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Falcon

(A Translation of Hrushikesh Panda's "Chhanchana")

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As the audience observed their omniscient countenances reflecting seriousness, and a sense of compassion towards the prey, some were reminded of a falcon—sharp, watchful, and decisive. The discussion revolved around the petroleum tree, its many benefits spilling forth in jargon in an authoritative tone. “No more dependence on imported petroleum,” they declared. “Foreign exchange will be saved! Fuel efficiency will soar! Its octane value surpasses mineral petroleum! And—less pollution!” They spoke in such an absurd and convoluted manner that even the wisest members of the gathering struggled to grasp their meaning. Yet, one thing was clear: they were determined to convince everyone of the tree’s extraordinary potential. One among them, eloquent and persuasive, expounded on the benefits of petroleum cultivation with such fervour that the chief guest was deeply moved. Turning to his secretary, he commanded, “Since petroleum cultivation is so profitable, let food grain production be reduced. Reserve fifty percent of the land for petroleum trees. Issue a directive to the farmers at once.”

Soon, private entrepreneurs took up the cause, plastering the virtues of the petroleum tree across government walls. Newspapers carried endless reports—some praising, some questioning—but all ensuring that the idea remained in the public mind. Even so, news of riots in a distant part of the state, the deaths and looting that would typically dominate headlines, was relegated to the second page.

The proponents of the petroleum tree roamed across states, scouting locations suitable for cultivation. Government directives backed them, and they were met with great honour wherever they went. Callous bureaucrats, sensitive students, public representatives, local dignitaries, and journalists alike marvelled at the promises of economic prosperity tied to the tree. Even industrialists, including petrol pump owners, struck agreements with these propagandists, eager to stake a claim in the new industry. Most of these advocates came from the far West, where even kings and queens were not shown such reverence. This adulation

made them bolder, more aggressive. They offered generous bribes and lucrative deals to those in power to secure exclusive rights for petroleum tree cultivation.

Then, they arrived at the village of Sunaput. The land here was not just fertile—it produced gold. That was how the village got its name: *Sunaput*, the golden land. Yet, for all its wealth, the village remained untouched by literacy. No one there had ever read a book. No one, except for one man—a boy once schooled, now an outcast, working as a watchman in a church far from his home. However, the villagers could sing; they could understand the language of Gods, and predict tomorrow’s weather with uncanny accuracy. The Disari, the village seer, was adept at such knowledge and had taken the task of passing down his teachings to a select few. By studying the stars and moon, by observing the movements of insects and wild animals, by noting the subtle shifts in the blooms of a wild creeper, Disari could foretell the fate of the seasons, the crops, and the village’s fortunes. And when danger lurked on the horizon, the spirits of the ancestors whispered warnings—sometimes in dreams, sometimes in shadows. The villagers listened, for they knew the signs never lied.

After the petroleum planters set up camp at the edge of Sunaput village, the first to spot them was a near-mute villager. This man, almost forgotten by the village, had been enslaved by a sahuakar for years. He toiled in a clearing, digging the land by day, and at night, he would climb the hills to the sea, beating his drum to scare away wild animals. No humans ever ventured to the places he went—only beasts and spirits roamed there. Even the sahuakar go only to yield the crops. Over time, the mute man lost his grip on words. Thoughts and memories remained, but the language to express them faded. He had forgotten how to describe things, events, and emotions. So, when he saw the strangers feasting at the village’s edge, he hurried back to Sunaput and tried to speak. “A group of falcons are feasting at the end of the village.” He did not intend to insult anyone. Having lived so long away from human company, he felt a deeper kinship with animals and birds. His mind framed the world as they did.

The petroleum planters observed Sunaput with keen eyes—its climate, geographical location, fertility of the land and ignorance of the people. The climate was cool and refreshing, reminiscent of the distant hills they had travelled to in summers past. And the villagers—uneducated, unaware of land deeds and market values—would offer no resistance. To the business minds of these foreign investors, Sunaput was a prime location, an easy conquest.

Disari sensed the shift before anyone else. The omens were never wrong. Who were these foreigners? Were they Christian missionaries? Were they setting down a factory? Or would they bring floods, drowning the village as had happened before? Nothing good had ever come from such foreboding signs. The villagers' unease turned into full-blown fear. Panic spread from house to house, then from village to village. It was then that the government officials arrived—revenue inspectors, foresters, village workers, and schoolmasters—bearing news of the foreigners. Orders were issued: “Show them the utmost hospitality.” The command was strict, unquestionable. Word was also sent to the neighbouring Mauzas, summoning their people to gather in the evening to convey to them the intending work of the foreigners.

And so, as dusk fell over Sunaput, the petroleum planters prepared their grand presentation. Through microphones, songs, slides, films, and flashing videos, they told the villagers how petroleum trees would change their lives. They spoke of a future without petroleum—a world crippled, drained of energy, civilization brought to its knees. But there was a solution, they claimed—Petroleum farming—More profitable than Mandia (finger millet), Suan rice, Paddy, Alsi (flaxseed), Kandul and Harad (lentils), or Maize—A way to save foreign currency, to import electronics and luxury goods in abundance. They explained it clearly in a language complex and unintelligible to the people. In the cinema, a close-up of the petroleum tree's leaves filled the screen. The leaves looked enormous, so much so that one startled villager blurted, “What a big leaf! It looks just like a jackfruit tree!” Another old amused villager burst out, “If the leaves are of the size of jackfruit tree, then the fruit must be the size of a bull.” The audience erupted into laughter. Beyond that moment, however, they understood nothing from all the grand teaching. The villagers had seen motorcycles pass through their streets, but they did not know whether the vehicles ran on petrol or if the wheels simply spun by the wind.

Yet, their innocence did not protect them. The project report—crafted by technical experts, stamped by the government—laid out everything in fine detail. A company would be formed by those foreigners. The company would cultivate petroleum trees directly on government land. In the surrounding areas, where local raiyats (cultivators) planted these trees on their fields, the government would provide incentives: plants, technical aid, fertilizers, pesticides—everything, but only through the company. In return, the raiyats would sell all their petroleum exclusively to the company. For this, they would sign agreements, binding themselves with ink and thumbprints. The documents were clear. The assistance, the concessions, the promises—it was all for the company.

For generations, the raiyats had tilled the land, sown their crops, and fed their families. But the land they worked was never truly theirs. They had no legal rights, no official records to prove ownership. And so, with a few strokes of a pen, hundreds of acres slipped from their hands into the company's grasp. Signatures and ink-stamped thumb impressions sealed their fate. Even the small patches of land owned by some farmers having land deeds were engulfed by the vast company estates. One by one, the raiyats were summoned. Each was asked to put thumb impression on a paper as proof of their voluntary consent to petroleum farming.

Then the truth struck like a storm. Their lands—gone. Their villages—uprooted once more. A wave of panic spread. For thirty years, they had wandered, displaced, struggling to settle. Now, they were being pushed again. Where would they go this time? Where would they take their cattle? There was no land left to shelter them. The forests—once their refuge—had long since been taken by paper mills, cashew plantations, wildlife sanctuaries. The god of the forests had been silenced, and those who had severed his hands had no ears to listen. And what lay ahead? No one knew. If there were no grains left at home, one could always find them in the forest. They once provided everything—honey, *mahula*, mangoes, jackfruit, *salap*, *kendu*, berry, roots, wild greens. Food in all seasons, a refuge in times of famine. But now, it was over. Two months of rough, dry fasting lay ahead. The land was barren, the trees useless—just scattered leaves and dry branches, nothing to eat, nothing to heal.

A crowd gathered around Disari, murmuring in confusion. Disari stepped forward, his voice steady: “I will understand and tell you.” That night, he questioned the stars. At dawn, he sought answers from the sun. He whispered to the gods and goddesses amidst the rustling of the wind. He listened to the whispers in the hills, the rustling at the village's edge, the secrets hidden in the forest, the echoes in the sky, the tremors in the earth, and the silence of the abyss. And when he returned, his face shone like the sun itself in hope. He stepped toward the foreigners and sat before them, meeting their gaze without fear.

“You are not good men,” he said, his voice unwavering. “I know who you are. I know you are spirits of men who take and take, never resting until you find Kuber's hidden treasure. If you have a heart—if there is even a speck of goodness left in it—then swear on that goodness. Swear before your gods, if you have any, and I will show you a secret treasure. But promise me this: you will leave our village. You will never return. You will never take our land. Take whatever treasure you find—take the riches of the Yaksha (nature spirit), if that is what you seek. But do not drive us away. Do not steal the very ground beneath our feet.”

The foreigners exchanged glances, then swore. Then came the others—scientists, surveyors, economists, geographers, consultants, politicians, and men of ambition. They followed the path Disari showed them, lured by the promise of something great. Disari stood among them, his wild hair framed his face, the sacred bunch of hair trailed on his back, bracelets clinked on his wrists, ornaments hung from his ears, and a fly buzzed near his nose. His mind carried many things. Before his eyes, the village was fading. The forest had fallen. It was as if the land itself had shattered, as if the hills had been cast down from the sky. The grass was gone. The polished rocks gleamed under the sun. The mountains stretched upward like silent, watchful spirits, their shadows hanging in the air like ghosts. Disari stepped forward like a monkey. He led the way for the scientists, the politicians, the economists, the surveyors, and the exploiters who climbed via the rope. “Stand calm Great lords!” called out Disari. “Look inside this cave. Do you see it? The Yaksha stays here. Be careful! If you look too hard, your head will spin! But look—you will see! The darkness will vanish, and everything will be revealed.”

Then came the laughter. First a smirk, then a chuckle, and soon the entire group roared with laughter—ha...ha...ha..., their voices filling the air. “Do you see?” one of them cried. “This is a petroleum mine!” The scientists, meticulous as squirrels, tried to smell. The geologists bent down to examine it. The economists, quick with numbers, scribbled their figures. “Do you know how much petroleum is here?” one of them marvelled. “If we farmed ten thousand acres of land here for a hundred years, we would produce the same amount of petroleum as this mine holds!” Another patted Disari on the back, laughing. “You are very clever Disari! I am pleased with you. I will reward you handsomely. We will surely fulfil your request.”

Disari stood with his hands folded, watching them. As they turned back toward their camp, he followed behind, his voice rising into the night. “Great lords!” he cried. “Do not destroy us, do not drive us away. Take the oil from this mine, take as much as you can. But do not take our rice fields, our millet lands, our rivers and streams. Do not take away our gods. Do not steal the souls of our grandfathers and ancestors. The spirits of the sky shelter us like an unseen umbrella—do not chase them away.”

The great lords paused for a moment, then one of them said, “We have heard your words, sir. In due time, we will judge and give our verdict.”

Back in their tents, the foreigners were in high spirits. They danced. They drank. They dreamt of money, land, share, bank balance and foreign women.

“Enough dreaming! Come back to reality,” one of them chuckled.

Another added, “True. Too many dreams are dangerous—especially for those not used to dreaming.”

A third smirked. “Imagine! If we could extract oil from the mine, all that backbreaking work in the fields would not be required!”

But the consultant frowned. His effort in drafting the grand petroleum farming project had gone to waste. His commission, his promised shares—gone. “If the government claims the mine, what will our company have left?” he muttered.

The chief promoter of petroleum trees nodded, “Besides, no matter how rich we are, we cannot own that much land unless we cultivate it with our trees.”

A heavy silence shrouded them all. Had they come so far, only to lose everything? Would the land they had taken for free slip through their fingers? Then the scientist, the one who had introduced the petroleum tree, leaned forward with a sly grin. “Do not worry,” he whispered, “The mining will continue. But we will hide the mine. We will make it seem as though the oil comes from the trees, not from the earth beneath.”

“Then all will be well,” said the oppressor, his voice smooth as oil. “And the land will not slip off our hands.”

“It will be good,” the lustful oppressor murmured, grinning, “Many women will work.”

“Then overhead costs will be halved, and profit doubled,” the economist added with satisfaction.

The chief shareholder politician let out a laugh. It spread like the wind over the hills, like rainwater rushing down the valley, like dry leaves crackling underfoot on an autumn night. The others joined in, their laughter swelling into the cold air. Outside, the flames flickered in the wind. The young women danced, their silhouettes shifting in the firelight. The foreigners felt the heat rise in their blood.

Someone suddenly remembered the hen that had been moving outside. “I’m starving,” he groaned, “I can feel my stomach twisting.”

Another waved a dismissive hand, “There is no chicken here. He is the Disari.”

A third one hesitated, “But what about the promise? We swore before him.”

A sly voice cut through the murmurs, “Let’s kill him. Then the promise dies with him.”

A chorus of voices erupted in delight, “Brilliant! What an idea!”

Someone opined, “If we let him live, Disari might go telling tales to our rivals.”

Another scoffed, “Disari is a fool. Calling a mine a *yaksha*—what nonsense!” The laughter swelled again.

One of them turned toward the hen outside, squinting. “What a plump little Disari... Almost looks like a hen.” He snickered.

The others roared, “Bah, bah! You’re a poet now! Such fine poetry!” And they howled with laughter.

Disari stood motionless, waiting for the Great Lords’ order. His chest swelled with pride and he expressed gratitude to one hundred and fifty gods, two hundred and fifty goddesses, three hundred *Dhangar* (hill) deities, and *Dadi Budha* (the ancesors).

The great lords summoned Disari with a mere gesture. He seized the chance, folding his hands in deep reverence before falling to the ground. Dust clung to his face as he bowed at their feet, scooping the sacred dirt from their shoes and smearing it across his neck like a blessing. “Great lords,” he pleaded, his voice quivering, “let the *mandia* field remain untouched. Do not drive your horses through its heart. If you crush the *mandia* fields, they will wash away. Do not pollute our streams. Already, they are choked by factory waste. Water is vanishing, life is vanishing. Every *Salapa* tree is carrying life—it’s are like a mother’s milk; do not let it dry up. Don’t drive our Gods away. Don’t ruin our hills.”

But the petroleum men did not listen. Their minds were filled with numbers—billions in profit, endless luxuries, untold power. Yet, on their faces, there was a shadow, something unspoken, something uneasy. They rushed toward Disari. Disari’s hands folded begging compassion for his people.

The foreign oil men stepped forward to reason with Disari. But Disari already knew. He had seen the vision—the fire subsiding from the field, the ecstasy of dance ending, darkness swallowing his people, the destruction of an entire way of life. And yet, a strange, sacred hope clung to him. Maybe—just maybe—he had done what the gods willed. Maybe his laughter, murky and mad, was the laughter of one who had surrendered to fate. His actions were not for himself but for the gods, for the ancestors, for those yet to come. Then the foreign hands reached out, creeping like venomous snakes. They coiled around his legs, his arms, his ribs. They twisted his nose, his ears, his thighs. His breath choked in his throat. His heart clenched. His neck snapped back, his lips curling into a final, frozen grimace. His bones snapped like the fragile spine of a sacrificed chicken. The dance around the corpse continued, wild and unbroken, while Disari’s soul slipped away—alone—into the eternal sky. A restless spirit now, it searched for peace but found none. His self-sacrifice had been true, yet his people were not saved. The insatiable soul of Disari wandered in the darkness—vast, endless, all-consuming.

Sunaput is no longer a village. It is a city now—heavy, modern, civilized—an example, they say, of progress, a shining beacon of economic revolution, a model for other developing regions. “Look!” they proclaim, “Look at the wonders of civilization!” Where once stood ancient forests and whispering rivers, now stand towering buildings, busy streets, the hum of electricity, the glint of tap water flowing in tiled bathrooms, the stench of sewer lines running beneath polished roads. The company colony thrives—rows of neatly built houses, filled with educated, ambitious, money-hungry people.

It is grand. It is prosperous. It is the triumph of civilization.

It is the land of the rich and the falcons.

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