



THE GOLD THAT WANSN'T

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The village of Undarkhel, nestled in picaresque backdrop of Taluka Aashti of District Beed, Maharashtra, was a hilly- green-land where nature expressed itself with quiet splendour. Gentle hills rose and fell like the soft breaths of the earth, their slopes shifting in colour with every season. Between them, valleys opened like tender folds, holding patches of fertile soil where standing young crops swayed calmly in the wind. To the west, a slender river wound its way around the village in a protective curve, its waters whispering against the banks as though guarding the lives built along its edge.

Near this river stood around twenty five to thirty giant and tall mango trees, their vast canopies merging in each other. During summer, their branches drooped with heavy clusters of sweet mangoes and the shade beneath them became a sanctuary for villagers, cattle, wandering children, and passing travellers. These trees bordered a small field cultivated by my mother's four brothers, their presence marking both continuity and belonging across generations.

Yet behind this serene and scenic landscape lay a world shaped by the weight of caste divisions, scarcity, and silent endurance. The Mahar community in Maharwada across and near the river was a half a mile distance. Despite living amidst such natural beauty, they were facing untouchability, a daily reality defined by social boundaries, backbreaking labour, and the quiet ache of unspoken struggles. Life in Undarkhel shimmered with scenic grace on the surface, but beneath it ran the deeper currents of injustice and resilience—currents as persistent and ancient as the river that curved around the village.

It was in this world that Santubai was born—the daughter of farm labourers Bhaguji and Dhondabai Pakhare, who spent their days bent over the soil under the unforgiving heat of the sun. Their lives followed the unchanging rhythm of the agricultural seasons: waking before dawn, working through long hours, and returning home with wages so small that survival itself felt like a daily negotiation. In their modest household, seven children grew—four sons—Keru, Appa, Shankar and Siva and three daughters—Kondan (my mother), Manasa and Vanasa each learning early the demands of poverty.

Among them, Dhondabai, my grandmother, stood as the firm centre of the family. A strict disciplinarian by nature, she managed the household with sharp clarity and unwavering resolve. She ensured that every child contributed to the daily work, kept order within the home, and held the fragile threads of family life together despite constant scarcity.

In Undarkhel, education for Mahar girls was a distant dream, more a whispered hope than a real possibility. Schools existed, but not for them; their lives were shaped by expectations of labour and obedience rather than books and pencils. For girls like Santubai, childhood lasted only for a fleeting moment. Before she could gather her own small joys—playing under the mango trees, grazing goats on the green mountain nearby, splashing by the river, or chasing hens and her siblings through the dust.

When she was barely nine or ten years old, her life changed course. She was married off to a Mahar boy Dasharath, the son of Bhujaba Raghuji Jadhav of Joharapur in Taluka Shevgaon,



District Ahmednagar-now Ahilyanagar. He was a young farmer nearly twenty, shaped by a life very different yet equally marked by hardship. Orphaned early, Dasharath had learned to survive without the cushioning presence of a family. He worked as a daily-wage labourer on the Patils' plantations, especially on the farm of Avhad Guruji where the days were gruelling and the pay uncertain. His life had been carved by solitude, labour, and a quiet familiarity with struggle. Into this world of endurance and scarcity, young Kondabai stepped as a child-bride, carrying no more than the innocence of her age and the unspoken hope for a life kinder than the one she had left behind.

When Kondabai arrived in Johrapur as a bride, fear clung to her like an uninvited shadow. She was still a child, yet she crossed the threshold of her new home burdened with the expectations of womanhood. The backdrop around her was unfamiliar, the faces new, and every sound in the bustling village felt foreign. In the quiet moments, she often felt the weight of separation—from her mother, her siblings, and the only world she had known in Undarkhel.

Kondabai became *Santubai* by the force of circumstance and custom. Her husband's first wife—also named Santubai—had passed away after giving birth to Sarubai, my foster sister who was married off at a tender age to Sheshrao Tulshiram Gaikawad, who worked in Mafatlal Textile Mill, Navsari, once a significant textile manufacturing unit. It was in keeping with the family's tradition and to preserve the memory and identity associated with the household, Kondabai's name was formally changed. Thus, the woman born as Kondan came to be known as Santubai, carrying forward not just a name, but the responsibilities and lineage it symbolized.

In this unsettling transition, Sai Aai, Dashrath's elder sister, emerged as her first pillar of stability. A woman known in Maharwada for her composure and unmistakable intelligence, Sai Aai spoke with a refined Marathi that carried both grace and authority. Unlike many women of her time, she possessed a natural ability to guide without harshness, to correct without wounding.

Under her gentle mentorship, Santubai learned the rhythms of her new household—the customs, the responsibilities, the unspoken rules that shaped daily life. Sai Aai taught her how to carry herself with dignity, how to manage household work without losing her sense of self, and how to face her circumstances with quiet strength. In this nurturing presence, the frightened child slowly gave way to a capable young woman, steady in her duties and grounded in her courage.

Through the bond she formed with Sai Aai, Santubai's journey into womanhood found its earliest shape—rooted not in fear, but in resilience cultivated through care, patience, and guidance.

With the passing years, Santubai transformed into the quiet yet unshakable pillar of the Jadhav household. What had begun as a journey marked by fear gradually evolved into a life defined by strength. Her honesty, sincerity and unwavering dedication to her work earned her a place of respect not only within the family but throughout the village.

People spoke of her with a certain admiration—of the woman who never compromised on her duties, who carried herself with dignity despite the hardships that shadowed her life.

Across the long, laborious years of her marriage, she brought nine children into the world, though fate allowed only six sons to live on—Laxman, Ramrao, Bhivshen, Arjun, Sahadeo, and Subhash. Each child walked a different path, carrying within them the imprint of her silent strength.

Laxman, the eldest, rose from the humble soil of the village to become a primary teacher and eventually retired with honour as the Head Master of a school in Tarawadi, Newasa taluka. Ramrao, after completing his seventh standard, returned to the earth, choosing the honest toil of a farmer. Arjun pursued learning with fierce devotion and became a professor of English at Fergusson College, Pune—an achievement that stood like a testament to her unspoken dreams. Bhivshen, after the fourth standard, embraced farming by choice, leaning into the life he knew



best. Sahadeo shaped young minds as a secondary school teacher in Bhore, District Pune. And Subhash, armed with an M.A. in Geography and a B. P. Ed. from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad—now as Sambhajinagar sought employment tirelessly; yet when opportunities refused to open their doors, he turned, with quiet dignity, to cultivating the little ancestral land he had.

Their lives, varied yet rooted in resilience, stood as living proof of her indomitable endurance—each child a silent monument to the love, sacrifice, and unrelenting labour she poured into the sacred vocation of motherhood.

To her, cleanliness was a sacred duty—performed daily, faithfully, and without compromise. Every day, she swept not only the house but the entire courtyard with meticulous effort, transforming the dusty earth into a smooth, darkened surface after carefully smearing it with cow dung. The floor would gleam with a rustic sheen that spoke of order, discipline, and her deep-rooted belief that cleanliness invited harmony into a home.

Every morning began before sunrise. She kindled a fire in the outdoor chullah, warming water to bathe her children so they could start their day in freshness and comfort. In the chill of winter or the harsh winds of summer, she ensured not a single child left the house unwashed. Her hands, roughened by work, moved with tenderness when she scrubbed their faces or brushed their hair into place.

Her day rarely paused. She ventured into the nearby fields and wooded patches to gather dry branches and firewood, securing the fuel she needed to cook for her large family. Then began the preparation of meals—the rhythmic patting of bhakris, the simmering of curry in earthen pots, and the comforting aroma that filled their modest home. While she worked, she kept an eye on her children, reminding them to hurry to school. Determined that they would grasp the education she had been denied, she insisted that they attend the village school without fail. She wanted them to walk a path she never had the chance to tread.

While the children learned, she spent her long days toiling at our Khatkali farm, bending over rows of crops under the vast sky. She returned home only when dusk settled over Johrapur, her body tired but her spirit unbroken followed by our dog Moti.

Sundays carried no softness for her—only a shift in rhythm. In the morning, she set out on foot for Shevgaon, walking five long kilometres to the weekly bazaar. She never boarded a bus, not even once. Instead, she moved with a quiet, astonishing endurance, balancing a heavy bundle of grain tied in dhoti on her head with the effortless grace born of necessity. Along the dusty road, she merged with a stream of village women—a living caravan of resilience. Together they shared more than footsteps: they traded stories, worries, laughter, sorrows, and whispered gossip. In their mingled voices ran the unbroken thread of rural sisterhood, weaving companionship into the harsh routines of their lives.

There comes a day in every life that etches itself into memory—sharp, unyielding, and impossible to forget. For Santubai and her family, one such day rose from the dust of an otherwise ordinary Sunday, a day meant only for the weekly bazaar in Shevgaon. No one could have imagined that this simple journey would carve itself into the marrow of their lives.

That morning, she set out with my cousin Mahadu Bhimaji Jadhav and a caste Hindu woman, Haranabai Dhage, following the familiar trodden path that wound from Johrapur to Shevgaon. On her head she balanced a heavy bundle—fifteen to sixteen kilograms of jowar grain—wrapped carefully in one of her husband's old, frayed dhoti. The weight was immense, yet she carried it with the practiced ease of a woman who had long ago learned that survival demanded strength, not complaint.

Her purpose was simple, almost painfully modest: to sell the grain and use the few rupees she earned to buy weekly essentials—salt, edible oil, chillies, garlic, onions and a handful of green



leafy vegetables. These were the small, indispensable things that kept a large household fed, things she secured not with ease but with sweat, labour, and relentless will. That Sunday began like any other. But by the time the sun would set, it would become a chapter that no one in the family would ever forget.

The sun showed no mercy that day. Its heat pressed down upon them with a ruthless heaviness, turning the long, dusty road into a shimmering river of exhaustion. After trudging nearly four kilometres, the three travellers finally paused beneath the wide-spreading shade of a big tree known in the village as *Wisavyacha Limb*. Its coolness felt like grace itself—an unexpected blessing on a punishing afternoon. They wiped their sweat, steadied their breaths, and prepared to continue—until an unfamiliar presence interrupted their brief refuge.

A Sadhu emerged from the mirage-like heat, draped in worn saffron cloth, his appearance both frail and commanding. His voice, though soft, carried the subtle authority of one accustomed to unquestioning belief. He spoke of divine powers—of the ability to multiply gold, to transform even the smallest ornament into a fortune. His words shimmered with impossible promise. To those who lived their entire lives within the confines of scarcity, such promises did not sound foolish; they sounded like hope.

In his hands he carried a small tin pot filled with mud. With slow, deliberate gestures, he described a ritual known only to ascetics, a sacred process through which wealth could be conjured from the earth itself. The idea was fantastical, yet in the fragile soil of poverty, even fantasies can take root with startling speed. A life of deprivation makes the mind hungry for miracles.

Encouraged by the others—perhaps by curiosity, perhaps by longing—and driven by the perennial ache to give her children something more than hardship, Santubai stepped forward. What happened next was a quiet act of immense sacrifice. She removed her only gold ornament—her golden nose ring, some golden gems in mangalsutra (fifteen grams approximately) and silver bracelet she owned, symbols of her womanhood and dignity. Handing them over felt like relinquishing a piece of herself. With trembling faith and cautious anticipation, she placed all ornaments gently into the Sadhu's tin pot, exactly as he instructed.

That single gesture carried the weight of years—the weight of dreams deferred, of hunger endured, of a mother's persistent hope that life might someday shift in her favour.

The Sadhu lit an agarbatti, its thin ribbon of smoke curling skyward as though carrying whispered prayers into realms unseen. The fragrance mingled with the dusty air while he began chanting mantras—measured, hypnotic, almost entrancing. His voice rose and fell with ritualistic authority, and soon he instructed them to close their eyes and repeat the sacred words after him.

Fatigued, overwhelmed, and disarmed by faith, they followed every command without hesitation.

When the ritual reached its solemn end, the Sadhu carefully sealed the tin pot and handed it back to them. His instructions were strict, spoken with the gravity of someone delivering divine law:

They were to walk home without once looking back.

They were to maintain absolute silence for five days.

They were to light incense each morning after bathing.

And on the fifth day, he promised, the pot would overflow with gold.

Once belief settles into the human heart, it possesses the power to override doubt, logic, even experience. Santubai accepted every word as complete truth. She lifted the tin pot with reverence, holding it as one might cradle a sacred offering, and began the long journey home. Her hands were empty of jowar, yet her heart brimmed with hope—delicate, shimmering, and dangerously alive.



She envisioned a future unburdened by scarcity: children who would not sleep hungry, a home free from constant worry, and a life where she could finally breathe without fear of tomorrow. In her obedience to the Sadhu's commands, she surrendered not only her sole piece of gold but also the grain she had meant to sell—an entire week's sustenance traded for the promise of miraculous deliverance.

But hope, when built on illusion, stands on fragile ground. The path ahead held a painful truth—one that would pierce her spirit and reveal the depth of her strength in ways she had never imagined before.

The days that followed carried an eerie, unfamiliar stillness within the Jadhav household. For five long days, Santubai cocooned herself in absolute silence—a silence so total, so unwavering, that it unsettled the very rhythm of family life. Not a word passed her lips. Not in anger. Not in tenderness. Not even in answer to her children's innocent questions. Her quiet became a wall—impenetrable, mysterious, and unsettling.

She obeyed the Sadhu's instructions with the unwavering devotion of a woman grasping her last slender thread of hope. At dawn, before even the first hint of light stretched across the sky, she bathed in cold water drawn from the earthen pot. The chill made her shiver violently, but she endured it without complaint. Immediately after, she lit an incense stick, watching its smoke rise in delicate spirals towards the soot-darkened ceiling. With folded hands and closed eyes, she prayed—deeply, fervently, with a sincerity so intense that it seemed even the mud walls leaned in to absorb her faith.

The silence weighed upon the household like a dense, invisible fog. The children—restless, bewildered—watched their mother move through the dingy house with a strange, purposeful quiet. That Sunday, like all others, they had waited for her return with eager anticipation. They expected the small joys she always brought from the Shevgaon bazaar: *goadishev*, *rewadi*, *bhel*, *murmure*. Those tiny treats were their festival in miniature, their mother-made celebration.

But this time, she had returned with empty hands and a face drained of expression. No sweets. No vegetables. No jowar. Not even a single word. Only a sealed tin pot pressed tightly against her chest, as though it contained her entire future.

The children could not understand what had changed—but something had. Something deep. Something heavy. And it sat in the house like an unseen guest who refused to leave.

As the five days slowly unfolded, the children's disappointment softened into bewilderment. They sensed that something profound had shifted in their mother—something too solemn, too fragile to disturb. Though they could not name it, they understood instinctively that she was carrying a burden far greater than anything they could grasp. And so, with uncharacteristic restraint, they held back their questions and simply watched her, uncertain and uneasy.

Inside Santubai's own heart, however, there was room for only one thing—the promise of gold. Every second of those silent days pulsed with the vision of a future unimaginably brighter than the one she had known. She pictured a life without the constant dread of hunger, a life where her children wore new clothes during festivals instead of patched hand-me-downs. She imagined repairing the roof that leaked with every monsoon, replacing the brittle mud walls with something sturdier, safer. She dared to see herself lifting her family out of the relentless cycle of scarcity.

It was this fragile dream—delicate yet dazzling—that sustained her. It gave her strength to endure the gnawing hunger, the exhaustion of unbroken silence, and the restless nights when her hopes grew too large for sleep.

Never before had five days felt so immense, so heavy, or so painfully filled with hope that bordered on prayer.



At last, the long-awaited fifth day arrived—a day that had glowed in Santubai's imagination like the dawn of a new life. She rose even before the first blush of sunlight touched the horizon, her hands trembling not from fatigue but from the electric pulse of anticipation. After bathing and lighting the incense, she approached the corner where the tin pot had sat untouched for five days—guarded by silence, wrapped in ritual, brimming with her most fragile hope.

Believing that destiny itself was preparing to turn in her favour, she sent word for my cousin Mahadu who was studying in seventh grade then. He arrived quickly, his face lit with the same mixture of excitement and curiosity that churned within my mother. To both of them, that pot had become something sacred—a vessel of deliverance. It held not just the promise of gold, but the possibility of breaking free from years of poverty, uncertainty, and daily hardship. With hands reverent and breath held tight, Santubai lifted the lid with a heavy breath.

And then—

Nothing.

Only mud.

Dry, cold, crude mud.

The same typical mud that had been there from the beginning.

For a heartbeat, her mind rejected the sight. The world seemed to stand still, suspended in a terrible silence. But then, slowly—cruelly—reality broke over her like a collapsing roof.

Her nose ring was gone.

Her talisman was gone.

Her silver bracelet had gone.

Her jowar was gone.

Her sacrifice, her trust, her dreams—gone.

Everything she had placed in that pot had been swallowed by a lie. And with that single unbearable moment, the fragile hope she had nurtured for five long days shattered into dust, leaving her standing in the ruins of a faith betrayed.

A tremor passed through her. Then another. And in the next breath, the dam of her silence—five days of swollen hope and blind belief—burst open. A raw, guttural cry tore out of her, a sound scraped from the deepest chambers of betrayal, fear, and helplessness. She struck her chest with both hands, again and again, as if trying to crush the pain lodged inside her ribs, as if the violence inflicted upon herself could undo the violence done to her faith. It was the cry of a woman who had trusted too hard, hoped too long, and been shattered too suddenly.

The sound carried through the neighbourhood like a spark through dry grass. Within moments, women from nearby houses gathered in the courtyard, their voices rising and colliding in a chaotic chorus. Some murmured soft words of pity. Some shook their heads, claiming she should have known better. Others clucked their tongues with smug righteousness—the kind that arrives only after disaster, heavy with hindsight and hollow advice.

Voices floated around her in sharp fragments:

“Arre, why trust strangers?”

“These sadhus cheat people every day.”

“She should have asked someone before giving her gold and silver.”

“What will her husband Dasharath say now?”

Each sentence stung. Sympathy, scorn, accusation—none of it eased her pain. Instead, the noise crowded her like a storm, suffocating, thick with judgment and gossip. The courtyard swelled with voices, but she felt more alone than ever.

Amid the chaos, Santubai stood like a broken pillar—her face wet with tears, her hands trembling uncontrollably, her faith splintered at its core. Poverty she had endured all her life. Hardship she



had carried like second skin. But this—this betrayal—cut into her far more deeply than want or hunger ever had.

For it was not just gold she had lost.

It was the fragile dream of a life that might have been kinder.

And that loss, heavy and bitter, weighed upon her heart more cruelly than poverty itself ever could.

Amid the clamour—the restless neighbours, the sharp whispers, and Santubai's wails of despair—Dasharath arrived. His presence cut through the chaos with quiet authority. He stood calm and unshaken, a steady anchor in a courtyard flooded with confusion. The murmurs softened, the gossip shrank, and the crowd instinctively stepped back as his composed gaze swept across them.

Without anger, without accusation, he requested the neighbours to leave—one by one—his voice firm yet respectful. Within moments, the noisy swarm dissolved, and the courtyard returned to stillness. Only two figures remained: a mother broken by betrayal and a father exhausted by life's unending demands.

Turning to Santubai, Dasharath offered the only comfort he possessed—gentle words, soft reassurances, and a quiet promise. The loss of her gold and silver, her offering of hope—he would set it right. Though their means were meagre and their days shaped by scarcity, he vowed to restore not merely the ornament but the dignity and confidence it embodied.

And so, a few days later, Dasharath set out for Shevgaon on a journey laden with sacrifice. In his small cloth pouch he carried the few treasures he owned: a pair of old silver buttons that once shone proudly on his kurta, and his bracelet—worn thin by years, but rich with memories of a time when life had felt slightly kinder. Each step he took was heavy with necessity, love, and resolve.

At the goldsmith's shop, he parted with those keepsakes. The exchange was modest, almost painful in its simplicity, but it was enough. With careful calculation, he purchased a plain gold nose ring and mangalsutra—humble, unadorned, yet radiant in its meaning.

When he returned home and placed the new nose ring and mangalsutra into Santubai's trembling hands, something within her eased. The grief that had crushed her spirit softened, loosening its grip on her heart. As she wore the nose ring, a quiet peace settled over her—a sense of being restored, not just outwardly, but within.

It was not merely an ornament; it was reclamation. Of dignity. Of trust. Of her place in the world.

In that small, tender act, love revealed its quiet, immeasurable power. I watched my father place the new nose ring into my mother's hands, and for a fleeting moment, the weight of the world seemed to lift from her shoulders. The ache of betrayal, the hunger, the long, silent suffering—all of it seemed to soften, like frost melting under the gentle touch of the sun. It did not undo the hardships, yet it whispered something far more enduring: that even in a life carved by struggle, love could still arrive—steadfast, gentle, unassuming, but unstoppable.

From that day onwards, the nose ring gleamed on my mother's face not merely as gold, but as a testament to resilience, courage, and quiet grace. Each glint held her sacrifices, her sleepless nights, the miles she had walked under a scorching sun, and the countless moments she had chosen hope over despair. And I saw, reflected in that tiny circle of light, a life that had refused to bow completely to suffering—a life that had loved, endured, and endured again.

In that moment, I understood the true weight of love. It is not always loud or grand. Sometimes it is measured in trembling hands, in silent acts of devotion, in sacrifices too heavy to count, in the patience to keep walking when the path is harsh and unyielding. And in that quiet love, I saw the foundation of our family, the light that had held us through years of hardship.



That small gold ring became more than an ornament—it became memory, lesson, and promise all at once. It shone with the courage of my mother, the devotion of my father, and the fragile, enduring hope that binds us to one another. And in my heart, I knew that no hardship, no betrayal, no poverty, could ever dim the light it carried—the light of resilience, of love, of a life lived with unwavering dignity.

Even now, whenever I remember that day, I feel it still: the gleam of the ring, the quiet strength in my mother's eyes, and the unspoken promise that no matter how heavy life becomes, love—steadfast, silent, and true—can always carry us forward.

And so, the gold that Santubai had entrusted to fate never came—the promise of instant fortune proved a cruel illusion. The mud-filled tin pot remained empty, a stark reminder of how easily hope can be tested, and how life's hardships often arrive disguised as opportunity. Yet, in the place of that vanished gold, something far more enduring was forged: love, sacrifice, and resilience.

My father's quiet devotion restored not only a piece of jewellery but the dignity and hope that had been momentarily stolen from my mother. In his act, I saw the true wealth of life—not the glitter of gold, but the steadfastness of heart, the courage to endure, and the quiet power of selfless love. The gold may have never been real, but the lessons it left behind were priceless.

From that day, the nose ring gleamed on Santubai's face—not as a reminder of what she had lost, but as a testament to what she had gained: unwavering resilience, a family bound by love, and the knowledge that even when the promised gold never appears, the richest treasures are often found in acts of devotion and courage.

And for me, watching her, I understood that life's true value is never counted in coins or ornaments, but in the hearts we touch, the sacrifices we make, and the quiet strength we carry forward. The gold wasn't there, but everything that mattered most—love, dignity, endurance—remained. And that, in the end, was more than enough.

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