

BOOK SEVEN CHAPTER 6 ASHA INDIA

Knowing her involvement in the interspecies internet had provoked her parents' kidnaping, Asha crumbled, as had Shilli, Emilie and Julian, each in their own way. What she was doing had put those she loved in danger. Marcus had often talked about courage; he lived it. Asking herself if this was more than she could handle, she had no answer.

The day before he was killed, no one could have guessed the timeliness of Marcus' message. "I've done what I came to do. It's now up to each of you to do what you came to do. Begin with small changes."

Returning from Bhutan, Asha, her skin now a bright violet color, had helped her friend Mita file charges in court against the man who had raped her. Encouraged by the love and support, Mita introduced Asha to three other young women, Malati, Laksha and Neeraja, all who had been abused. Was it a coincidence that the three were named after jasmine, white rose and lotus? With her parents missing, her husband, Rukmini, transferred by The Animal Welfare Board for two months to Shola National Park, Asha spent her time caring for her baby daughter Sana and getting to know her new friends. When the idea of beginning a small flower business was born, Asha offered the temporary use of her parents' house and garden. The name of the business would be *Jugaad*, a word meaning an imaginative fix, a solution that bends the rules, a resource (or person) that can solve a complicated issue.

Since she was a little girl, Asha had loved flowers and plants. Over the years, as she learned more, her questions became more specific. Can plants communicate and learn, do they have memories, an intelligence defined other than human? Do plants use networks instead of brains to exchange information? Do plants have conscious minds like animals? What was intelligence if not the ability to solve problems? Learning from its environment, a plant chooses where next to root. Understanding that plants send signals, both electrical and chemical, Asha knew humans could be positively affected by flowers.

Wayne had sent her a book about how flower essences could alleviate stress, with both humans and animals. When they were last together, Asha had given Shilli, Emilie, Julian and Lapis a list of the essences and how to use them. Little did she know how valuable this information would be in the months ahead, plant based medicine's effect on bacteria. Like humans, plants prefer their own comfort zones, ecosystems. During the stress of the ongoing outage, could plants take the place of some medications? Asha felt better when surrounded by flowers and plants. Did she imagine she worked better as well?

The seeds Asha had been given to plant when she arrived home from Bhutan hadn't yet sprouted. When, early in the morning, a goat named WINSTON walked into the back garden, he enthusiastically gave his permission to have his wool woven into yarn. The growing flower business would soon have daily classes in weaving and knitting. As Asha and WINSTON talked, something suddenly pushed through the ground, a tree growing in front of their eyes, its fruit breaking open to reveal luminous white udumbara blossoms. With plants, flowers and berries unique to one geographic region now appearing in new locations, the message was unmistakable. As a hummingbird sat communicating with two bird of paradise, the brilliant oranges, reds and purples of the flowers contrasting with the deep purple of the bird, his wings not moving, CHLOE the sloth jumped over the wall onto WINSTON's back. CHLOE - "It's a pleasure to meet you. I can't stay but wanted to thank you, Asha, for helping women speak up. Small changes."

While in Bhutan, Asha and Lapis had spent an afternoon talking about how prevalent homophobia was in both India and Russia, how ordered rapes of young women were taking place in both countries, as was sex trafficking. Having become aware, for the first time, how widely corruption was accepted, they now looked at their countries in a very different light.

The week before the outage began, the news received worldwide attention. For the first time in India's history, four men who had been arrested for gang raping and murdering a young women were sentenced to death. Attitudes in the world's largest democracy were changing.

Asha and her new business partners talked continually about cultures accepting and embracing different beliefs, knowing well their country was not just dealing with isolated rape cases, but a culture of rape, attorneys among the guilty. Mita - "Do you think certain attorneys chose their profession as a form of protection?" Malati - "What about some priests?"

With India's caste system and rape culture, the five young women clearly understood the enormity of changing people's values, challenging and publicly questioning customs, traditions and myths passed down (many with stories and songs) for over a hundred years.

The more they learned about child prostitution and trafficking the clearer it became how naive they had been growing up. Asha - "We can't just say the customs are wrong. We have to replace them with something, concentrate on change rather than blame." Mita - "How can five of us make a difference. . . the caste system, gender violence, femicide, protection from sexual assault, care for others in the natural world, including our shared habitat?" Malati - "We can each choose what's most important for us." Rene Hibou's advice came to Asha's mind. "Don't try to change the whole world. Start with one person at a time." Asha - "Never deny yourselves the right to talk about what happened to you, to act, do something, no matter how small." Neeraja - "Beginning tomorrow, I'll pass that on. "Practice and learn how to speak up. Be your own advocate."

Asha knew memories are formed in the brain. She credited her extraordinary memory and skills of observation to her grandfather who, years before, had taken a deck of round Ganjifar cards, (decorated with animals and birds), putting the ninety six cards. eight different suits with numbers, around the room. One important lesson of conducting business was remembering people's names. Asha had five minutes to study the location of each card. Initially, four or five cards came to her mind. They played the game every day. When Asha was ten years old, she could meet a hundred people for the first time and remember each of their names. It was now second nature for her to recall in detail anything she saw.

Asha and Rukmini regularly discussed how unreliable memory was. Faced with making an important decision, how susceptible are we when someone says something we then trust as being the truth? When we remember something, has it been altered by time and/or by what has happened to each of us since? Over a lifetime, is each and every original memory stored, unchanged, waiting to be summoned?

Asha and her husband knew how quickly a large group of people can be influenced by just a few. When you are part of a group, you sometimes stop thinking about your own values and responsibilities, going so far as to disregard what you previously believed, switching instead to the most vocal leader of a large group. Speaking up when you think something is wrong is harder in a large group. Even when many people turn violent, it's easier for a single person not to feel responsible...because everyone is doing it. Among many other facts of history, Asha had never been taught in school about the Holocaust. When Rukmini had first told her, she understood, for the first time, how people in different cultures accept, without questioning, the values, beliefs and behavior passed one generation to the next. Asha - "All the things I grew up believing were true...all the things I didn't know."

When Asha talked with Mita, Malati, Laksha and Neeraja about her grandfather and memory, they all had the same reply. Mita - "I try not to think about it, not to revisit what happened, because of the connection between my memory and fear." Asha - "What would happen if you could have the memory without the emotion?" "Is that possible?" "Let's go for a walk." A half hour later, sitting quietly in a clearing in a heavily wooded forest, they saw a herd of elephants approaching, one carrying a calf who had been killed. The elephants buried the calf, covering it with brush and tree branches, standing in a circle for several minutes. After a half hour, they left, except for one. Asha and her friends quietly moved away, not to disturb the animal.

When they arrived back at the house, sitting on the garden wall was a statue of Ganesh, the one tusk elephant headed god of wisdom and learning, the remover of obstacles. Asha, Mita, Malati, Laksha and Neeraja grew quiet, asking in their prayers for help with tomorrow's meeting, the first since the outage began on November 22nd. Everyone was welcome. It would be held under the Baobab tree at the entrance to the Rock Garden.

Leaving at dawn, Asha sprinkled snapdragons, violets, cornflowers, carnations, pansies and primroses on the pathway from the back garden to the house, thankful for her parent's safe return. After filling the day's flower orders, her partners would join her at the meeting, Malati staying home to watch over Sana.

For Asha, the sound of walking over the crisp leaves of the giant magnolia trees, dried by the sun and carpeting the ground, was comforting. Surprised to see two large animals approaching in the distance, she immediately recognized the elephant who'd stayed alone at the grave site, walking alongside a much larger elephant, a young boy on his back. The fifteen thousand pound male, putting his trunk in his mouth, managed vocally with different bursts of air, to communicate "Hello" and "Good." When Asha burst into tears, the two elephants and the young boy began to cry.

"My name is Asha." The larger of the elephants nodded. "I am KAL. I watched my mother and father die. I have complex post traumatic stress syndrome." The young boy spoke - "I am Joseph. I saw my mother and father killed. I was then told if I didn't start murdering other children, I'd be shot. I escaped from Uganda and hid." Slipping off KAL's back, walking toward Asha, Joseph's tears continued. "The name KAL means yesterday and tomorrow. MANISHA means wisdom. KAL and MANISHA are my family now." Asha - "How can I help?" KAL - "We're here to speak at your meeting. Asha - "Thank you."

Chandigarh's rock garden was beautifully crafted out of recycled waste materials. When Asha, Kal, Manisha and Joseph arrived at the Baobab tree, hundreds of people were waiting. A small stage having been set up was a welcome surprise. That her bright violet skin color made her stand out was precisely the intention of the Council members in Bhutan. Though everyone silently questioned her unusual skin color, no one commented. Asha walked onto the stage to address the gathering, TAL, MANISHA and Joseph standing quietly under the Baobab.

Asha - "Our constitution says every citizen should treat animals with kindness. Animals deserve the same basic rights of liberty given to human beings under the law.

Humans and elephants have shared a long history. Elephant cultures are as different as human cultures. Elephants are the largest land mammals on earth. We are proud of India's animal circus ban and first chain free elephant sanctuary. Two guests, KAL and MANISHA, would like to speak with us."

KAL turned to face the crowd. "Because of greed, your species is now using poisoned arrows to kill us. Thirty thousand of us are grotesquely murdered every year for our ivory. Sixty percent living in the forests were slaughtered in just nine years. Threats from your species have now magnified to the point we could no longer be silent."

MANISHA addressed the crowd. "It is not only elephants. Rhinoceroses are murdered for their horns. Did you know their horns are the same material, ketatin, as your fingernails? Would you like to be murdered for your fingernails? After years of progress, things have now reversed. Leopards, tigers, turtles, pangolins, gorillas are disappearing. Do you take being free for granted? Imagine being chained and shackled." A young girl yelled from the audience. "My teacher said elephants are vegetarians. Is this true? Please tell us what we need to change, how can we help?" MANISHA - "Yes, we all are vegetarians. You can start by speaking up. Being dependant on technology, you can relearn how to depend on one another. If you ask the natural world for help, you will always receive an answer, often not in the way you expect." As MANISHA slowly turned and walked into town, Joseph jumped onto KAL's back to follow.

As people shouted questions at Asha, a boa constrictor and king cobra slithered across the stage climbing over each of her shoulders to deliver their message. Boa Constrictor - "I am TENACIOUS. One thing to remember. There is endless love in the world, but many do not feel it." King Cobra "I am BURWELL. Heads up. Fact versus Version."

Asha - "If anyone needs shelter, food, or help with caring for anyone of any age, please see me after the meeting. A plan is in place to collect and distribute rain water. Beginning tomorrow, community kitchens will be set up at multiple locations. Schools will follow normal procedures. A reminder. Both animals and the natural world will correct any illegal acts in progress.

For the rest of the meeting, goals were set, lists made, schedules arranged, each challenge the outage presented addressed, every age wanting to contribute. What people were feeling, they were saying, in many cases respectfully listening to other's beliefs with which, to this day, they had little, if anything, in common.

“Some people believe the universe is utterly indifferent about the human species. When the time is right, we'll all disappear in a blink of Brahma's eyelid, birds, fish, humans, animals. I don't share that belief.” “It's simple science, solar flares. I don't think this outage has anything to do with nature, certainly not purposefully.” “Conflicts often happen when I speak in one language but am still thinking in another.” “Once you learn how, it doesn't take long not to be afraid.”

Late afternoon, when the children went into the Rock Garden to play, adults separated into smaller groups, explaining in detail the things they'd been taught. Cultural differences immediately came to light, how wearing certain colors and shaking hands, or not shaking hands, could offend others. A spirited discussion began about different religions' belief (and non belief) in the value and power of nature. Asha remembered Marcus the Labrador's comment. “Everyone has the freedom to believe or not to believe in any supreme being.”

At intervals, the natural world intervened. A tapeworm's communication was clearly understood. “I am ELUSIVE. Many people don't like me. I know how to manipulate minds, brains, and bodies, control and influence others. What needs to change is up to each of you to decide. Success depends on collaboration, being sensitive to each other's differences and needs. There are no right or wrong answers to what you are facing. Learn to share your troubles, fears and love with one another. There is a great deal at stake. Change takes time to absorb. Are you willing to make the turn?”

A termite answered a question about climate and global warming. “I am MOTIVE, nothing ulterior about me. Did you know that termites are the second largest natural source of methane emissions? Congratulations to Chandigarh for being the first smoke free city in India, a blessing for residents' health and the planet's well being.”

Two people shouted at the termite. “Who named you?” “Is that your real name?”
MOTIVE - “Everything I do has a motive. Do you think there’s something wrong with that?” The answer from the crowd brought laughter. “I guess it depends on the motive.”

When Mita handed her a small hand woven basket, Asha took out a periwinkle, a blue violet funnel shaped flower with five petals. “I am LUNASHA. The outage has changed things. Confusion, discomfort, frustration, impatience and anger are understandable. Even though you might be sad and afraid, please don’t waste your feelings and emotions, use them to change what you can. Plants have evolved over a billion years and have extraordinary capabilities. We’ve developed chemicals that protect us from bacteria and viruses. I’d like to suggest you notice and pay attention to what is in front of you. Nature. Periwinkles are different colors, rosy pink, white and blue. It has been our privilege to help humans with many of your illnesses.” Asha carefully put LUNASHA back into the basket.

Asha - If anyone would like a guardian animal, a horse, dog or cat, a bird, lizard, or a mouse, please let me know. Hopefully, all those who love music will get together and arrange a weekly performance. We’ll start tomorrow’s meeting with a few minutes of silence. Let’s all remember the words “One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.”

Walking home, Mita and Asha talked about their sorrows, joys and failures, from healing a broken heart to letting go of resentments. Mita - “Because of you, Asha, I’m a better listener. When you helped me file the court papers, you paid attention to my every word so intently I told you things about myself I’d never realized before. Asha - “Marcus the Labrador taught me how important listening is. Because of the outage, we’ll have no choice but to deal with each other face to face, plenty of time to listen, improving how we interact. Hopefully, many unlikely friendships will begin. Sensitive and intuitive, knowing well that human’s continuing destructive behavior isn’t in our species’ best interest, Marcus told us how important team work is. It’s now up to humans to be on the same team as the natural world.

When her parents arrived home safely that evening, the relief Asha felt couldn't be described. They had been held, not knowing their captor's identity, then released.

In the weeks that followed, vanishing tribes and cultures came vividly to many in dreams. Kite festivals, bicycle races, concerts, daily meetings discussing different cultures and religions, children meeting in the parks after school, playing cards, chess, checkers and backgammon, especially intrigued spending their time learning to communicate with animals and birds.

Asha discovered she worked better under pressure. the unused energy of her normal reluctance to criticize was now channeled into changing attitudes to ensure the safety and equality of girls and women. Mita, a surprise to her four friends and business partners, would work to save and protect elephants. Their simple message of love and kindness given freely, nothing asked in return, their character, humor and intelligence touched her deeply.

Malati would work to change the part gender played in India's rules of behavior. Hoping for a future where the most qualified person, female or male, would be chosen to do what needed to be done, she'd already begun her work with songs, stories and puppet shows for young girls and boys.

The day the outage began, Laksha, had been approached in the garden by a small bird, a rufous-breasted accentor. "Will you help us? I speak for many other birds. Humans are shooting us while we sit on our nests." Laksha - "Why?" "To sell our feathers for decorations." "Laksha - "Killing a wild being for any reason other than survival is wrong." As the accentor flew away, he dropped a white feather at her feet. Both the outer and inner vanes surrounding the central shaft had what appeared to be a L in cobalt blue. This was the issue Laksha would champion.

With Asha's parents home safely, Mita, Malati, Laksha and Neeraja would look for a place of their own, expanding their flower and yarn business. WINSTON the goat asked to go with them, suggesting they add cosmetic cream from the Baobab tree to their product line.

Had the concept of women being in a secondary position to men begun with the interpretation (misinterpretation?) of different religious texts . . . by men? With many countries now led by woman, a reversal to the past was unlikely.

As KAL, the fifteen thousand pound elephant led the way, Joseph on his back, one hundred and forty three girls joined Asha, Mita, Malati, Laksha, Neeraja and three men in their walk to the Court. They were followed by five dogs who had been previously occupied addressing any and all illegal activity throughout the city, a Fila, Brasilieros, Doberman Pinscher, Czechoslovakian Wolfdog, Tosa Ken and a Rottweiler. As two guards stood speechless, the girls and their attorneys entered the building. Any and all dilatory tactics didn't work, the legal papers were filed successfully at the end of the day.

The aerial spectacle, a murmuration of speckled black starlings, surprised and inspired. Flocks, not led by a single bird, moved together collectively, each starling making a choice to coordinate with his and her neighbors. Gracefully swirling and pulsating in fluid motion, thousands of birds became one recognizable image. All of us. JASLEMS.

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