

# ***Khoj- a search for the truth***

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## Chapter 1: Kabri

(It was a fine summer afternoon in the village of Kabri in the district of Panipat, Haryana. The village was quiet. Ridhima, however, was restless. She had never imagined that she would be stranded in this situation).

(What brought this city girl to Kabri? The only way to find out is to read. So read on.....)

*“Oh my God! This place is so dusty! What have I got myself into? I wish I wasn’t so outspoken. I should not have taken the bait. Why do I have to rise to every challenge thrown at me? No wonder **Ma** tells me to mind my own business. Why do I always have the need to get to the truth? I should have listened to Deepa...just done some internet research and produced a cut- paste report. And then that old man ... just a rude and arrogant old man. I thought old people are supposed be kind and understanding...but that man was just the limit.”*

(Her frustration, as you can see, is evident!)

(She fans herself with her *dupatta* and plonks under a peepal tree and looks around)

From where she was seated, she could see huts dotted like colourful beads in a necklace; a woman dressed in a red *saree* walking to the nearby well to fill her *ghada*. The landscape was dreary, but it was open, calm and quiet. The smell of fresh cow dung was unappealing to this city girl. The aroma of freshly cooked rice and potatoes cooked in a *chulha* brought memories of her *nani’s* kitchen. The jingle of bells caught her attention. She turned around and saw a calf... learning to walk. The sound of children laughing and screaming while playing *laggori*, *sathpathar* and *pittu* added to the rustic ambience. The soothing sounds, eye pleasing sights and familiar smells brought a sense of calm and objectivity to her.

She starts talking to herself.

*“Will I really find the story I am looking for, the truth I am searching for? Or is it going to become yet another other wild goose chase?”*

*“Who are you talking to?”*

She turns around and sees a young man.

The man is tall and has a neatly trimmed moustache. He is wearing a white dhoti and light yellow coloured *kurta*. His orange turban has a stone studded motif in the center. He has a piercing look and his keen sight is now directed towards Ridhima.

The young man repeats the question. *“Who are you talking to, by the way? Are you lost? May I help you?”*

The young man’s question brings her to the present and, with a nervous smile, she tries to hide her embarrassment. She had always been warned not to interact with strangers. Though the young man seems friendly and approachable she decides to be careful. She doesn’t want to take any chances: after all, she hardly knows anyone in the village...

She, politely, with all the sweetness she could muster, says, *“Thank you, sir. Who are you by the way? You speak flawless English. It’s hard to believe you live here! Or are you also visiting just like me?”*

*“My name is Veer. I do live here. I..... (Veer hesitates) It’s a long story, can I tell you another time?”*

*“Do tell me, I have all the time in the world....”*

*“I was born here in Kabri and completed my primary education in a nearby school. For my higher studies I went to Delhi and from there ...it was the usual. I went abroad, did my PhD in LSE. The person I am today is also because of the experiences I had there. Are you doing your Bachelors?”*

(Ridhima nods her head, Veer continues).

*“You should go abroad for your higher studies if you are planning to continue. When you are away from home, when you are on your own, you get a different perspective. You appreciate who you are more, you appreciate your national identity more....A spoilt brat, I was. There I had to work, manage my own affairs and also pursue my research.”*

(He pauses and adds an afterthought with a faraway look in his eyes)

*“I moved back to the village a year ago. I had come for my father’s funeral. I saw things that made me stay back.”*

She is curious to know more but he seems to not want to share any further.

Veer suddenly realizes he is talking to a complete stranger. He looks at her. He is a lot like her, determined and inquisitive. But somehow her inquisitiveness makes him uncomfortable. Veer gathers his thoughts.

*“Oh! That is enough about me. Who are you? What brings you here?”*

## **Chapter 2: Ridhima**

*“I am Ridhima. I am here because ...mine is a long story. I don’t know whether you had heard about this report that was placed before the public quite recently. The Indian media ...as usual... latched on to the report ...every TV channel, every newspaper covered it... the media and the so-called experts had a field day talking about malnutrition.”*

(Ridhima looks at him, the way he was listening and nodding his head conveys that he is clued-in and is aware of what she is talking about.)

*“All the grim pictures of malnourished women and children upset me. Some of my classmates felt what the media was doing was unethical. For their own TRP, the media was cashing in on poverty. In our discussion on Ethics, some of us brought this up...All I said in the class was that, India is a self-sufficient country. We are one of the major fruit and cereal producing nations...how can we say most people suffer from malnutrition? To say most Indians are malnourished is a lie, a media-generated lie. That’s all I said. My professor said that I was wrong! We got into an argument. He threw me the bait...and as usual I caught it. “*

Ridhima pauses. *“Have I given too much information to a stranger?”*

Veer sees this and smiles. *“Don’t stop now, continue. It’s like finding the last few pages of a John Grisham novel being torn....”*

*“The image I have of India...the images I see on the TV, magazines, the Shining India portrayed everywhere seems to contradict with what my Professor said and this confuses and annoys me. I am here to search for answers. I want to prove my professor wrong! I know he is wrong.*

*My professor asked me to go to the nearest rural town or village, that’s real India for you; see for yourself whether the report is correct. And prove it wrong. So here I am, in a rural village. As usual, my parents wouldn’t let me come here by myself. So, I had to drag my brother, Raunak. I had to bribe him, beg him...”*

Veer sees a young man sipping water and reading a newspaper, sitting, at a distance.

*“Ridhima, do not get offended. Don’t you think your professor might be correct? Is it possible that we have all been deceived? Just because we have become self-sufficient in food production doesn’t mean that there is no poverty. I also used to believe that. When any of my friends in England talked about poverty in India, I was the first one to criticise them, with hardcore data on food production and yield. That opinion of India --- the Shiny India—changed about a year ago. Forty-two per cent of children under five are underweight and 59 per cent are stunted.”*

**Beneath the attractive, developed peel lies a gradually rotting fruit. The percentage of underweight children in Gujarat (one of India’s richest state) increased from 45% at the start of the decade to 47% in 2006.**

Ridhima too had read the headlines: that India is the malnutrition capital of the world but she had thought to herself that the report was definitely based on ‘false’ data!

Veer seems to read her mind. Never to give up on challenges, Veer invites Ridhima to meet his friend.

*“If you are not in a hurry, please come and meet my friend Basanti.”*

Ridhima hollers to her brother and tells him where she is going.

As they walk, Veer starts to mouth facts after facts.

(I am sure there are people like Veer in your life too, dear readers! These people need numbers, remember them like you and I remember Top-20 Hits)

***“In 1993-4 in Haryana 35% of children were reportedly malnourished with 25% of the population under the poverty line. In Assam 36% of children were malnourished yet a full 41% lived in poverty. In other words although the destitute poor have higher rates of malnutrition than the rich, poverty itself is not the sole cause.”***

Veer can see that Ridhima listening keenly. Encouraged, he continues, *“Practically all families can afford half a chapatti or half a banana or a boiled potato or a bowl of daal which is enough to adequately feed an infant.”*

*“It is more often inadequate knowledge, about feeding practices that are in the best interest of the child that leads to malnutrition. **The denial of as little as 200-300 calories in a young child’s daily diet is what makes the difference between the normal growth and the faltering that starts the descent towards illness and death.**”*

There is surety and confidence in his answer.

Ridhima had, till now, taken pride in the fact that India was a nation to be reckoned with and was emerging as a superpower. Something about what Veer said makes her think...*“Is it possible that I could have been wrong?”*

As she walks, she sees similar images that she had seen on TV: skinny children...tired-out women. Some children come running towards Veer. They look at Ridhima. *“Who is this didi, bhaiya?”* Some are whispering and giggling.

Ridhima didn’t realise that they had stopped in front of a hut...you can call it a shed, perhaps! She sees a young woman milking a cow. Who looked weaker....the cow or the young woman, it was hard to decipher.

### Chapter 3- Basanti

*“Who is the young girl besides Veer bhaiyya? Bhaiyya always has friends with him? Bhaiyya knows I can’t afford chai. May be I can offer them just water! Water....city people bring their own water. The city girl has such nice skin, and is so pretty.”*

Basanti looks at herself...her torn sari, rough hands and feet... tears start to roll down her cheeks. She vividly remembered the day; she was prevented from going to school....the day when she was married off to a much, much older man, old enough to be her own father!

*I was the oldest of four. All I remember about my childhood is this: chores, chores, chores. Taking care of my brothers, helping **Ma** in the house, fetching water, gathering firewood, cooking and cleaning. After all this was done, I would go to school. I really wanted to become a teacher. I remember the way I would sit in class and imagine the things I could do...*

*My parents sent me to school so that I was out of everyone’s way and taken care of. Food was also provided in the school. After ‘khaana’ we came back home.*

*My teacher thought I was smart for a girl from a village. She even came home and talked to my babuji. She said that she would help me study. But babuji was certain. “A girl’s place is her home,” he said.*

As Basanti reflects upon her past with a great deal of disappointment, Veer and Ridhima enter her hut...

*“Ram ram Basanti kya hal chal hai?”* exclaims Veer. Veer bhaiya’s question brought her attention to him.

*“Oho yeh kise laye ho apne sath?”* questioned Basanti.

Though she appeared to be weak, her question expressed a certain excitement as though she longed for a visitor.

*“Bas ek dost hai... inka naam Ridhima hai...”*

*“By the way, how is Guddu? Are you also taking care of yourself? “*

*“Bhaiya, who’s there to take care of me? I am a widow, and as you know most people shun me because they think I bring bad luck.”*

*“How many times have I told you that you have to take care of Guddu and yourself? You need to think differently. Remember you are pregnant. You wouldn’t want another Guddu. What you eat affects the health of your unborn child....”*

Basanti is silent...she knows that Veer Bhaiya is trying to help but somehow she is embarrassed about the fact that she is unable to raise her children like the other mothers.

*‘She looks so young. I can’t believe that she is already a mother and is expecting another child? When did she get married? When she was like 10 or 11? How did this happen....?’* Ridhima thinks to herself.

*“Do you rest enough? Or does saasuma make you do all the work?”* enquires Veer

*“Bhaiya, I am used to work. That’s what I have done all my life.”*

Basanti looks at Ridhima and asks, *“Are you related to Bhaiya? What are you doing here?”* Ridhima doesn’t know what to say, what she has seen and heard has impacted her deeply. Veer intervenes and says *“She is from Delhi, we are on our way to the farm; I wanted to stop by and check on you.”*

Once out of sight of Basanti, Veer says, *“Ridhima, do you see the connection? As you may be aware that pregnant women should get adequate food and rest in order to prevent damage not only to the mother’s health but also to that of their unborn child. Unfortunately there is no one to take care of Basanti. She is made to do excessive work and is not even fed properly. This in turn would lead to a negative calorie balance and low birth weight in the unborn baby.”*

There is a long pause. Ridhima is stunned by what Veer had told her and she just needs some time to soak it all up. Veer senses Ridhima's dejection and decides to divert her attention.

*"Ridhima, come. Let me take you to my ancestral farm land: from there we can see the sun set and experience how beautiful the ending of a day can look like. Each day accepts its end in the same way that you have accepted that some of your views may be wrong."*

The two walk towards the farm. The farm was situated at a distance from the village. Mother earth bore no green crops on this patch of land but the golden weeds glorified the emptiness of the farm. It felt as though the farm was not complete, as though it craved to be cared for, as though it was guilty that it could not serve its purpose....

(Veer walks about restlessly, plucking the weeds off the land.)

*"So, Veer, looks like you want to tell me something. Go on, I am good at keeping secrets."*

*"This is not a secret but it is a story that has been inside me and is eating me from within."*

*"I love stories and plus, I am a quite good listener is I may say so myself. What more could a story teller ask for?"*

*"I will say it briefly. My grandfather owned land that he cared for, like a child. In his lifetime he cultivated crops such as jowar, tuar, moong, makka, bajra, udad, and groundnuts. These used to be the crops of the summer but during winter he grew wheat. In this way he was able to feed not only his family but also a large part of the village. Malnutrition was not heard of in those days."*

*"That's all I wanted to tell you!"*

*"Is that all?"* Ridhima had expected more. She felt Veer was still keeping something from her...

Ridhima spends a minute reflecting on the events of the day. She is very sad after hearing Basanti's story. She thought to herself:

*"How could a girl only 19 years of age raise a family without any financial or moral support?"* The unfairness of life hit her hard. Ridhima sits down. The severity of the problem weighed her down.

*“The professor was right. The urbanites are indeed cut-off from the real India. I am only a few hundred miles away from this village and I did not imagine the extent of poverty and malnutrition prevailing so close to my home”.*

She remembers what her *Nani* used to say, problems are opportunities to learn...yes. Ridhima decides to learn...from Basanti, from Veer and yes, she remembers the old man Rajmangal Singh who had absolute disdain for her questions. She could learn from him too.

My dear readers I guess you must be wondering who Rajmangal Singh is...he was the village Sarpanch, a shrewd, stubborn and resilient man. Our protagonist had first approached him seeking help and answers to the questions she had. Rajmangal Singh turned out to be a quintessential cranky, cantankerous old man.

*“What...? You city people know nothing... you have no clue about the real India. All you people think is that India is developed, has highways and high-tech companies. You don’t see or you don’t want to see what is actually happening. You come like tourists to your own villages and do research. After research, where do you go? To America or Italy. You don’t want to see the truth or accept the truth.....please get out of my house. I have no place for people like you”*

Remember readers, our first meeting with Ridhima? We had seen her upset and irritated, sitting under the peepal tree. That was after her first encounter with Rajmangal Singh.

Meeting Basanti and learning about her story makes Ridhima question her own assumptions and evaluations; her tendency to see things in black and white. She now feels that Rajmangal Singh also had a story to tell, and, intuitively, she knows she needs to hear it.

Rajmangal Singh did not expect to see the girl from the city knocking at his door again. He had insulted her enough the previous day...he’d thought that would be enough to drive her away...

## Chapter 4: Rajmangal Singh

Ridhima knocks on his door with a certain determination. There is no answer for a while. Finally, he opens the door, and, without any invitation, Ridhima barges in. Rajmangal Singh breaks the prolonged silence.

*“I am sorry for shouting at you the other day, but your question brought back some old and unpleasant memories...”* he says apologetically.

Then with a sigh he begins:

*“Did Veer tell you about his grandfather? He was my friend.”* Ridhima nods.

*“As you know Veer’s grandfather owned a fertile piece of land and he grew many diverse and traditional crops such as jowar , bajra, udad, ... these were low maintenance crops. They could grow in no-so-fertile soil, required minimum water and very little manure. After his death, his son Jay Singh, Veer’s father took over the cultivation of the farm. For a year he grew millets but later on he was persuaded to grow wheat by government officials. Those officials, told Jay that they would provide him with a loan to buy a tractor and other inputs. In exchange he would have to grow the HYV variety of wheat. At first Jay resisted but later due to the perks given by the government officials, he gave in. He would have been a fool not to accept it. The same was true for other farmers as well. Initially they were thrilled with the high yield that these seeds generated. However, with the passage of time, we could see the adverse effects. The soil grew more acidic and less fertile.”*

Rajmangal Singh looks at Ridhima and wonders aloud, *“Are you bored?”*

*“Of course not! These are the kinds of stories that I have come here for. So you are basically talking about the green revolution... and tell me what happened to Veer’s father?”*

Rajmangal Singh continues, *“I tried to convince him about not getting caught with short term benefits. But he was stubborn, he refused to*

*listen to me and he fell into the trap. And he paid a very heavy price for it.”*

Then Rajmangal Singh sighs.

*“Have you seen Jay’s farm?”*

*“Yes I have...”* replies Ridhima.

*“That farm used to be so green and fertile. It was the most bountiful piece of earth a farmer could ask for. Now look at it... it’s so barren. I saw it, I saw it all happen... all of it...the fall in yield, the debts, the rise in poverty, the unemployment, the deaths, the suicides, ...everything-it happened to our village... The others decided to live with it but I could not resist it. I went all the way to the city and protested and raised my voice against this injustice, but those urbanites...Do they listen to an old farmer? That too an illiterate one?”*

Ridhima can sense the pain and anguish of a farmer deeply connected to the earth.

*“Is that why you hate us city people?”* asked Ridhima.

*“I don’t hate you; I am appalled by your apathy, arrogance and indifference.”*

*“What happened to Jay then?”* asked Ridhima

*“He died... a remorseful old man.”*

Ridhima can see that the ever so resilient Rajmangal is starting to break. There is so much of pain in his voice...

Ridhima is taken aback. Ridhima realizes that the Green revolution also had a dark side to it. She is now able to connect the dots. She now knows what she had missed so far: the human element.

She is deeply touched by Rajmangal Singh’s story. He evokes in her a deep sense of respect. She touches his feet and says, *“Paay lagun, dadaji”*

Ridhima gets up to leave when Rajmangal calls her. She stops, sensing that he wants to say something more.

*“What really saddens me is that we could have avoided all this, especially the malnutrition. We would not have had children like Guddu in our village. Guddu, the first son of...”*

*“Basanti’s...., I know he is medically malnourished.”* There is sympathy in Ridhima’s voice.

Rajmangal is evidently surprised that she knows Guddu.

Ridhima departs. She goes straight to Veer.

*“I am very upset with you, Veer!”*

## **Chapter 5: Realization**

*“What did I do now?”*

*“You didn’t tell me the whole story about that farm of yours.”* She frowns at him and continues, *“I had thought that Green Revolution was the one that made India self-sufficient in food. I didn’t even realize that it had another untold story. What I still don’t understand is the link between Green Revolution and malnutrition.”*

Veer patiently explains the link as he sees it. *“Soon after independence, India wanted to attack the problem of poverty from two fronts. One was from the production front – Green revolution was the result. The other was the distribution front – ration shops, or PDS was the answer. As you know, Green revolution promoted cultivation of only wheat and rice. It also encouraged their distribution through PDS. With the availability of wheat and rice through PDS, the poorer segments of population soon changed over to rice and wheat as staple cereals.*

*Coarse cereals such as bajra, maize and jowar, which are rich in fibre, micronutrients and minerals, were no longer being consumed. Do you know that the consumption of jowar and its products has dropped by over 40% in both rural and urban areas. “*

*Veer pauses. “Come with me ... I have something more to share .... something that might help you.”*

Ridhima tries to keep up with Veer's long strides. Soon they arrive at a small house. Ridhima steps in and saw maps, charts and graphs all showing statistics.

*“I have started an NGO named ‘Sanyuktsamaj’. As the name suggests we are working together to bring back life ...bring back forgotten farming traditions that served the community so well in the past.”*

He continues, *“We are also training and motivating young mothers like Basanti to access healthcare from the nearby health center, at the first sign of illness. We also educate them regarding dietary habits and the importance of minimum calorie intake. We train young girls from the village to go on house visits to motivate mothers to breast feed, add supplements into the children's diet and accompany them to seek healthcare from the nearest facility. These teenage girls called Sevikas are respected in our community which will serve them well in their future.”*

*“Hmm... so if we educate girls like this on a nationwide basis it not only serves the community, it also addresses the issue of gender inequality!”* exclaims Ridhima. *“So this is what made you stay back over here?”*

*“Yes, Ridhima. This is the secret you were itching to know. He continues, “While I was abroad, I was disconnected from my homeland. When I came down for my father's funeral, I realized that my village, as I knew it had ceased to exist. The fields were barren and lifeless. Laughter and the sense of togetherness seemed to have left our lives. People were helpless and dispirited. I wondered what had happened to*

*the indomitable Jat spirit. What hit me really hard was the fact that my father died a broken man.. I could not go back. I decided to stay back.“*

Veer's words seem to have touched a chord within Ridhima. She says, *“I know what you are talking about. I only live a few hundred miles away from this village and had no clue about the hard reality here. This journey to your village has opened my eyes.”*

Veer looks at Ridhima. He can see the change – from the talkative, ‘I-know-it-all’ high horse, Ridhima seems to have landed on the ground. He is deeply touched by her integrity. *“Hmm ... I am happy that this has been a journey of discovery for you. It's good to know that you have realized that real stories lie beyond just numbers and reports.”*

Veer adds, *“We are celebrating the last day of Dusshera. Do you want to join us?”*

*“You carry on Veer. I shall join you later. I have some unfinished work...”*

Just as Veer leaves, Raunak, her brother enters the house.

*“Ridhima! We have been here for so long. Let's go back home!”* exclaims Raunak.

*“Bhaiya, please. I still have a little work left. My report is almost done. Besides Veer wants us to join him for Dusshera celebrations.”*

Raunak is irritated and returns to his iPod without a reply.

Ridhima sits down and reflects on her journey. She takes out her writing pad and begins to write.

*“What leads to malnutrition?”* She starts to write down the reasons on the paper.

- Poverty (however after the discussion I had with Veer, I am convinced that it is not the sole cause)
- Lack of awareness in matters of feeding practices that are in the best interests of the child.

- Low status of women in the society - pregnant women ill-treated during pregnancy (underfed, overworked) (Basanti's story)
- Social evils - a superstition that a widow is a symbol of bad luck and misfortune (Basanti's story)
- Eating disorders which is caused due to
  1. Emotional shock or grief
  2. Stress and fear
  3. Shortfall in funding for child health.
- Poor execution of government policies with respect child care.
- Agricultural policies and Public distribution system
- Women in rural areas do not have the luxury of time to feed their infants. The task is often given to an older sibling who may not have the knowledge or patience to feed an infant
- Change in eating habits of the general population.

*"This issue is much more complex than I thought. I came here with intent to complete a report and prove my professor wrong. I go back with a deep sense of gratitude towards the people who let me into their lives. And such a rich experience it has been! "*

She closes her eyes as a tear trickles down her cheeks.

*"Ridhima, is everything alright?"* It was *bhaiya*.

*"It's nothing! Now, come on bhaiya; it's time. Let us go to the Dusshera mela."*

*"Promise me this - we are going home after this!"*

*"Fine..."* Ridhima agrees reluctantly.

Raunak and Ridhima meet Veer in the field. There is excitement in the air. On one end of the field some *pehelwans* pull up the giant flammable Raavan covered with *phatakas*. Some villagers lit the effigy ... their eyes

glisten as they saw the mighty Ravan burst into flames. Ridhima thinks to herself: *“What a grand way to celebrate someone’s life and death. Maybe Ravan’s biggest flaw was his arrogance. His arrogance regarding his own abilities, prevented him from seeing the truth that Rama was a God and Sita, a Goddess. If he had seen that, he wouldn’t have been drawn into a pointless war with Rama.”* Suddenly a thought strikes her. She realizes that she too had been a Ravan. *“In my arrogance, I too, like Raavan, was blinded by my own shortsightedness.”*

She sees Raunak and Veer engage in a serious discussion. *“I hope Raunak doesn’t ask Veer one of his silly questions. It is nice to see him disengage from his iPad and interact with people.* Her eyes shift towards Veer. She remembers her **Nani’s** favourite adage *“In every ending, there is a new beginning!”*

**THE END**

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