARJUN: What have you seen?

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN (TAI): I have seen the girls. The twin ghosts. Walking near the lake at full moon. White dresses. No feet. They float.

YOUNG MAN (SANTOSH): My father saw them too. Before he died. He said they called his name. He got fever next day. Dead within the month.

ARJUN: When did your father see them?

SANTOSH: Three years ago. Full moon night. He was coming from the kiln side. Working late. Saw two figures near the water. He ran home. Never went that way again.

ARJUN: (to the group) Has anyone seen these ghosts up close?

Uncomfortable silence.

ELDERLY WOMAN (AAJI): No one goes close. If you see them, you run. That is how you survive.

ARJUN: Has anyone NOT run? Anyone who got a good look?

OLD MAN BHOSLE: (hesitant) Dinesh. The watchman at kiln. He sees them most. He works at night. He says they come to the lake often. Not just full moon. Many nights. Sometimes with lights. Sometimes with... sounds.

ARJUN: What kind of sounds?

OLD MAN BHOSLE: (shrugs) Engine. Truck engine. The ghosts have modern transportation now. (others laugh nervously)

ARJUN: Truck engines? At the lake at night?

TAI: (quickly) He is joking. Old man makes jokes. There are no trucks at the lake. Just ghosts. The engine sounds are... maybe wind. Maybe imagination.

ARJUN: (notices the deflection) Has anyone actually been harmed by these ghosts? Other than the children?

YOUNG MAN SANTOSH: We don't go near. We stay away. The children... they don't listen. They explore. They wander. That is why the curse takes them.

ELDERLY WOMAN AAJI: The curse is patient. It waits for the curious ones. The ones who ask too many questions.

ARJUN: Is that a warning?

AAJI: (looks directly at him) Take it as you wish, saheb. Some questions are better not asked. Some answers are better not known.

A woman approaches from behind. She has been listening.

KASHIBAI: (younger woman, angry) Enough ghost stories. I will tell you truth. There are no ghosts. There are men. I have seen them. At the lake. At night. Two men with cloth on faces. Doing something. I told my husband. He told me to forget. He said I will get us killed if I talk.

TAI: Kashibai! Quiet!

KASHIBAI: No! I am tired of quiet! Four months ago, a girl died. My daughter's friend. And everyone talks about ghosts like they don't know. (points at the men) You know! You all know! But you are scared. (starts crying) We are all scared and children are dying.

Her husband rushes forward, pulls her away.

KASHIBAI'S HUSBAND: She is emotional. She doesn't know what she's saying. Please forgive her. The grief has affected her mind.

The crowd disperses quickly. No one else will talk.

INTERVIEW #15

Person: Villagers of Vasti (Group) **Age:** Various **Role:** Collective testimony - Lower caste settlement **Location:** Common area, Vasti **Interviewer:** Leena **Phase:** 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Vasti is at the edge of the village cluster, where the lowest castes live. The houses are smaller, closer together. Leena is known here - her family is from here. Women gather around her, some holding children. Men stand at a distance, watching.

LEENA: I need to ask about the lake. About the children. About the twins from fifteen years ago.

Immediate shift in atmosphere. Some women look away.

OLDER WOMAN (KAVERI-BAI): Why do you ask about them? They are dead and gone. Let them rest.

LEENA: Because more children died. And I think the truth about the first ones... might help us understand.

YOUNG MOTHER (MINA): We don't know truth. We are Vasti people. We know what they tell us. What happens in Wada, in Bhatti, in big families - that is not our business.

LEENA: The twins' mother, Kalyani, lives here. She was one of us.

Silence stretches.

KAVERI-BAI: (sighs) Kalyani was beautiful. Long time ago. Before grief took her. She was so beautiful that... (stops)

LEENA: That what?

KAVERI-BAI: That important people noticed. People who should not notice a girl from Vasti.

MINA: (whispers) The zamindar. He noticed. We all know. Everyone pretends not to know, but we know.

LEENA: Kalyani and the zamindar?

KAVERI-BAI: She worked at Wada. Young girl, washing clothes, cleaning. He was younger then. His wife was cold even then. These things happen. Sin happens. And children come from sin.

LEENA: The twins were...?

MINA: His. Everyone knew by looking at them. They had his eyes. His forehead. They looked nothing like Gopal, Kalyani's husband. Poor Gopal knew too. Everyone knew he knew. But what could he do? Fight a zamindar?

LEENA: So the twins were the zamindar's children?

KAVERI-BAI: (nods slowly) And they died. And then Gopal died. And Kalyani stopped speaking. And money came from Wada every month. Guilt money. Blood money. Whatever you call it.

LEENA: Who would want the twins dead? If this is true?

Women exchange looks.

OLD WOMAN (RADHA-AAJI): (who has been silent) The wife. Vasundhara. She found out about the affair late. After the twins were born. When everyone started whispering. When her husband started visiting Vasti too often.

LEENA: Vasundhara killed them?

RADHA-AAJI: (holds up hand) I did not say that. I cannot say that. She is zamindar's wife. We are Vasti people. But... (leans close) ...when the twins died, something changed at Wada. Something in the air. The way people looked at each other. Fear mixed with relief. I cannot explain it better. Some people were sad. Some people were... something else.

LEENA: Did you tell anyone?

RADHA-AAJI: I told my husband. He slapped me. Said if I spoke again, he would throw me out. Said Vasundhara would destroy our family. (bitter laugh) Destroy us? We are already nothing. But fear keeps us nothing.

MINA: After the twins died, many people came to offer condolences. People from Wada, from Bhatti. Some seemed sad. Some seemed... I don't know. Uncomfortable. Like they wanted to say something but couldn't.

LEENA: Anyone in particular?

KAVERI-BAI: (shrugs) We are Vasti people. Everyone from the big houses looks the same to us. Uncomfortable. Guilty, maybe. But guilty of what? Of being rich while we suffer? Of ignoring us until tragedy brings them to our doors? Who knows.

LEENA: Did Kalyani react to any visitor?

KAVERI-BAI: Kalyani didn't react to anyone. She had already stopped speaking by then. She just sat and stared. At everyone. At no one. The grief had taken her voice. What more could anyone take?

The group goes quiet. Children's laughter from somewhere. The weight of fifteen years of silence hangs in the air.
