

## Story 4: "The Boy with the Burnt Hands" — The Journey of Suraj Kumar (AIR 5, 2019)

On the cracked stone platform of a sleepy railway station in Bihar, a boy stood behind a steel kettle, steam rising in curls above his head. His name was Suraj Kumar, and he was ten years old the first time he heard the word IAS — not in a classroom, not from a teacher, but from a government officer who refused to pay for tea.

The officer's bodyguard shoved Suraj aside and muttered, "Yeh sir IAS hai, isko chhot mat karna."

(This is an IAS officer, don't touch him.)

That sentence hit Suraj harder than the push. Not because of the disrespect, but because of the reverence. In a world where nobody listened to boys who sold tea, here was someone who made men tremble with just a title.

That night, Suraj asked his mother, "What's an IAS?"

His mother, who worked at a government school as a helper, didn't know. But she replied softly, "Shayad koi bada aadmi hoga. Tu ban ja."



He took that seriously.

Suraj's childhood was made of heat, steam, and ambition. He'd wake up at 4 AM, help his mother cook, sell tea on the station till 10 AM, run to school, then return to sell again in the evening.

His schoolbooks often smelled of burnt milk, and his fingers had little white scars from the kettle — reminders of his starting line.

He was a silent student, always at the back, always listening. He read textbooks like others read novels. But there was no electricity in his house. So he studied under the street lamp next to a paan shop. The shopkeeper, noticing his routine, started bringing him chai at 10 PM every night — free.

Suraj studied hard, topped his district in Class 10, and caught the attention of a retired teacher, Mr. Shukla, who called him one day and asked,

"Kya banna chahte ho?"

(What do you want to become?)

Suraj said:

"IAS."

The old man smiled.

“Toh chaliye shuru karte hain.”

Mr. Shukla became his mentor — not just in studies, but in life. He introduced Suraj to newspapers, loaned him NCERTs, and taught him how to dream without shame.

In college, Suraj lived in a rented room the size of a bathroom. He studied during the day, gave tuitions at night, and skipped meals to save for UPSC exam fees. He failed his first attempt — not because he didn't study, but because he didn't know how to study.

But Mr. Shukla kept faith.

“Fail hone ka matlab hai ki tum khel me ho. Haarne ka nahi.”

His second attempt — he reached mains. But didn't clear.

That year, tragedy struck. Suraj's mother — his only pillar — passed away from a sudden illness. The woman who gave him strength, who held his dreams like fragile glass, was gone.

He almost gave up.



But something inside him said, "Don't let her die for nothing."

He returned stronger. He built a study schedule so brutal that even toppers would hesitate. He solved hundreds of papers. Watched every topper's strategy. Recorded himself speaking answers. He focused especially on Ethics — the one paper where heart mattered more than facts.

Third attempt. AIR 5.

He stared at the result. Then looked at the kettle on his table — the same one he used in childhood to sell tea. He placed it beside his rank card. Two symbols of two lives.

Today, Suraj Kumar is an IAS officer. He works in backward districts, building schools, improving railway sanitation, and ensuring no other tea-seller boy is pushed aside.

But he still keeps that kettle in his office — not as shame, but as a shrine.

He didn't rise despite the burns.

He rose because of them.

And when people ask him what he had that others didn't — he replies,

"A reason."

