**Chapter 1: Growing up in a village**

A developing country is one which is still lacking in the basic amenities of life. India is one such country, and despite the Metropolis and the cities being developed, the majority of the country still reside in the villages.

Nirbhaya Singh grew up in such a village in India. Chhangla, located in Hoshiarpur in Punjab was not a village where much had happened. It was located just 4 kilometers outside Dasuya. The village had a paltry population of only 1500 people, and their condition was likewise. A poor setup of the infrastructure resulted in the majority of the population lacking in some way or other, unable to access what they needed to live a life where their basic needs were met.

Because of the lack of the infrastructure, the people were making less than $4 a day. They did not have proper houses to live in with the majority of the houses being mud houses with thatched roof. The houses did not even have proper toilets in them not allowing them to even maintain their basic dignity and they had to leave their houses to use either the outhouses available for bathroom purposes, or they would use the nearby fields, thus living up to the clichéd image of the farmers and poor people using the paddy fields as a toilet.

Even Nirbhay’s family who were a bit more privileged than the average villager were not able to have a toilet in their home. It was not a matter of money, but of hygiene. Since there was not piping or proper infrastructure and running water, there was no way for a modern bathroom to exist there. Instead they too had an outhouse, which was some distance away from the actual house. This toilet was used by everyone, and a paid *zamadar* would clean the waste product every day. Still the toilet smelled and there was no way that it could have been inside the house. Instead it was outside, and even in the night, when the darkness had engulfed the village, even at that time, people would have to take lanterns from the house and head over to the outhouse. The darkness hid many dangers, and there was always the fear of snakes because they were the biggest hidden threat in the dark. The possibility of snakes kept people wary, but throughout the village it was not uncommon for people to step on such a reptile by mistake in the dark.

A snake is not a forgiving creature, and while not as dangerous as the basilisk in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, a bite was still enough to kill a strong man, let alone a child. The number of people being bitten by snakes was a constant, and since there was no hospital nearby the village, the sole doctor had plenty of midnight snake bite victims to tend to over the years. Unfortunately lacking the antivenom required by a snakebite victim, he would only be able to take away their pain for a bit before their death.

Life went on, and still this was a shock to Nirbhay when he learned that at least a few people died of snakebites each year in his village.

A large portion of India still has their primary career focus on agriculture to earn their daily living. This is obviously necessary as there is such a large population who need the agriculture products to survive. The problem lies elsewhere, and that is in the inability to educate and provide proper facilities to the outlying villages.

Outside India, in more developed countries, the communications system and the facilities provided to farmers are much more advanced. India too is progressing in that direction, but the growth is extremely slow. ITC with their e-Choupal initiative provide farmers with more ways to make a fair earning in their living.

Unfortunately this is not true for the majority of India. The villagers don’t have choices and have to make use of middlemen, who cheat them and hardly pay them enough for them to be able to earn a normal living. This is one of the reason the rate of suicides is so high for farmers in India. This was the surrounding in which Nirbhay Singh grew up, amidst hopelessness, as there was no Bill Gates, or Zuckerburg, to help fund the village to have proper infrastructure.

If education cannot be considered a basic necessity in a developing country, then out of food, clothing and shelter, proper food or nutrition was also lacking. The amount of effort that had to be put in to get water was astronomical. The women had to march miles as there were no water sources inside the village. They had to travel to the wells far away from their houses, or even to the municipal water sources that had been provided by the government. The effort that had to be put in could easily have been used in thousands of other duties they had that needed doing if they simply had a simple source of water in the village.

The lack of running water is no new thing for the dry areas of India. However, in Punjab there was water available. The lack of water was not the problem at all. The problem lay in the fact that there was no investment in bringing that water to the more remote villages. India was still developing and everything was an ongoing process. Water would come maybe, but not for many more years. During that time they had to make do for their water needs in some other manner. Nirbhay experienced this first hand, when he was going out to school in the nearby city. On the way he saw many women, carrying the *matkas* on the top of their head as they tried to balance as much water as they could carry with them, bringing it back from the wells. That would be the water that would be used by the whole family for the entire day. The following day, the same process would be repeated. This never ending walk for water, was a hardship that not all could possibly bear. Some of the women were too old, while others were simply too young and weak, suffering from malnutrition to carry enough water to last them for the whole day. The men had gone out to work in the morning after having used up the last of the water, and they would need more when they came back.

Once while passing by, Nirbhay saw an old woman who could barely walk, trying to carry back three pots full of water. He could not believe his eyes, as the woman was simply too old to be doing this much at that age. He watched as the woman collapsed onto the floor suddenly, unable to continue bearing that weight. The pots spilled from her hands, and the water dropped right out onto the ground, the precious commodity being soaked up in front of the desperate and hopeless eyes of the woman.

He went up to her and helped her up. Once she was up, she could not help a tear rolling down her eye. She jerked it away angrily. Nirbhay asked her, “Why are you so angry *Dida*?” talking to her like she was his own grandmother.

The old woman turned to him and said sadly, “I don’t have time for self pity son. I have three grandchildren who are waiting at home for me to bring back water. If I waste time, they will suffer more from thirst. They are too young to come with me yet. For now I must bear this burden.”

Nirbhay’s eyes filled with tears. Seeing this the old woman said, “Nay son, don’t waste tears on me. That is precious water your body needs. You need to be strong. A tear drop is a wasted drop that could be enough to bring forth life on this dry dusty earth.”

Amazed by the wisdom, and self-sacrifice of the woman, Nirbhay asked her to hand him the pots. That day it was him he who made the mile water walk, bringing back water for the old woman from the well. They were heavy, and he was soon tired, but being young he had strength and resiliency. He was still astonished that people would do this every day in their lives. Just after one trip he was completely exhausted by the time they came to the house of the old woman.

Upon reaching the house he looked inside. There was an infant sleeping in a side of the room, while another, this one a toddler, was walking around. The oldest one was barely five, but she sat in a corner, looking over her brother and sister. When grandmother was not in home she was in charge for their safety, and she for one took her duty seriously. Seeing him and their grandmother return home, the two that could walk ran up to them with joy in their face. Holding up a cup made out of burnt mud, they scooped up water and took turn in drinking it, savouring each drop, not letting a single one touch the floor. Next the older one took the cup and helped her younger brother, who was no more than 7 months, to sip. The cries and mewls of joy from the baby, helped Nirbhay again to realize how precious water was, and how lucky he was to get water delivered by others, and not have to bear the burden each time.

He sat resting watching the grandmother, as she took the smallest sip of the water, before taking some in an earthen pot to boil, so that she could cook the rice for the day. She did not thank him for what she did, but the smile she gave him was so sweet and full of kindness, that it was thanks enough, and Nirbhay sat there satisfied with what he saw. After a while it was time for him to leave, and as he was leaving, the old woman held his hand and for the briefest instant looked into his eyes. Then she said the words, that Nirbhay never forgot for the rest of his life. “You are hope son. You are the hope. You are getting an education as your family is privileged. You may have an opportunity to leave this village, and you should when you can. But never forget us, or what you see today happening here. You are the hope that can change the world for so many lives.

The lack of this basic infrastructure was evident when it came to the schools as well. Nirbhay was lucky in this regard, as he went to a St. Paul’s school, as he was from a comparatively well of family. The other children he would see, were not so lucky. The village had two primary schools, both of which lacked at a fundamental level.

These schools are not those you see in the coming of age Hollywood movies, or even Student of the Year. The conditions of the Primary Government schools were poor. They did not have proper toilets or even classrooms. The buildings were need of maintenance to a point where it looked like they were in need of construction. The simple existence of the institution did not ensure that the students received an education. The low but guaranteed salaries of the teachers made them lackadaisical and lazy. They did not really focus on education and most of the time did not even come to the school. Rules were not enforced, and children were allowed to play as they saw fit. Children of that age being allowed to roam free, would never take the initiative to study by themselves, and thus their educational base was damaged from the very beginning. They did not try to study, and as the teachers did not care, they did not complete their homework either. This was the poor picture of education that was there in the basic level in Chhangla.

Located 5 kilometers away from the town of Dasuya, the only good thing that Chhangla had, was that they had full road access to the town. The town was also called the Land of the Pandavas, the character of the epic of Mahabharata.

Although Nirbhay was able to go to a private school, his two best friends, did not share such a happy privilege. Param and Ronit had to go to the public school of the village where they were subject to the completely pointless education that was provided. They never had the opportunity to learn as much as Nirbhay did, and thus that was when he first started to notice the difference between what was happening in the village, to what was considered to be the norm outside. He learnt from them the sorry condition of the school that they had to go to and the teachers that would never come to classes.

Once Nirbhay had not completed the next day’s homework for school, and he was playing with his two friends. As the sun began to set he realized that he had work left that he should complete to avoid being punished by the teacher. He decided that he would play for ten more minutes and then leave.

As he was about to leave, Ronit asked him, “Why do you have to go now?”

“I have to do my homework,” answered Nirbhay. “The teacher has asked us to do some map pointing and if it is not done by tomorrow, she will be disappointed in us and punish me for not doing what I was supposed to do.”

Ronit and Param gaped and laughed at his answer. “They don’t actually check your homework do they?” Param asked laughing. “You can stay and play. They won’t even remember that they had given any homework.”

“Yes they do check it every day!” Nirbhay was shocked by the casual way his friends could dismiss homework. He himself was not an extremely diligent student, and was now thinking about homework, only because he had been punished for turning up in class without it.

“They give us homework too, but they never check it.” Ronit was a bit more serious now. “It’s wonderful though, it’s all a charade isn’t it? They never expect us to complete anything, but it is just so that they can tell the board that the syllabus that was supposed to be taught has been taught. After that they never check or even bothered to look at what we had done. School is boring, because we never learn anything new. The teacher comes and talks and does not explain if we have any questions. Whatever we do learn in life, it is by experiencing it first-hand. That is the only way we know to actually learn anything in life.”

At that moment while he was leaving to complete his homework, Nirbhay was jealous, but only for a little time. His friends were able to continue playing because even though they had work, they did not care enough to complete it. He alone would have to sit and slog over maps and sums.

But then much later when he was thinking, he realized that he was lucky. Even if he had to put in the time to learn what was being taught in school, at least he was being taught. At least there was a point of being able to go to school. The teacher might punish him if he did not work, but at least some one cared enough to see that he did work. That he learnt and gained something from his time as a child. All the other children who studied in government schools did not have the same facility. They had to do what they could with what little they had and were set up to fail in such a system. Most of them would end up dropping out of school before they even reached their tenth standard. He actually felt extremely bad for them and the lot they had been handed in their lives.

Often he would find that children of grade 6 or 7 were dropping out of their schools. This was not something unusual as more and more children would do this, and instead spend their time working. At that age, where they should have been having fun with their friends, they instead spent their time working in the fields. The hard labour would damage them and their bodies, but they would get used to the pain such was need to continue working without stopping to consider the repercussions in the future.

Nirbhay would be taken aback seeing them, being brought up in a private school, where dropping out was one of the most unacceptable and shameful things that they could do. Once out of pure curiousity, he went up to one of them and asked him the question that had been burning at the back of his mind for the longest time. He asked them why they were dropping out of school to work in the fields. Their answer shocked him, and gave him a glimpse into the grim life live by people in villages in India.

They said that they had to support their family and did not actually have time to visit and study in schools. Every day working in the fields they earned an amount of Rs 200, or $4. That would help their family to no end given the scarcity of money and the number of heads to feed. Even other activities that would pay were adopted by them as they saw no other choice to get by in life. Their grim lives were topped by the cherry, that even if they did choose to go to the schools, it would end up doing them no good. There was no one who was interested in helping them academically, and growing up in that atmosphere, they developed a similar attitude about studies. They became secondary to everything else that they needed to do to survive first. The idea was that they would earn enough money to not only support their family, but earn enough to improve their condition and help get out from under the poverty line.

Unfortunately, while this was the dream of many, it was the story of scarcely a few. All of them strove for the same goal but not all of them were able to reach them. Some obstacle or other was sure to get in their way, stopping them from achieving their goal. Be it the loan they took from a greedy moneylender, be it the work they put in only to suffer an injury which was common on the fields, be it a sickness of some sort where in the village medicine was so scarce, or even the death of a family member, one hurdle or the other stopped most of the dreams from ever becoming a reality for most of them.

They dropped out of their schools even more during the time of harvesting of crops. They had to harvest wheat and sugarcane and other crops which would get them a good payment. They would get employed by the land owners.

Once Nirbhay went for a ride on his bike in his village. He had grown up in a privileged family who had helped him to go to a private school in the city. This had kept him far from the harsh realities of the world. While he was not as protected as Gautama Buddha had been initially, it was a similar sort of experience for him that truly opened his eyes to the suffering of the others who lived in his village.

During his ride he saw boys around the age of fourteen and fifteen working in the farming fields. He looked at his watch and realized that the time was 5 pm, way past the time, when the usual farm hands would pack up from the work in the field. They usually completed their work by 3 pm, much before the sky was darkening and head home or to work somewhere else. The question rose in his mind then, who were these boys who were so young and were working so very diligently on the fields back bent at a time when no one else was even thinking of working.

He walked up to them and asked, “Excuse me, if you don’t mind me asking, why are you still working?”

They looked up, startled at the interruption to their work. They had not noticed him as they had been so engrossed in what they were doing. They were a bit intimidated by Nirbhay, as he looked nothing like them and was dressed smartly, while they were sweat stained clothes from their work all day. While he had the sweet fragrance of perfume, they had the stench of unwashed and sweaty clothes after the entire day of work. Nirbhay had dressed up to go for a ride, and was not always so dressed up, but they were not to know that. They still were able to gather up their courage and speak to him.

“We are working because we have to support our families. We don’t have enough money to put food on the table and if we don’t earn our family will have to go hungry.”

Nirbhay was shocked and saddened to hear this. He had not been expecting to hear such a tale.

“What about school?” he asked, sure that they at least had the chance to be educated and get out of such a predicament soon. “Surely you go to school every day?”

“I cannot do this, as I simply do not have enough money to waste time at school. This is the time of harvest and this is the best time for the highest payments as there is so much of work available.”

So affected was Nirbhay when he heard this, that he began to contemplate the good life that he had while others like this boy suffered. He could not bring himself to let the boy down, and he realized again how unfortunate most of the people of his village was to be in such a system, where they hardly had any choices in then way to do things. How they had grown up without the same options that lay before him.

He took out all the money that he had in his pocket. He did not have much, but that little was still a lot for someone who did not have any at all. “Here take this,” he said. “Take this and go to school. Try your best to be the best you can be and keep your head up.” He wanted them to register in the schools and be able to take part in safe and proper primary education. Looking back, Nirbhay can see that he had it right, because the best way to get rid of the darkness is to spread light. The darkness of the developing country, specifically one like India, can only be gotten rid of from the very roots, by destroying the spread of all the evils and spreading education instead. The moment education came into focus all other problems like backwards mentality, superstition, and anything else could be solved by the concentrated efforts of the educated and the fortunate.

The boys gratefully took whatever he offered. It was not much, but to them it meant a lot more. To them it was symbol of hope that he had unknowingly provided to them by such a simple gesture of presenting them with the little money they had.

From that point on Nirbhay pledged that he would make choices that affected the life of others. Instead of focusing only on himself he would learn to help others, and be the change that he wanted to see in the world. This was something that people only said, but thankfully, at one point Nirbhay was indeed able to live up to it, and became the proverbial ‘Man in the Mirror’ who made the all-important change in not only his own life but in that of his fellow man.

His life was not easy by any means, and the path to success as guided by his life can be seen to have thousands of obstacles in the way, but none of these obstacles were so bad that he stopped. He took his time to look at the obstacle, and logically was able to find a way around it. This is the story of Nirbhay Singh, and through this, a story of happiness, a story of sadness and struggle, a story of hope, a story of the better tomorrow.

**Chapter 2: Grade 2 and other struggles**

Nirbhay was never a good student. He may have been admitted to a convent school because of his mother’s insistence, but he never really understood what the necessity was to actually study in school. He would do everything else, play truant and skip classes even at that early an age just so that he could join his friends to play outside. He hardly ever did his homework, only when he knew that if he did not do it he would have to face consequences, did he put his mind to the work that was in front of him. Otherwise, he would spend his entire time playing around, going to the vendors who sold *muri* and buying some with the money he had, and otherwise being involved. His teachers were fed up with him, but somehow he was still able to get through grade 1.

When he came to grade two though, it was altogether a different story. He still continued to play about the same way and skip classes. For those who are wondering, how grade two could be different, here’s how. While for anyone who pays attention to what happens in class, passing grade two is easy, for someone who plays a truant and does not at all pay any heed to his studies, grade two can be the equal of Mount Everest.

Nirbhay’s mother was extremely gifted in studies, and had herself graduated from a convent school, the St. Pauls in Amritsar, Punjab. Being a graduate of such a school, she knew the benefits her son would have if he studied in such a school. He was given admission to the St. Pauls in Dasuya. Nirbhay’s mother’s English teacher of her time was now the principal of the St. Pauls in Dasuya, thereby making it easier for her to register her son there.

However, once in the school, the mother had no control over what Nirbhay would do. He spent his entire grade two year playing about, and as a result the dreaded day finally came. He gave his exams and one day came back with his report cards.

Nirbhay’s two cousin sisters loved him very much, and as a result it was to them that he first went with his card. They loved him so much that they could not bear to tell him the truth to his face as they knew how very sad and disappointed he would be.

They told him that he had passed instead and supported him, trying to cheer him up. They talked about the subjects where he had done better than others and talked about that instead of talking about where he had gone wrong and actually failed. This cover up helped him feel good for a while, until his mother came to know about what had happened.

She was more than disappointed, and as a student who had been good in her studies she only saw where he had made mistakes. To her the entire matter was devastating and imagining that her son had not been able to pass grade two was not something that she could readily believe. She first went into denial thinking that there must be some sort of mistake, but then later realized that what she had heard was the actual truth. Nirbhay’s entire family was extremely saddened and disappointed by what had happened, but no one seemed as effected as Nirbhay’s mother. She acted like it was the biggest tragedy of all time and could not simply accept that her own son had failed at such a simple task. She was embarrassed to think of what the neighbours and society would say once they came to know. Her life changed on that day, and her worries about her son grew to an extreme point. She faced her son and asked him, “Where did you go wrong? Do you know what mistakes you made?”

Nirbhay had simply played a truant, and truthfully did not know wrong from right at that age. He knew that he should have studied, but telling his mother that would not really help anything at that moment, so he simply said nothing instead. His silence seemed to enrage Mrs. Singh even more, as she shouted and screamed at him. “You cannot even pass grade 2! You are bringing shame to the family name by acting in this manner. You play with your friends all the time and spend little or no time where you should with your books and doing homework. This way nothing good will ever happen in your life. You have to make changes. This is the last day that you played with your friends. You are no longer allowed to play like this ever again, you have to come back and study. Until I see that you become the best student in the class, you have to concentrate on studying. Then and only then will you get back your rights!”

Nirbhay became extremely sad. He had been scolded the whole day, and his mother was now forbidding the little joys that he had in life and taking even them away from him. Unable to contain himself he began to cry as he realized that he would have to stay behind in the same class while the others, who were his friends, went on.

For Nirbhay, that was a turning point. He did not get better at studies, but when he looked back later in life at that point, where he had been when he first failed a class, he would realize how significant it was. He changed slowly from a fun loving young boy, who simply loved playing to someone who seemed to be missing a part of himself in life. No longer allowed to play outside he had to stay inside and this by far was the worst punishment for him.

All of the members of Nirbhay’s family were extremely concerned about him. His mother may have scolded him a lot in the heat of the moment, but they all loved him very much and could not see him suffering in this way. They knew it was extremely hard on him, but they could not get him to open up about it at all.

Nirbhay changed drastically, still apparently the same boy, but anyone who knew him would know that there was something completely different about him and how his behaviour had changed so massively.

His aunt was a Clinical Psychologist, and he was taken to see her to see what could be done about him. He had sessions with her over the course of the next few months and there she would talk to him to figure out what was wrong there in him.

She understood that Nirbhay was suffering from depression, and at the same time was the victim of a horrible inferiority complex. Studying in a convent school, he did not wsee himself in the same light as the other children who were his classmates. He felt that they were better than him, and that he in no way deserved to be a part of their class. He felt like a total and complete outsider while talking to them, feeling horribly bad about himself. His actual friends were Ronit and Param, both of whom were from government schools. His aunt thought that the idea of the convent school itself scared him, as he was in a system which was so superior to the government schools, and in a place where the top students studied and excelled.

On top of that he had failed and was not going up with the children he had made friends with over the last two years. He instead had to spend time with the children of the first grade who had been newly promoted and they would make fun of him and the fact that he had been left behind.

He was made to feel excluded.

He was friends with a few kids, who were nice to him, but since their friendships and groups had already been formed in previous classes he never had a chance to actually become one of them. So instead it was on him to make sure that he never was noticed, and try to fade into the background when he was with them so they would not notice him. That way no comments were passed about him, but at the same time he felt very alone as literally no one noticed when he was not there, and they did not care at all about his presence.

Once during the lunch break in school, Nirbhay had opened his tiffin box and was eating peacefully, thinking about the fact that he could not go home and play with his friends. Two of the children who had just been promoted came to him. He looked up at them, it was Rajan and Rohan. The two were best friends and had been so from birth. They were also bullies and liked to push around the other children and display the apparent authority that they had over others. While he was older than them, both of them were much bigger and stronger than Nirbhay.

They came up to him, and without asking him took the apple from his lunch box. He looked nervous, and in a tired voice asked, “Could you please give it back to me? I have not done anything to you, yet you keep bullying me. Why do you keep doing this? Go play with your friends. I won’t tell anyone, just leave me alone.”

Like typical bullies the pleas of their intended victim only excited them, and made them more eager to come after him. Rajan looked at Rohit and said, “Do you hear anyone speaking Rohit?”

“No, I don’t,” Rohit answered with a sly grin on his face. He knew what his friend was planning.

“How fortunate we found this empty lunch box just lying here, with no one eating anything from it. Someone must not have liked their tiffin at all.” Saying this, Rajan grabbed the box from the hands of Nirbhay. “Let’s see what’s in it.”

Rohit laughed and clapped in delight watching Nirbhay try to get his box back. Nirbhay was really tired and did not seem to have any energy in him. Staying inside and being forbidden to play had made him completely depressed, and along with depression came the idea that he could do nothing. He felt completely useless and his energy was apparently completely drained away by some mysterious force. He grabbed at the box again, lurching forward, only for Rajan to move out of the way, and he fell, striking his head against the strong wooden desk. As he lay there clutching his head, Rajan and Rohit continued their investigation of what exactly it was that he had brought for tiffin.

“Oh my!” said Rohit. “Would you look at that, Nirbhay has brought *achaar paraatha*.” They licked their lips looking at the delicious food Mrs. Singh had made for her son. “Since there is no one here, and someone obviously does not appreciate good food, let us not waste it.” They tore a *paratha* in half and started to eat it, making appreciative noises.

“Give it back!” said Nirbhay from his place on the ground, fuming that he was being bullied like this. He did not deserve this and his life was tough enough already without adding this to the mix.

Rohit and Rajan pretended to be surprised to see him there, and asked him, “Oh see! It is Nirbhay! What are you doing down there on the ground Nirbhay? Did you drop something that you are looking for?”

“You two are extremely bad,” Nirbhay shouted. “I will complain to the teacher if you don’t give me my food back immediately.”

Rohit and Rajan looked at each other and exchanged another sly smile. “You want your food?” Rohit asked him. “Well here it is!” He picked up the apple and threw it at him. It him directly on the nose bringing tears to his eyes. They ate u the rest of the paratha before throwing the empty tiffin box at it and leaving. While leaving they left a last parting shot. “Enjoy your food.”

Such was what life had become like for Nirbhay and he hated every second of it. It was not fair, he thought, that he would not only fail and struggle to study things he could not make head or tail of; on top of that now he was being bullied by two boys who were so much bigger than him. There was nothing good left in his life and this only made him more depressed.

So when his aunt talked about how depressed he was, it seemed like he kept getting pushed down, and more depressed. The sessions did not do him any good, as he did not tell his aunt about the bullying either, because he felt like that it would be complaining. While he had threatened them, telling them that he would complain, being the sort of person that he was underneath it all, he just could not bring himself to talk about all the problems that he was facing truthfully.

His aunt was able to realize a large part of it though, and understood that most of his problems came from thinking that he was not as good as the other students he was studying with. This was something that she wanted to change fast and did not think that he should continue in this style as this would change him completely. She advised Mrs. Singh to take him away from the St. Pauls school. She told his mother that the best place for him was a normal school, one not with the ICSE board, but the State or CBSE board instead, where it would be easier for him to do well. She felt that studying in those schools he would see that he was not all that far behind the other students and was even better than them in some ways and aspects. She felt that if this was brought to his attention then things would be better for him, as he would once again have more confidence in himself, and it was that confidence that he was lacking more than anything else.

She knew that he was a good student, and given enough encouragement and help, if he was satisfied that he was equal with at least, if not better than the other students, his performance would dramatically improve and he would prove that he was not a bad student after all, and his only problem was his vast and undeniable inferiority complex. The failure of the class was the biggest fuel to the fire that was the complex.

When his mother heard about what his aunt was suggesting, she listened to her, but did not want to accept it yet. Having studied in a convent system herself, she wanted that her son too should grow up in such a system, taking advantage of the facilities that it offered.

She decided that it might be a fluke that he had failed and gave him one more chance to achieve what he could in that year in the second grade. She waited to see how he would perform. Unfortunately for Nirbhay, he was still a truant at heart and did not study as much as he should have. He tried his best, but given everything that he was going through his best was not enough and he failed again. His English and Mathematics damaged his performance and reduced what could have been a good score to nothing.

This time there was no denying that his aunt had been correct. His mother was very disappointed but now she had no choice and removed him from the school. Failing again had come as a huge blow to Nirbhay and he felt like there was nothing that he could do that went right for him.

Instead he was left with nothing but a chance to sit by and watch as his disappointed family each hid their disappointment in their own way. His sisters pretended like nothing was wrong at all and helped him, and treated him to sweets. They loved him a lot and took care of him, as it hurt them to see that he was hurt. He felt bad that he was the reason for their sadnessm and really felt like he had let them and the whole family down. What was worse was that his mother did not hide her disappointment like the others at all. If the others were hiding their disappointment behinds sweets and hugs, his mother was waving that disappointment around like it was a sword. Nirbhay was often the victim of that sword, as even though his mother knew he was depressed she had to show her feelings because that was who she was.

Nirbhay would often hear about how he had let down his and be scolded by her for doing absolutely nothing other than being in her line of sight. His worst fear was though, when she started to cry, and even though she was not blaming him at that point of time he knew that it was he who was to blame for his mother’s sadness and this hit him really hard, much harder than any of the words that she had used while blaming him, as now he was blaming himself. Such was his fear of her crying that he actually would prefer to be beaten by her rather han see his strong mother break down in such an uncharacteristic way.

In the end however, the change was finally made. He was removed from St. Pauls and instead put into a much more ordinary school under the State board where all the students were not so strong. It was expected that he would fit in much more there and once he found that he was at level with the other students there, become happier and concentrate more on his studies than he had previously.

However, even here Nirbhay was faced with an obstacle that no one had foreseen. Instead of keeping him in the second grade in the new school, he was pushed up to the third grade by his mother. From one side this was good for him, because he was past the dreaded second grade that he had failed in twice before. Studying in that same grade another might have given him a mental block, as he was so much older than the rest of his classmates, while also studying the same things all over again that he had been unable to understand before.

At this new level it was an altogether new move for him. He was starting fresh, away from bullies and away from the fact that he had failed. It was an escape from a fate that had not seen him be happy at all. In this new place, where no one knew of his past, he did not have to answer stupid questions and all he had to do was study the books that were kept in front of him.

Unfortunately for him, there was also a problem that he was starting in the third grade. Due to the fact that he had failed to pass grade two and he had played truant and not studied at all, his studies were not up to par. There were many things that he did not know and he was especially weak in English and Mathematics. The two subjects were the most foreign to him, and whenever he was studying them his confidence was extremely low. Now he had to not only study in grade three, he had to make up for all things that he had not learnt over the years in that one year. It was a whole new experience for him.

The thing that no one foresaw however, was the change that came over Nirbhay as soon as his school was changed. Gone was the boy who had played truant. He realized that what he had done was not good, and now he had to get serious. Studying in this new school, young Nirbhay turned over a new leaf. While he did make friends, at the same time he did not spend all his time playing with them.

He would study a lot more, and this time when he was studying it was not forced upon him, instead it was voluntary. Things that students learn in Lower KG, or for those who are not so fortunate, in the first grade, like ABC the alphabets, or basic addition and subtraction, Nirbhay learnt for the first time when he was studying in the third grade in a new school. He worked extremely hard to learn, staying up nights while others slept to read again and again, and try repeatedly till he was successful. At this point he had set his mind towards one thing, and that was getting the hang of whatever was taught.

In this new atmosphere of the State Board school he was much more comfortable than he had been in the convent school, and while it was not the best, it was much better than the primary schools in the village which lacked infrastructure. This was sufficiently funded, but at the same time it was more lax, with more relatable students and friends than the convent school had had.

He was in such a poor state of his education despite his best tries, his mother was convinced that he would never be able to pass the tenth grade board examination and would be a dropout with no proper future.

From that point of time, looking back at it now, one cannot help but wonder, what it must have been like for Nirbhay to hear such words, and what condition of mind his mother was in and how worried she was about her son. If she could have seen the future, she would have been able to realize that there was no reason to worry about her son so much, as he was now in a much more comfortable position than he had been before.

He still continued to try as he was determined to prove her wrong and make her proud of him by his achievements. There were essays that he had to learn in English about cows, the type given to children to write at that age. Since he lacked the knowledge of English so profoundly, he used to cram each and every letter of the word inside his head so he could remember what it was that had been said and what he had to write. He used to spell out cows when reading and writing it like, c-o-w-s, and cram that into his head as well. It was an extremely difficult process, but he did not give up though at first it seemingly looked like there was no way that he could succeed. That slowly but surely started to change, and things suddenly began to go right for Nirbhay. It is important to remember that when things started to go well for him, it was not because of some magical power, rather it was the work he put into changing how things happened for him. He used to stay up till late and night and put in the effort to make sure that things changed for him. To him it seemed like it was magic that things changed, but for anyone who saw him working it was obviously the tremendous amount that he worked, refusing to give up, for the first time in his life focused on a specific goal, not because of a punishment, rather because he was so very eager to achieve it.

The transition to the new school helped a lot, and the friends he made were never people who acted superior and were very down to earth people, who also helped keep him grounded. Among them he began to see that there were ways in which he was not trying to improve which they took very naturally. They worked hard, and some of them came from the village after waking up early in the morning to help with the farming in their family farm. The work was unending and after school they were so tired they went home and slept. He understood seeing them and their lives how fortunate he was to have what he did and the sort of privileged family he came from while most of the others he saw did not, and they had to toil day and night to study at such a school. He stopped taking things for granted and put in much more work in what he was doing.

He decided the time had come to stop fooling about. He set targets, worked hard to achieve the target, and only once he was successful there try something else. In this way he improved in a tremendous manner.

His work finally paid off, and after the year end examinations it was announced that he had not only secured good marks, but that he had passed to the following grade. Now out of grade three he got the hang of things more. He focused on improving in the subjects that he was the weakest in. English and Mathematics were the weakest subjects for him so he decided to study them continuously till he improved in such a manner, that he was no longer weak in them. This level of determination in himself and his studies helped him to improve no end, and before he knew it he had become one of the best students in the class.

In the year end examination of grade four, he tried more than he had ever before. He studied all hours, concentrated on the mistakes he usually made till he was not making them any more, and finally gave the examination.

In the examination, much to the combined, delight, surprise and shock of himself and his family he not only passed, but actually secured a rank. He stood third in his class, and finally his mother was proud of what her son had accomplished. From failing in second grade twice to actually passing and securing the third position in the entire class in the fourth grade was a huge achievement, and whether they knew it or not, it was just a signal of things to come. Securing the ability to rank in a completely regular school after failing was not something that Nirbhay had ever contemplated. When he had studied he had just wanted to make sure that he would stay ahead and never fail again.

The fear of failure had been ingrained into him from an early age due to his experiences and from then on he wanted to be sure that he was going to chase success and nothing else.

**Chapter 3: The Female Touch**

Growing up, Nirbhay had lived in a joint family and not a nuclear one. In those days nuclear families were appearing more and more, but his family remained the traditional system of joint. It was good for Nirbhay that this was the case, as this meant that he was living with a number of women, and women influenced his life a lot in a positive manner.

In his family, there was his mother, and two cousin sisters, Anmit and Manmit. Nirbhay never used to think of them as cousins and was extremely close to both of them, thinking of them as his own sisters rather than cousins. One of the sisters was one year older than him, while the other was four years older than him. Even before he made other friends, his first and most important friends were these two sisters. They had an extremely important part to play in his life, by influencing him and pampering him, while also making sure to guide him in the right direction. When he failed they supported him, by not only helping him to learn but also providing mental support.

When he brought back the report card a second time from the convent school saying that he had failed, even though it was clearly written that he had not been able to pass, they encouraged him. They were positive about it giving him confidence. They told him that he had indeed passed, and that everything was going to be okay. If they had criticized him at that point when he had failed for a second time, where he already blamed himself he would blame himself even more and end up not being able to do anything as he would obviously suffer from depression, anxiety and the feeling that he was inadequate and that he had let the family down. He would be chastised by his mother, but knowing that his sisters were there gave him a sense of joy and comfort that cannot be properly described in words.

To quote Macbeth,

“Sleep, that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care,

The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,

Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,

Chief nourisher in life's feast.”

Only instead of the sleep that is spoken of in this quote, it was instead his sisters that were the balm to his hurt mind, and the chief nourisher of life’s feast.

With his sister who was only one year older than him he shared a lot of childhood memories. While both sisters loved him and cared for him, the one who was four years older than he was, had other work to do, and was too grown up to spend all of her time with him. Instead when she did spend time, it was by pampering him and making sure that he had everything he needed and was happy. She was almost like a second mother to him, being as caring as she was. The other sister was just one year older and was more like a best friend with whom he shared memories.

He used to play plenty of games with her, once even playing pretend house with her, where he was the husband and she was the wife.

Anyone who has had a sibling will understand the depth of the friendship between the two as they played and grew together. In a hilarious incident once when Nirbhay was only in the first grade, his sister demanded that he had to listen to her. Loving her as he did he agreed, only for her to demand that he had to dress up as a girl.

“But I don’t want to dress up like a girl,” he said. She started to pout and looked sad.

“But you told me that you would listen to what I said!” she complained to him. “You can’t just back out of such a promise just like that. You have to keep your promise otherwise what is the point of making them.”

Nirbhay desperately looked for a way to get out of postponing the inevitable. Whenever his sister was in this mood anything she wanted she usually got by using all her wile and blackmailing him by claiming that he did not love his sister.

“But I am a boy!” he protested trying to appeal to her logic and rightness. “How can I dress up like a girl? That is not right!”

“Who says it is not right?” demanded his sister. “There is no such written rule that you cannot dress up like a girl. What is more, you are doing this in a playact. Just because you dress up like a girl you don’t become one! What are you afraid of?”

Finally seeing that there was no way to win the argument, Nirbhay gave in. His sister dressed him up like a girl that day, putting a frock on him along with a bow. She then put on some toy makeup that she had, and giggled and laughed while doing so. His elder sister also saw what was happening and joined in.

The three of them had fun like these, and these memories they created together as children lasted forever.

The other most influential woman in his life was his mother. She was an extremely critical part of his life, as is any mother for any son. But on top of that they were Indian, and Indian mothers can be extremely possessive and protective about their sons. While they can scold them all day long and criticize them for hours on end, if any one else so much as touches a hair on their son’s head, then that person lives to regret it (if indeed they live).

She was the one who accepted the aunt’s advice and switched him to the state board school a move that would change his life and the way that he looked at the world. She was also the one who helped him to take the most critical decisions in his life when he grew up.

After he failed twice in the second grade, Nirbhay’s entire attitude towards life changed. He no longer just lay back and let things happen in their own way, he was far more participative and worked harder to ensure that his future was not a failure in the same way that he had failed before.

His hard work paid off, and because of that he was able to pass each grade in the school with good marks. His marks were good enough that after passing the twelfth grade he actually had an amazing choice in front of him. He had the choice, if he so made it, to go to Canada and study in an University, leaving Chhangla behind.

During all the hard times, despite criticizing him she always supported him. She made sure that he did not feel too sad at any time. After scolding him she used to do little things that would make him feel good again. Sometimes she would cook his favourite food, or sometimes she would simply hug him and tell him it was alright. This was she did not spoil him, but at the same time made sure that he was not left feeling like no one in the world cared about him either.

She helped him make the decision to travel to Canada after his twelfth grade to study and make something of himself. Travelling from the remote village in Chhangla to a university in a place the likes of Canada was an incredible transition, and something that was very difficult to make. This was not a decision to be taken lightly, but his mother made sure that he took it and that he made the shift fast.

Being an Indian parent having a child go to far off lands to study was not an easy decision to make. She would not be able to see him as much anymore or see the person that he was becoming each day, but she did not really hesitate before making the decision to make the leap. She sacrificed her right of seeing her child every day, allowing him to move to Canada to study. He was the only child, and yet she did not hesitate, knowing that this decision would help him make a mark in life.