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Covid Diary

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Setting

Kovalam Beach (Kerala)

Kovalam- Small coastal town in South Indian state of Kerala; south of Thiruvananthapuram

Characters

Akira, mother

Amvi, a fisher woman and eldest daughter of Akira

Anala, younger daughter

Ikshu- A boat man and Amvi's love interest

Achala- Ikshu and Amvi's daughter

Kiaga- A doctor and Ikshu's love interest

Peter - Kiaga's love interest

Evelyn, nurse

Martha- The Doctor

Rameshwar- The neighbour

Akira means Strength

Amvi means a goddess

Anala means Goddess of Fire

Covid Diary - Part I

Amma! Amma! Little Anala was wandering through the house spoiling everything coming her way. Akira was bedridden for two days. The locals were astonished how she contracted covid. There was no one to look after Anala. Neighbours feared of contracting the virus. Anala broke a set of demitasse cups while searching for milk. Only eatable little child found was a banana. She stuffed her mouth and kept shouting at her mother. Her knee had swollen when it hit the kitchen door. An eerie silence prevailed the house. Anala felt envious to see her mother lying on the bed. Amma! O Amma! I will teach you a lesson. While saying this Anala's body turned pale as the virus engulfed her little soul. The infection reached lungs and the little girl high in spirit a few hours ago was breathless. Her body was aching but she felt it was due to the exertion while dancing to the music "Lovely! From the beach". Tears rushed through Anala's eyes as she felt sudden tremors in her body.

Amvi wandered along the shore of deep Kovalam water. In the scorching heat of June, her face reddened and she wondered if it was a covid symptom. Her eyes searched for Kiaga, her Japanese friend. She met Kiaga near Otter Resort and in a few days the two felt an intimate bond. Kiaga was disappearing for the last few days and it filled Amvi with a sense of grief. Amvi's life was about to change in unexpected ways. Her family was in the midst of a grave danger but she was wandering like a soul clueless about the serpent in her life. Deep down in her heart she held herself responsible for this mess as she was jealous of growing proximity between Kiaga and Ikshu. Ikshu fell for Kiaga the very first time he saw her. "Madam, Is Japan bigger than our India?" Kiaga was least interested to respond. She was lost in thoughts of Peter who was a civil servant employed in British embassy in Japan. Kiaga met him in hospital when he was critically ill. A doctor by profession, Kiaga lost her husband in a car accident. After years she felt passionate for a man belonging to foreign civilization.

In the hospital, Kiaga showed her concern towards Peter which was something new for the staff. "You changed my life for good". Peter was shocked and enthralled to get attention from a beautiful lady. But it could not change his philandering ways. He used Kiaga's attention and left her in a devastated position. She could not bear the loss. The only symbol of emotional bond between her and Peter was their child whose life was crushed under the pressure of Kiaga's frustrated aspirations in love. For a change of heart, Kiaga visited Kerala. Her colleague suggested her that serenity of the beaches in Kerala could cure her illness. Evelyn, Kiaga's friend was often found caressing her. "Love is just an over release of dopamine, poor child". Evelyn was an old nurse whose ancestors were regular visitors to India. They often appreciated the spiritual essence of the country. Her grandparents worked as fishermen in Kerala. "India is a place of spirits" often exclaimed Evelyn. Evelyn wondered how situation changed after a few months. She was stuck in hospital as everyone feared deadly corona virus. A few patients suffering from disease were brought to hospital. A few died. She prayed for Kiaga's well-being. During her visit to Kovalam beach, Kiaga

found in Amvi a soulmate. But she was surprised when Amvi distanced herself from Kiaga. “Why is this fisher girl so indifferent to me? Am I really so worse?” Her thoughts hovered around her past when Peter left her for another woman who was nobody else but his wife. This fact shocked Kiaga to the core. In the scorching heat of may, all her fears were reborn. But the fate seemed to be cruel enough. Her tense face caught Ikshu’s attention. Ikshu lived near Kovalam beach in Vabhiz locality. Ikshu was a sweet boy of twenty five who fell for Kiaga who was in her early thirties.

Amvi and Ikshu were childhood friends. They had passed their childhood together and Amvi could not understand when this affection turned into love. She could not bear the thought of Ikshu getting closer to Kiaga. Ikshu felt that in serving as a guide for Kiaga, he was worshipping goddess Athena. Kiaga found Ikshu very irritating initially but later two became good friends. She discussed with him the brutal heartbreak. “I am a failure when it comes to relationships”. Ikshu replied, “No madam ji, You are the most beautiful women. That man, Peter must be a fool to reject you”. Amvi suffered silently as she watched the two having conversation for hours. She was about to leave while her foot was injured by a conch shell. The salty water of the sea made the pain unbearable. It was an ominous incident. Suddenly the thought of home flashed through her mind and she felt uneasy. “What little Anala and mother Akira might be doing? Blood connects us. Why am I bleeding profusely? Does this foretell impending trouble?” Fear gripped Amvi as she had been wandering cluelessly. Kiaga was missing and Ikshu had left the beach in search of his ideal woman. Amvi was desperate to know where were the two. She wished Kiaga to be safe as she was new to the place. “I am such a big fool. Kiaga is a wonderful girl, extremely beautiful and chaste. How could Ikshu choose me over her? O Lord Padmanabha! just save her.”

Amvi had firm belief in Lord Vishnu and she addressed the lord as Padma. Her mother often scolded her. “Lord Vishnu is the eternal being, the supreme Lord. You address him as if he is your neighbour or a friend.” Amvi always used to argue “Mother, when Lord Vishnu will come to save you while you would be in an untidy attire, then you would renounce all your doubts and love Lord Vishnu as your soulmate.” Akira angrily retorted “You want me to be bedridden. What kind of a daughter you are?” Amvi’s hug usually pacified an angry Akira. Amvi had least idea of the gruesome fact that virus had reached her home town. The locals had called the doctors as they could neither see Akira who actively roamed around her kitchen garden nor did they hear little Anala’s chirping voice. The nurses straight away went into the house. Anala and Akira were lying unconscious. It moved the hospital staff as the child embraced a beautiful family photo in her arms. They were shifted to hospital. For a brief moment, Akira gained consciousness and moaned, “My child! Where is my Ana? Where am I? What is happening to my body?”

Anala was on the bed next to hers. Both were in a critical state. “What’s going on”, Akira asked the nurse. The lady in white wearing gloves and mask replied- the people in the ward are patients of Covid-19. All of you will be kept in observation till

recovery. “Recovery from what? What disease? Is fever a new illness? Where is my family?” Amvi was roaming around like a desperate soul and was amazed to find Ikshu crying like a child. She was startled to know that Kiaga was abducted. It was a gang of local goons- Abhirup and his friends who used to befool foreign travellers as guides, looted them and trapped them in strange ways. Ikshu ran behind the cab when Abhirup and his gang abducted Kiaga but it was of no use. Ikshu lodged police complaint but had to face wrath of a senior police official. “You fisherman! You are such an idiot. You young men fix eyes upon English girls. You must have helped those illiterate goons.” Ikshu was thrashed by police official. When Amvi found Ikshu he had scratches on his face. With a dejected look, Ikshu stood near shade of a coconut tree. His eyes were swollen and a heartbroken Amvi tried to enquire about Kiaga’s whereabouts.

Amvi sat beside Ikshu and looked into his eyes. As soon as she was about to confess her feelings before Ikshu, she was abated by the announcement of speaker in a cab. “The state government has announced a lock down due to the spread of corona virus. People are instructed to go back to their homes and come out only when necessary”. Ikshu wondered, “c-o-n-o-r-a virus! Huh! Now what’s this stuff ?” Amvi wanted to bring Ikshu closer to her. She could not bear the idea of separation. She had heard about people dying in foreign countries. “When there is uncertainty around, why to get scared of rejection in love!” Suddenly a feeling of shame overtook Amvi. “What kind of a petty creature am I? Least bothered to enquire about lovely Kiaga”. Hey, Ikshu! “When will Kiaga come back. I miss her terribly.” Ikshu broke down- “She suffered severely in life. Neither could she find peace in India nor Japan. A widow whom destiny ditched twice- First in marriage and then in love.” Amvi was shocked when she came to know about Kiaga’s heart-break. In her heart she scolded herself for always hating Kiaga. Ikshu was moaning over Kiaga’s sudden disappearance. A grieved Amvi in a fit confessed before Ikshu her feelings. “What the tides in the sea feel after white light of the crescent moon falls over them, so do I when you gaze upon me.” Ikshu was startled as he could not believe what he heard. He never thought that he could be so important in someone’s life. “O Ikshu! When the city is in the grip of a severe danger, I won’t mind suffering a heart break as our this meeting could be the last one...who knows who will live and who will die?”

Ikshu had tears in his eyes. “You have a beautiful family to love you. Amvi, this poor fisher man is alone in this world. If you will speak of separation, this poor Ikshu will go mad”. Amvi looked into his deep eyes, “Let’s make this bond imperishable”. The two spent a memorable time together. Their souls were inseparable in love. Amvi was engrossed in deep thoughts. “A few days ago Ikshu was madly in love with Kiaga. Now when she is found nowhere, Ikshu accepted my proposal”. But in Ikshu she could find an innocent man who had faced ravages of time. Ikshu’s innocence and truth touched her soul. She used to spend hours at the beach to catch a glimpse of Ikshu and was determined to wait for years to be with him. But life surprised her every time... While Ikshu was asleep, he had a terrible

dream. He saw Kiaga running breathlessly and a group of men chasing her. Her clothes were torn and feet bleeding. The nature, trees, stars, moon and the sea were indifferent to her shrieks. The bandits had looted Kiaga's wealth. Seeing no escape Kiaga rushed towards the sea. As she ran away from the monsters, every step dragged her towards deeper surface of the sea. She could not realize that in her desperation to save herself she had embraced death. The waves were rising higher. Kiaga wondered if the tides were affected by strange gravitational pull of the moon. Higher the tides rise, sooner their very existence succumbs to negligence. The waves always lost their essence in sea.

So was Kiaga's condition when she fell in love with Peter. She was living an illusionary life and soon she came back to her senses when Peter deserted her. Her life was like smooth surface of sea with waves subsided beneath it. "Death is also a reality. Should I give myself one chance to live or embrace death? Those morons have already left the place." The thoughts of life and death confused Kiaga and she could only realize the ill-effects of her impulsive decision when cold water of the sea reached up to her belly. Soon her body immersed in water and was one with the depths of sea. Ikshu woke in an agitated state. "Kiaga, I won't let anything happen to you." Amvi was shocked to hear Kiaga's name. Her heart could feel the agony of being cheated. She cried "So you still love Kiaga". Ikshu was embarrassed and tried to explain his state of mind. With a broken heart Amvi left the place.

The place had turned into a ghost town with sounds of police vehicles and ambulances. Few of the shops were opened and faces known and unknown hid behind masks. Things had changed and a restless Amvi could only hear sirens of ambulances. One of the shopkeepers expressed his fear, "Covid has looted our city of its peace and prosperity. Without tourists our place will be ruined". It's the only profession of the masses in Kovalam". It was raining heavily and the blood oozing out of Amvi's wound made its mark at the places she passed by. There was a deeper connection between Amvi's wound and her mother's suffering. In the hospital, Akira's body was burning with fever. The chills and aches her body was bearing seemed like electric shock to her. Her thoughts wavered between little Anala's chirping voice, Amvi's disappearance and her chest pain. Akira could hear faint voices in the background. There was a surge in covid cases and the hospital was flooded with patients. Some of the patients were having body aches while others were clueless about the hue and cry. Hospital authorities directed all the patients other than covid to leave the hospital. Those who needed surgeries raised voice against the callousness of hospital authorities.

Finally, Amvi reached home but she was shocked and utterly surprised to see the house door locked. She went to her neighbour's place. With a dejected look, Rameshwar told her about her mother and sister who were admitted in the local hospital. For a few seconds, Amvi felt that her body was numb and feet lifeless. Her shrieks turned louder "Why? Why is it our family? Always! First, Pa was the only man, my mother loved in a lifetime. Now this covid and all. Why she and Anala?

Why not me?" Rameshwar turned pale while listening to Amvi's shrieks. "You can stay in our home tonight. Your house has been sanitized. The spray could cause harm to your health". A hopeless Amvi retorted, "What more harm! I am already ruined". Suddenly Anala woke up in the hospital. She called up Amvi. "I need milk. I need mom. I need Pa".

This was Anala's favourite quote she uttered most of the times. Little Anala's desire to meet her father irked Akira. In the hospital, Akira wished "Why my little one is deprived of her father's affection. Who will look after my daughters if I die?" Akira was unaware of the fact that Anala had also contracted covid and was battling for life. Anala was in the children's ward. Her condition had become worse by each passing day. The nurse had given her paracetamol which proved ineffective. Her body was fighting against fever. When Amvi entered the house gate, tears rushed down her cheeks. She felt suffocated due to the smell of sanitized house walls. "Can I go to hospital to enquire about my family. Who will pay the hospital dues?" Amvi locked the house and left for the hospital. Rameshwar tried to stop her but failed- "May Lord Vishnu save this family". Amvi reached the hospital but was not permitted to enter the building. She left for home where Ikshu was waiting for her. She could not control her tears. "I am ruined, Ikshu. Only God knows what awaits next". With feeble voice of a man and shattered aspirations, Ikshu said, "Oh dear Amvi, Kiaga has left us". Amvi felt relieved. "Now she would be safe in her homeland away from evil spirits". No, Amvi. Ikshu's lips trembled in pain. "Amvi, Kiaga left us forever. She is no more. She does not belong to this cruel world any more. She is one with divine forces of universe. Her body was found near the beach. When police agencies spent hours to trace her whereabouts, the sea with all the might exposed its naked cruelty". Amvi could not bear this. She lost her balance and fell on the door way. Ikshu brought her in the room. After a few minutes when she gained consciousness, she grabbed Ikshu's hand. "Tell me where is Kiaga? What's happening around these days? I feel I'll lose my sanity. You are lying, right".

Ikshu felt suffocation in the room. "What is this weird smell emanating from the walls of this room, Amvi?" In her desperation to know about Kiaga, she started abusing Ikshu. "You moron, why don't you tell me exactly what happened to Kiaga. Where is she and why does this planet seem so cruel to you". Ikshu explained how Kiaga lost her way to Otter resort and a group of local goons might have recognized her as an outsider. According to police officials, Kiaga's body was in sea for more than three days and somehow reached the shore via crest and troughs in the waves. Kiaga in a bid to save herself lost sight and sea waves engulfed her. She reached a point in water from where she could not revert back. A fisherman who witnessed this tragic incident tried to stop her but it was too late. All he could do is chase the goons who were scared of being caught. The fisherman informed the police. It was not possible to trace the body. A heart-broken Ikshu sat down on the floor and mourned the loss. "Nature's merciless touch is powerful than cruelty of human beings". Amvi was speechless and shocked over sudden turn of events. Ikshu was feeling anxious

while sitting on the floor. A feeling of morbidity passed through his mind. His body showed signs of an impending danger like the one which he felt a few years ago when there were possibilities of a tsunami. “Amvi, I feel something terrible is going to happen. Where is your family? They couldn’t be seen anywhere”. She was speechless and teary eyed.

A lifeless Amvi sat on the floor. “Mother and little Anala are in hospital. They contracted covid. Their bodies are in feverish state. The gatekeeper told me in hospital”. Ikshu’s face turned white. A scared Ikshu left the house abruptly. After witnessing Ikshu’s hasty departure, Amvi pondered over his infidelity and her mother’s selflessness...it’s in Ikshu’s blood, flesh and spirit. “My Pa left mother for another woman when she needed him the most. Peter left Kiaga while she was madly in love with him. She cared for him like a mother and was a dedicated soul. Had Peter not deserted Kiaga, she would not come all the way to India from Japan to seek solace. Ikshu loved Kiaga but failed to woo the Japanese girl. “The time when I needed Ikshu the most, I am suffering like a desolate soul. People are too greedy ... Peter, Pa, Ikshu and many others”. In her heart, Amvi had determined to bring herself and her family out of this mess. She was sure that she would never see Ikshu again in life.

A lifeless Amvi folded hands and kneeled before Lord Vishnu to infuse new life into the sick bodies of Akira and Anala. In the hospital, little Anala dreamt of chasing a goddess who was as beautiful as her sister Amvi. Anala dressed in white was carried away by the music of flute. She followed the fairy like goddess till she reached lush green woods. Anala felt thirsty but an unstoppable drive forced her to move on. She could only see at a distance a woman in milky white clothes with shining anklets. It was irresistible for little child to restrain herself. In a few seconds, the woman disappeared and Anala found her standing at the edge of a cliff. She was about to fall off but a forceful voice stopped her from behind. Amvi woke up abruptly and started shouting, “O merciful Lord! The creator of cosmos. Father of all the fathers and sons! Save my mother and little sister. Bestow them with health and life”. In the hospital Anala had started feeling breathless. She was shifted to ICU.

Akira’s health had started improving after four days of fever but she felt something dying inside her. Being a mother she could feel that somewhere something was wrong. Nurse, “where’s my family. I have two daughters who live near Kovalam beach with me. Did they arrive to see me? My daughters- they are my backbone. It’s not possible that they would not be curious enough to enquire about my health”. Nurse, an old woman of seventy was finding Akira’s questions unbearable. “Why don’t you keep quiet? Lord Venkateshwar saved me from contracting covid. I could never imagine that the very idea of death could be so haunting. I have not been to home for last twenty-five days. Only God knows for how long we would be imprisoned like this. I am unable to go back to my home place as I fear my family would contract infection”. Akira tried to pacify nurse’s anguished soul. “You and me

share similar concerns. Even my daughters would be restless at home without me”. For the first time, nurse looked at Akira who was quite hopeful of future.

Nurse wondered how Akira will react to the news of her daughter’s illness. “One of your daughters came to enquire about you. She was not permitted to see you. The other one, the little nymph cannot see you”. Akira was feeling restless after gaining consciousness. Her mind was pushing her back to the times when her husband left her. Then Anala was only six months old... How difficult it had been to go outside for money and rush to home for little infant. Anala’s eyes used to shine like stars staring upon mortals in the absolute darkness of the night. The little one used to search for loving hands and Amvi caressed the little soul. Such was the aura of the child that neighbours always wanted to have a glimpse of hers. It was rumoured that Akira’s husband was seen many times around the apartment to catch a sight of the little star.

The thoughts about the glorious past were left behind when Akira gained consciousness about the cruel present. “Why my thoughts waver back and forth and forcibly drag me towards the memories of little Anala? Where is she? Is she fine? Why do I feel there’s something wrong?” Sister, Nurse! “Are you listening to me? I could partially hear, you said, my younger daughter could not see me”. In a fit, the nurse shouted, “You have been eating up my veins. Can’t you shut your mouth? Your younger daughter, the star of your eyes cannot see you. It’s a fact- a bitter fact. She has been hospitalized as she was infected by you. She is fighting for life against corona”. Akira could not understand what was the nurse saying. For her it was the worst revelation of her life and she found the nurse, ugliest creature she ever met in life. “I want to see my daughter. If she has contracted a disease, why do you inform me now? Humanity is at a greater risk of contracting insanity than corona”.

The hospital staff rushed inside. The senior doctor, Martha shouted “What’s going on in this hospital”. She calmed down Akira and rebuked the nurse. The nurse looked like a figure full of negativity. Behind this negativity was years of struggle- Akira could see ... but in that moment, her daughter was her only priority. Martha assured her “Your daughter was admitted to the hospital the same day, you were brought to this place. She is in ICU. Yesterday she had high fever and her body was not responding to treatments and medicines. Late in the night, miraculously, she woke up and started shouting. Amu! Amu! Please take me away. I need milk... banana and Pa”. She had not been taking meals for three days. She is a special child and is a favourite of the hospital staff.

Akira was relieved to hear this. “Amu, Amvi... she is my elder daughter, the backbone of our family. She must be praying for Anala when my little nymph was wavering between life and death. Amvi provided me solace when I was going through the worst phase in my life. My husband left me and Amvi provided me unconditional love”. Unlike the nurse Martha was a silent listener. “Times are not favouring us. Everyone is losing these days. I lost my husband due to covid. He died serving

patients in Kolkata. You are lucky enough. You and your daughter are showing good signs of recovery”. Akira in her silent prayers kneeled before God for well being of her little one. “I am sorry doctor. I were not supposed to discuss this stuff”. The doctor was a pious soul who had witnessed in Anala a glimpse of her own little daughter.

Your daughter reminds me of my little star, my daughter who keeps waiting for his mother at home, whose eyes search for me in all corners of home. My mother takes care of her. Only God knows when will destiny bring a daughter and mother under one roof. I don’t have such long discussions with my patients but because of the little angel who belongs to you, I feel a sacred connection. You and me, I feel ride on one boat, our final destinations are same.

Akira assured the doctor of a hopeful future. The doctor left the room in haste.

Finally light will prevail. Humanity will win over this. Akira was left alone pondering over sudden change of circumstances. Is the viral infection a form of god’s fury or wrath inflicted upon my family? But for what fault? I never developed ill-will against anyone. Neither did I borrow sum of money from anyone nor did I abuse my neighbours or relatives.

Akira was an avid reader. Reading books, especially English poets was her hobby. She tried finding an apt reason for the chaos in her life by seeking justification from Milton’s famous quote in *Paradise Lost*- “No one can seek justification for God’s ways towards mankind”. “I suffered when my husband absconded. I played the role of a father and mother for my daughters who suffered for no fault of theirs. Martha is dying to see her daughter who is devoid of a father and mother’s love. For sure, it’s a trap, a vicious trap! Only the creator of universe would decide who will be able to unlock the mysterious snare”.

After deep contemplation, Akira succumbed to a peaceful slumber. In the dream, she saw Amvi caressing her, touching her face and Anala kissing her cheeks. It was like a blissful dawn. It seemed as if the night of eternal darkness passed away. At home, Amvi had been constantly praying for the well-being of her soulmates. Her prayers brought life into the collapsed being of Anala who was now having an urge to meet her elder sister, Amu. Her little eyes were searching for her mother. Anala was sure her mother must be cooking some dish for Ikshu. The little one felt envious of the fact that a stranger had a special place in her mother’s heart. “Does Ira (Akira) love Ikshu? Will he snatch away my mom and capture her?” Anala was restless to see the walls of room which had become a home for algae. The walls looked much older. She felt that she was mistakenly locked into a fifteenth century dilapidated building. “There might be a secret room where an old lady with long hairs and yellow teeth

must be waiting for me. She would eat me definitely. May be Ira is too helpless to save me. Amu told me that in difficult times one must chant Lord Vishnu's name".

Anala often heard her mother saying, Lord Vishnu is fond of kids. Those who worship Lord Vishnu at a tender age are protected by his mighty sword. Death and other demonic powers fail to touch Lord Vishnu's devotee. "Lord Vishnu's Sudarshana will cut the lady with ugly teeth and rescue me from this trap. I will surprise mom and make a secret plan with Amu to drag Ikshu out of mom's life. If Ira is with Ikshu then she would never get a place in my drawings". Ira and Ikshu seemed to Anala a pairing of abject opposites. She abhorred Ikshu's presence around her mother. "If anyone deserves Ira's love, its her daughters". Anala always dreamt of being the future sensation of Kovalam beach. Her universe revolved around the sea of Kovalam, the coast, the conch shells. The conch shells made her feel like a water nymph. While Amvi spent time with Ikshu on the coast, Anala's thoughts dived deeper and deeper into sea. Her eyes were eager to explore the life beneath the blue surface of the sea. She was tempted to fleeting motion of the sea which seemed to reveal its anger to the people around. Anala's love for the deep waters of Kovalam was an obnoxious connection between her and Kiaga who was fascinated by the charm of the beach and its blue waters. The moment Anala used to have a glance upon the crests and troughs in the sea- she felt as if the atoms in the water molecules had an inseparable bond with atoms shaping her soul. Anala no doubts possessed a psychic energy. Kiaga too was fascinated by the charming spell of Kovalam beach. The splashing water tempted her and took away her life. But it liberated her of all the fears and insecurities.

Anala was sleeping while the buzzing sound of a honey bee awoke her. She roused up abruptly and wondered why she saw in her dream a woman dressed in blue getting drowned in sea. "Was it just a dream with in a dream?" Anala was unaware of her psychic abilities. Now her only focus was the bee and its fluttering wings. Amu always said- "If you find the bee, you will find the garden". The path to the gateway might be full of thorns but the bee will guide you... lay for you the shining path. All the locked doors would be unlocked if the bee is the guiding spirit. It affirms that sunshine is waiting to glow the traveller's path. The buzzing bee is god's messenger. Little Anala won many hearts in the hospital with her innocent yet philosophically stuffed brain. She was a complicated piece of matter. She was herself a buzzing bee who had infused into the weariness of the double storeyed hospital building a whiff of enchantment. Her chirping sound as she recovered seemed too irresistible to be ignored. Her eyes longed for beautiful Amu. "Where is Amu? Why doesn't she come to see me? Why I am here in this dull green room for so many days? Where is Ira? Is she still stuck with Ikshu? But I love them..."

For Anala, Ikshu was her mother's love interest. Her heart used to sink when she spotted them together. Anala was unaware of the love between Amvi and Ikshu which was like a blossoming flower with several thorns around it. Anala had tried harder to pluck the flower but everytime she tried, her hands bled profusely. Amvi

spent several days and nights lying helplessly against a chair and kneeling before Lord Padmanabha for her family's safety. The sound of ambulances pierced the love laden soul of Amvi who was yet unsure of what she saw in Ikshu. Ikshu was a flirtatious man who had liaisons with several women around and now she had seen him falling in love with Kiaga. Her affection for Ikshu was a lifelong devotional journey. She could compromise with her shattered self and torn destiny in the matters of heart. She had learnt it as she saw her mother, Akira practising survival and solitude for years. But what bothered her was Ikshu's betrayal towards her family. "My mother admired that bloo...ody boatman for years and as soon as the news of my mother's ailment was revealed before that heartless savage by a foolish woman like me, that creep fled away. For sure, human beings are at times worse than monsters. I need my family back. Their safety is my priority".

Amvi looked outside through her window. A week passed away in isolation and introspection. For her, it was a time of deep meditation and self-incrimination. She abhorred herself for being a licentious being.

I felt a special bond with a man like Ikshu, an embodiment of selfish ...fishy emotions. Fish for sure he is...who can dive into brackish or blackish waters to satiate his bourgeoisie greed... a mean player he is. O Lord Padmanabha! Forgive me and embrace me- a woman with sinful conduct. It was the last and the meanest act on earth committed by me against my family.

While crying over her follies, she heard a sound behind the curtains. It was a buzzing sound which startled her. Putting the curtains aside she realized it was early morning. The rays touched her body and the morning seemed to impart her new philosophical wisdom. A holistic awareness about needs of self gripped her anguished soul. The buzzing sound vanished but she could see a bee outside the window.

For days I heard haunting music of ambulances and mournful sound of gnats in lonely evenings. This solitude killed my spirit. I felt suffocated and imprisoned at my own place- my home, the storehouse of my dreams. Now this bee running around Anala's favourite curtain is not sheer co-incidence. This is Hari's message to have faith amidst chaos. Even if a jungle is burning, Hari's maya could save lives of birds living on a tree which is about to get uprooted or almost destroyed by forest fire.

The bee has, for sure a secret message as Amu always said "If you find the bee... you will find the garden... you will find the light". In the hospital, Akira had the most terrible experience of her life. In her ward, she was lying for two whole days amidst corpses. Nothing could be as scary as seeing people struggling for life. A patient dying next to Akira was cheerful on the day she was admitted. After two days, high fever and chills gripped her body. An uncertain state of breathlessness

encapsulated her spirit. Her body collapsed and eyes bulged before doctors could put her on ventilator. The hospital staff moved from one room to another like zombies. Akira was alarmed to see a corpse lying beside her bed the entire day. The only thing she aspired for her and Anala was 'release'. "I want to go back home. Please allow me and my daughter to leave this place. I feel like dying of high blood pressure, insomnia, fear and anxiety. For what fault of mine, my little daughter bears this trauma. Let me go".

The doctors assured Akira that soon they will be discharged. The next day corpse was cremated and the room was sanitized. In her room, Anala felt something highly unpleasant trying to conquer her body's warmth. She moaned "This thing smells as bad and irritating as that nasty Ikshu. When would the good old days be back? When would I play with conchshells near Kovalam beach?" At home, even Amvi was desperate for return of good old days. She wanted to roam near the playing sea waves.

I want to understand the strange chemistry between moon and the waves- how the two act and react upon each other and form an unbreakable bond which is eternal... lovable... Why human beings lack such a spontaneity and charm which sea and moon share? The two celestial objects are miles apart but cast their unfathomable glances upon each other which motivates entire world to believe in poetry which celebrates love and love which inspires poetry. But why human beings turn out to be fragile when it's about sacrifice in relationships yet conniving enough to extract benefits.

"I surrender myself... body...soul and spirit before Lord Padmanabha...I vow to never see that boatman again". Amvi had realized one supreme truth which reigned over all other facts- factual or sentimental. "Man is a selfish being who won't mind strangulating his best mate in times of adversity. Kiaga, my mother and my own altruistic self bled profusely after witnessing this brutal and harsh reality of mankind. I hated Kiaga for taking away the man who was never mine". It was a moment of divine revelation for mother Ira when her determination to work for her daughter won over the grief of rejection by her husband. "So for me ... this is the time... the final moment when the call of duty towards my family should win over that momentary passion".

The phase of self introspection went for several days and it was for Amvi a means of purgation of self. It was her folly to surrender her will before a man who was adept in philandering ways. Ikshu was a man with feeble state of mind. His narrow escape from Amvi's home in fear and desperation was in stark contrast to the role played by doctors in hospital. She wondered how could nature infuse into a person such an enormous sense of dedication and modulate the other into a savage... a beast.

There's a beast inside me ... he didn't find a place into me forcibly but was given special invitation by me ... and now his rage, the callousness of his being, numbs my spirit. Though I feel an urge to release him yet his memories encage me. I feel something pulsating in my belly which connects me strongly to the boatman. Have the memories shifted their base from my mind to the belly. As I stare upon the leaves on the trees that glow in this starry night, I feel a strange pull that draws me towards gravity ... mother earth ... and my mother as well.

In the hospital, Martha found refuge in Anala for few days. As she touched Anala's soft hands, she was reminded of her daughter at home. She missed Anala after few minutes of discharge. "I miss the chirping voice ... I miss old days ... gone too soon. I am living a life which is worn out and lacks spirit. Though I follow my passion yet I feel devoid of life". Martha's gaze was fixed into the hospital walls which seemed to echo Anala's priceless memories. Akira and Anala were on their way home. They had tested negative in their last report. Little Anala was excited to go back home and her little hands were not ready to take rest. Every now and then her little fingers moved out of the cab and pointed towards people walking on the street. Akira was still in a state of shock over what she had been through. An over-excited Anala shrunk into her mother's lap on hearing the siren of ambulances passing by. "Please save me ... I don't want to go back to that place which looks like yellow algae grown on the old water tank of the house terrace. "Momy ... I never played in that corner of house because it reminds me of darkness ... absolute darkness ... I could feel it sometimes in dreams ... When I close my eyes ... some times when I see Ikshu".

Akira hugged her daughter and assured her that from now onwards everything will be fine. Akira's anguish was genuine and like all other moments, in a fit of anger, she moaned in the cab. "I experienced this darkness because of my good... great husband. Now my daughters are suffering. I will make sure that my daughters learn the lesson of strength in adversity ... to fight against all the odds ... covids ... men". At home, Amvi was sitting outside, gazing at the moon and door. Her eyes were anxious to see Akira and Anala. In that moment of silence which a few days ago seemed baneful, now seemed to touch her soul, she could hear the music in sea ... could feel the rise and fall in motion of waves. She had witnessed betrayal in love, experienced the pangs of separation, the fear of losing loved ones.

I felt unseen trauma of Kiaga's death ... the sound of waves that knock at my ears seem to echo the hollowness of conch shells which magnify the beauty of sea-shore. Likewise the glory of love seems enchanting but the very existence of this emotion is fleeting. My wearied soul demands freedom ... it rebels against

my body. However its strange that I feel some mysterious object clinging inside my belly ... it drags me to core of the sea where there could only be waveless emotions and real stillness.

Amvi could clearly hear approaching footsteps. Tears rolled down her eyes because she knew who it was ... “No doubts ... it’s my Ira ... my mother ... the footsteps remind me of the time when Ira dragged away street urchins who stalked me like criminals. Unlike other mothers who would unnecessarily restrict their daughters, mother Ira like a lioness protected her cubs. Akira has the strength to fight all such covids of past, present and future as well. In the late evening, amidst the rustling of leaves, Amvi could easily recognize her mother’s footsteps. She rushed towards the gate ... her bare feet could feel the prick of a thorn but an over excited, breathless Amvi felt an unexpected surge of emotions like the sea waves rise higher and higher with the pull of moon.

From a far off distance she could see a black colored cab ... Amvi thought if she was illuding about her mother’s comeback. “Should I call the hospital authorities or check the calendar ... Am I overthinking? While Amvi was ruminating, in a fraction of seconds, the cab stepped outside the gate. Amvi turned back and saw two nurses dressed up in white. One of them was holding Akira who was too weak to walk by herself. The other woman was carrying little Anala in her arms. Amvi was speechless as she looked into Akira’s eyes. Unable to speak the two could not resist the tears flowing through their eyes. Amvi looked after the two for days as she had never done before. “I will repent for my sins. No person can ever break this inseparable bond ... No person on earth ... in sea or cosmos”.

Amvi had to wait for several days before she could embrace her mother and little sister. Soon little Anala was back into her world of cartoons and drawings. As Akira looked into the mirror, she could visualize the glaring difference between old and new. “I look much older than before. My face is crippled. My soul is tired. My husband’s deception wreaked no less havoc in my life. And now this corona infection increased my trauma”. Akira could note certain changes in Amvi’s stature. But her own fragility disallowed her to focus upon anything else. One day while Amvi was asleep she dreamt herself wandering near Kovalam beach. All of a sudden she fell on ground against a conch shell. Her abdomen could feel the pain. As she tried to remove the conch shell from belly, it stuck deeper and deeper ... reached her womb and was fixed.

The pain vanished but Amvi lost consciousness. She saw an angelic woman dressed in white around her. She looked somewhat like Kiaga. One of her hands was on Amvi’s forehead while other was on her belly. She whispered into Amvi’s ears- “I am reincarnating in you. I travelled all the way from Japan to India ... wandering through the realms of Indian ocean back into brackish waters of Kovalam, my spirit finds solace in your body. I’ll see this envious world through your eyes as you once saw through the eyes of Akira”. Amvi woke up in a breathless state and saw Akira’s

hands over her belly. Amvi woke up “Water! I need water! I feel thirsty! The conch shell inside me grows bigger and bigger. It would engulf me, my body and spirit as well”. Akira knew what was in store for her daughter. “A similar fate awaits us all ... all women. Someone else writes our fates”. Akira in her feeble voice reprimanded Amvi. “You silly girl! It’s not a conch shell. There’s a life dwelling inside you. Or a worm that will infect your entire life. Who is the father of this child?” Amvi was stunned and was reminded of the time when she resigned herself before Ikshu. “Mother! That bloody Ikshu ... Sorry! Forgive me ! Nooo... Just Kill me! This is the punishment for envying Kiaga”.

“Daughter! You never lost your dignity. Dignity is not a scale defined or measured according to the principles laid down by a few. I am scared for you because a lonely path full of hopelessness awaits you. When I married your father, you were six months old. Time repeated itself and so did the curse which crossed my path several years ago when I met your father”. Amvi explained how Ikshu was scared when he came to know about the disease. He never knew about the child. “But after several days of introspection, I have started rejoicing his departure from my life. I have developed a strange fantasy for isolation. It strengthens my spirit. Now my only motive is to protect my child in this covid era. This covid-child is the ray of hope. As you fought the virus in hospital, I’ll resist the evil world and ...this child will shine like a star emerging through a massive whirlpool of envy, deception and fear”. Akira forgave her daughter as she knew about the pain of separation. Amvi felt secured in her mother’s warm embrace. Both were unaware of little Anala who was standing behind the curtain, rejoicing the fact that Ikshu would leave their lives. Amvi felt, “As we shooed away corona virus, so will I bid a final goodbye to Ikshu, the man with corr..ona horns”. Ikshu- the corona virus will finally get away from our lives”.

Covid Diary- Part II

While Anala was playing near Kovalam beach, Amvi suddenly embraced her, the mischievous little nymph. As soon as she touched Anala’s soft skin, she was reminded of conchshell ... her wounds of past... how her bleeding foot was a premonition of the impending disaster. Now a reminder about sacred touch of conchshell agitated her mind to the core and shifted her thoughts to Achala. “I think she is in some kind of trouble. I can feel it... something serious is approaching her. Is this covid or fear of covid?” Amvi rushed towards her home with Anala’s hands grabbed, and a little white mystic conch shell connecting the two of them. Two different kinds of footprints aligned in mud some of which were later washed away by sea water. Certain foot-prints still retained their shape and were concretized as memories in Amvi’s mind... memories of love, betrayal, separation, fear as well as anxiety.

Fear of corona gripped her soul and she started chanting the holy name of Lord Padmanabha. “Where’s my baby, Achala... where are you... mom?” Amvi heaved a sigh of relief when she heard the cries of her little one from the terrace. She immediately rushed to the terrace and held the little one in her arms. The holy touch of mother radiated the body of infant with glitter and effervescence. “I could see a shadow. What was that?” Amvi rushed towards the house garden in search of Anala’s toy. As she went closer to the window pane, she could feel a presence. “I can smell this... this is only Ikshu’s fragrance. I can feel the sting, the sting of bee”. She went barefoot wandering through the narrow lanes but could not find any concrete clue. When she came back, she could hear the sirens. “I feel a lurking danger. Now what next? My daughter’s future is uncertain. How many tests! So much of mental turmoil! For how long will I have to bear this trauma?” Suddenly Akira shouted from inside. “Amvi... Amvi! Look at the baby’s face. Its turning pale. I think she has contracted fever or some kind of evil spirit touched her body”. Anala crept into the room and started inspecting the little one with curious eyes. “I can smell sickness around. The green algae on the hospital walls still haunts me”.

Amvi felt breathless seeing little Achala’s diseased face. “For what fault of mine, is my daughter bearing the consequences? Last year it was Anala who contracted covid. Now a similar kind of illness haunts infant Achala’s body. When will this cycle of disease and sickness come to an end? My will has collapsed and my soul feels bruised”. A de-spirited, Amvi wanted to immerse herself in the waters of Kovalam”. The sound of sirens was akin to what Amvi heard in the past. Anala rushed into the room. Drops of sweat on her forehead could explain her state of mind. “I don’t want to go to that place again”. Amvi responded “I will not let this little angel suffer like me or Kiaga. Life has been so cruel to us. We have suffered multiple injuries. Mother Akira’s isolation, Ikshu’s deception, hardships faced by little Anala and Achala will never go invain. I’ll correct that which is wrong and those who have been wronged”.

Suddenly there was a slight rustling of leaves in the courtyard. A few faint footsteps could be heard along with creaking sound of leaves. Anala was frightened and she clasped Amvi’s hands. Amvi retorted “I can feel it... a presence... a shadow trying to creep into my life... that which is a sheer presence and has no basis or credibility. It is none other than Ikshu”. Amvi hurriedly moved and she saw a man standing outside the house door. After a few seconds he disappeared. Amvi followed him in the dark but could not find anyone. She felt lost in the whirlpool and suddenly a hand with a strong hold grabbed her arm. She moved from darkness to light ... streetlight and faced the greatest fear of her life- Ikshu. He was standing before her in torn clothes.

Amvi, please save me. I am ruined. I am paying the debt of all those faults of mine, the ways in which I cheated upon you. I left you and contracted covid ... were in local hospital and somehow saved. I missed you like food and water. I am roaming around in the streets like

urchins. Your thoughts keep popping into my head. The stars, the sky, the beach of Kovalam reminds me of the holy touch, I felt when I embraced you for the very first time. The sound of ambulances was irresistible. Amvi shrunk back and angrily retorted ...

“You left me when I were alone wandering around like a lost soul ... a stifled corpse. Now you talk about certain emotions like love, pain, frustration and covid. People like you could only bring nuisance to someone’s life. I had abundant happiness, peace and sanity before your vicious presence made its mark into my life. Then the arrival of covid was synonymous to your malicious arrival. Kiaga’s death, Anala’s breakdown, Achala’s birth ... these tiresome experiences were smoothened by your gracious absence. Now your malevolent presence, I feel will bring greater sickness around. It haunts me when I see people suffering. How badly bruised we all are in one way or the other. People have been dying this year, going through hell and what not!” Ikshu angrily raged, “You bother about others but never care about my heartache. I missed the delight of visualizing the infant you caressed during this mess”. Amvi was unwilling to listen to him. She gazed deep into the dark and pondered “When would the darkness of covid and nuisance of this man shrink away? I feel there are harder times ahead. Achala has contracted sickness. A strange kind of feeling, feeling of disgust overtakes my spirit”. Amvi could see ripples formed on the surface of seawater.

I saw such structures on surface of Kovalam when Kiaga died. Am I going to witness such a catastrophe again? For how long my life will be entangled in this situation? So many beginnings and never ending ends! So many people around but a strange loneliness encapsulates my diseased spirit. This man standing beside me sucks up my belly... my breathe gets dried up and it has a direct impact upon Achala’s body. Her fever, my weariness, second wave of covid and arrival of this selfish filthy creature are inevitably linked.

Amvi wondered who would save her family from this new wave of fear and anxiety. Under the dark shadow of fading stars, there is queen moon shining over all objects of world. “Am I just an object, one with a doomed spirit? This covid like creature and many such covid like diseases or diseased men make me feel miserable. I move like living corpse and my daughter and little sister are leading a life devoid of happiness”. Suddenly Amvi’s sight caught hold of a couple who were roaming together at a distant point. The two were dressed in white and looked like a pair of dove. Amvi looked desperately at two of them and wondered how the fate of people gets entwined for good or bad. “Their bond seems to be eternal and peaceful and mine devoid of charm”.

All such connects whether transitory or permanent put freedom of mind at stake. “My body feels weighed down by Ikshu’s obnoxious presence. Where is the release? Where is the end to this darkness? Where is the light?” Amvi looked into the sky and was astonished about the vastness of blue roof over her. She prayed before the creator to put an end to this stagnation. “Liberate the world of this virus and my

life as well, of the discontinuous presence of this man who arrives every now and then to remind me of the wounds I suffered because of him". Suddenly Amvi was reminded of her daughter's fever. "Oh Lord Padmanabha! How do I save my family from fever and fret of this world?" The voices of ambulances seemed colliding with the sight of union of two lovers. The two dove like creatures clasped their hands and roamed around the beach. A furious Amvi looked upon Ikshu with disgust. "These corona times are tough ones ... tougher indeed. Many people are dying of fever, infection, respiratory illness and what not. For what purpose on earth is this man alive?" Ikshu turned his head towards Amvi. "Are you talking to me? How could you? We are not two separate beings. Our bond connects our spirits and bodies as well!" A furious Amvi was about to leave the place when waves of Kovalam water reminded her of Kiaga's corpse. "Why am I thinking of Kiaga, especially when I never witnessed her brutal end? Am I going to die in a similar way? What is the purpose of this life? Will this man follow me up to hell?" The scene was ready for an intense fight between two ex-lovers. Very soon Amvi held Ikshu by the collar of his shirt. She was about to strangle him but resisted herself from showing aggression. All of a sudden her inner voice found an outlet and years of aggression flooded as tears through her eyes. She shouted at Ikshu and her voice could reach up to the other end of the shore. The two dove like creatures turned back from a distant zone, as Amvi's words echoed amidst the sound of sirens.

Stay away from me and my family, you double-faced creature. You have been a covid to my aspirations and emotions. You turned away from me when I needed you in adverse times. Now when you are engrossed in a messy state of affair, you need me, my body, soul and vitality as well. I had to bear the birth pangs alone. No one stood by my side. Society looked upon me with contempt and questioned my self-esteem.

Ikshu tried to stop her and explain but Amvi was least interested. "You are over reacting, I wanted to come back but out of fear of unknown I resisted". Amvi refused to listen and in this confrontation she shunned away Ikshu's hand and he fell near the coast. Furious over what happened in the past between the two and witnessing the closeness between two lovers on the shore, Amvi ran away... "From dust, attached to my feet, I will be reduced to dust, so will everyone be. What is therefore, the logic to stick to dirt and mess around?" The streets were echoing the sounds of ambulances and cabs. She was anxious as the day had passed and she was unaware about Achala's health. "This man, this beast ruined my peace of mind and life and returns to create chaos. Very soon this state of uncertainty will be over. I trust Lord Padmanabha. His mercy knows no bounds. He would for sure come to my family's rescue like it happened before".

Amvi tried hard to make way through the cars, crowd and ambulances. People watched her as if a mad woman was rushing through a dense forest trying to safeguard her virtue, modesty and life as well. "I won't let the fear of covid break my

family's spirit. I will protect my baby till my last breath. The obnoxious presence of a man, sporadic disease or any other obstacle won't shatter my faith in the ultimate power whose will reigns supreme". A breathless Amvi didn't realize when she reached her home...her sweaty hands touched the house door and torn with inner frustration, deception and muddle of life, she fell down on floor. Akira came outside enquiring what went wrong. "Mother, I saw Ikshu, that mongrel again. I left him like a leftover once and for all. Where's my daughter... the star of my eyes ... the sparkle of my life ... I wanna see her". She rushed into the room and found little Achala lying in the cradle with a smiling demeanour. The little one tried to raise her finger as she saw her mother after hours of wait. "Mother, how's her fever. Is she fine now?" Akira held Amvi ...kissed her forehead- "Your daughter is stronger than her mother as her mother is stronger than this old Akira". At that moment, Anala entered inside and three of them joined hands, embracing each other. Little Achala smiled ... as if she understood how her family rose above the wounds of past and fear of corona.