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# ANCESTORS | पूर्वज

18 degrees, 35 minutes and 20 seconds – North; by 74 degrees, 32 minutes and 20 seconds – East.

On the banks of the river Ghod, the prime artery of the Bhima River, lies the village of trophies, Inamgaon. The village that flourished as a proto-historic trade centre during the late Harrapan age is today an all but emptied out excavation site. The site was discovered by a team of archaeologists led by Dr M K Dhavalikar in 1963. What they found there was a curious tradition by which the denizens of Inamgaon dealt with their dead.

The archaeologists chanced upon a burial site with a total of 243 graves. Bodies were buried outdoors, flanked with their copper tools, ornaments, armour and weaponry – all embroidered with beads of jasper. Each corpse was delicately arranged like the needle of a compass, with the head facing northward. The feet of these bodies were dismembered at the ankles which, the archaeologists believed, was a ritual to allow their souls to exit the land.

Yet, among these graves there was one which was even stranger. At the centre of the site, a body was found buried indoors, beneath the remains of a large structure – perhaps a temple or a stronghold. The corpse belonged to a 35 year-old man, seated cross-legged, and interred inside a massive terracotta urn shaped like a stout beast with four legs. Surrounding his burial urn, there were several others containing strange artefacts, large ceremonial masks, ritual daggers, horned blades, agrarian tools, scientific instruments and votive idols confined inside ancient terracotta.

This revelation set the Indian archaeological community on fire. Conflicting views were offered on the identity of the seated man. Some members of the ASI maintained that this man was the chieftain of Inamgaon on account of his solitary indoor burial, laden with tools and beaded trinkets.

Others argued that this man was instead an outsider to Inamgaon, a vagrant or nomad, buried inside his peculiar tomb in accordance with the rituals of his own people who had long vanished, perhaps falling victim to an ancient flood in the Bhima Valley.

This view was attributed to the discovery of a boat-like symbol marked on the inside of the four-legged tomb. This tomb was discovered by a pseudonymous member of Dhavalikar's excavation team who went by the name 'Mook Shodhak' or the 'silent seeker'. In the days that followed the discovery, Mook published a series of clandestine papers, arguing that the boat motif represented the pan-civilizational belief in the possibility of interdimensional travel. While they initially gained a surprising amount of support among the archaeological community, Mook's arguments were officially dismissed by the ASI in the weeks following the declaration of the National Emergency in 1975.

The outsider theory was described as "deviancies that were incongruent with the established methods of the ASI, purported by a malicious rabble rouser". Given their strange nature, the origins of these objects cannot be verified with any degree of certainty. Are they artefacts of a lost civilisation that preceded Inamgaon? Or are they in fact Mook's vessels of trans-dimensional travel, wandering across space and time with the weight of a million histories upon their backs?

While all these questions remain unanswered, one thing is certain: they are here now.

# 01. the lying soil

हद हद करते सब गए और बेहद गए न कोए  
अनहद के मैदान में रहा कबीरा सोय

Limits are all they speak of and yet they dare not cross them

Kabir, my friend, rests on the playground beyond those limits

By the time they have gathered enough dirt on their knees, archaeologists realize that geology can play tricks on the human mind.

They describe this strange occurrence as 'terminus post quem', or put simply, 'the limit beyond which'.

Artefacts that find themselves at odds with the historical era of soil cover they are located within, are described as such. For they could infact be dated to a time far beyond that of the dirt that entombs them.

Before it has been ordered into the categories of historical time, the Earth and all it contains is a labyrinth of deception.

The undersoils of Inamgaon are no different. Nothing here came from where it belongs, my friend.

## 02. inquisitors of illness

The mysterious origins of the disease were a matter of much debate and controversy. These competing conceptions of the affliction and its beginnings, gave rise to dissident factions and renegade cults. Each with their own arcane methodologies of treatment and cure.

1. The Argent Eaters were a nomadic cult that worshiped the Moon, for they believed they could deceive the plague in the illusions of the night. When morning came, they set up wandering marketplaces where they sold pellets carved out of silverware, scavenged from the shadows of the past.
2. The Embalmers believed that they could shield themselves from the virus by bathing in the gelatinous fat of cattle. They too were a nocturnal tribe that would raid farmsteads at nightfall, their fat laden bodies glowing under starlight.
3. The Marked Ones, as they are colloquially known, had fashioned a curious vaccination technique. They would tattoo themselves with squid ink which they believed contained an antiviral ectoplasm. They spent their nights drawing anti-geometrical shapes on their population, creating an entire bestiary upon their limbs.
4. The Order of Occlusionists believed the disease would invade the mind of the afflicted by entering its inner recesses through the naked eye, possessing their bodies to enact its unfathomable whims and desires. As protection, they chose to veil themselves from all that touched the light of day, becoming blind seers that would only converse in whispered hymns composed in forgotten tongues.

## 03. the fence maker's folly

As the sun began dawning upon the 20th century, the grandfather of the modern image, Paul Cezanne, declared that the vastness of the visible world could be rendered within the boundaries of the picture plane by organising its entirety within a collection of cubes. He pronounced, "We must not be pleased with reality itself, we must give structure to reality, rearranging it through a process of re-composition. We must readapt it to our rules of composition".

This militancy of comprehending reality by categorisation has plagued Modernity's finest minds. Much to their chagrin, however, the containment cube has remained humanity's most enduring civilizational motifs. The cube has followed humans across the farthest reaches of the oceans and to the stars. For, everywhere that man went, he laid cubes.

From stone fences to bricks, iron cages, concrete blocks, cardboard boxes, border walls and quarantine zones, humankind has an exemplary ability to put itself inside cubes. Categorizing, segregating, excluding and excommunicating. All that refuses to be contained is banished to the realms of rumour.

But fear not, my friend, for rumours, as we know, have begun to spread.

## 04. the extinction games

Among the many theories concerning the decline of Inamgaon, one remains particularly prominent. Archaeologists across the subcontinent have come to agree that the civilization fell to a flood in the Bhima valley.

While this postulation might indeed hold water in geological evidence, given the propensity of the Bhima river to flood, the bodies at Inamgaon seem to suggest otherwise, for they betray no signs of drowning or death by water. The rich collection of artefacts, weapons, utensils, toys and trinkets found in the excavation site that have remained unmoved through the many swellings and sinkings of river tides, further deny this claim.

However, something has indeed been caught in the waves, for there is a complete lack of clocks, calendars, chronoscopes and sundials in the remnants of Inamgaon. All of which have existed in civilizations that have both preceded and come after. Time itself seems lost in the undertow.

This apparent absence of time-keeping devices, however, reveals a complete miscalculation of how the denizens of Inamgaon perceived time. For them, time was not an object to be grasped and measured, but a flow that was meant to pass.

And they had many games to pass the time.

They played games of; स्पर्धा (*Spardha*), or 'competition', designed to build personality and cultivate character. Games of मौका (*Mauka*), or 'chance', that called to attention the many surprises their world had to offer. Games of नक़ल (*Nakal*), or 'mimicry', in which they invited both relationships and repetition,

and finally, बवंडर (*Bawandar*), or the game of dust storm. A game played at the distant borders of what the modern mind construes as rationality. Caked in the mud of ages as they appear to us today, the ancestors of Inamgaon had no notion of such borders and willingly surrendered themselves to dust.

## 05. the battle of beginnings

To bury the dead, is but one part of a procedural endeavor. A single step into the corridor that separates here from hereafter.

In ferrying itself across this corridor, humankind has manifested, empires, rebellions, technology, theft, theatre, political campaigns, plagues, inoculation, indoctrination, belief systems and heresy. This mosaic of methods when held together, measure the gross weight of human civilization.

The origins of this weight are entombed within a mythological doublet of two opposing tales. The first, attributed to Rousseau, imagines the origins of humankind as a fall from grace.

It supposes we began among small bands of brotherhood. We thrived within never more than miniscule groupings of ten or twenty people in this Edenic utopia.

However, with the arrival of civilizational complexity, and their ensuing elaborations; in the forms of sect, structure, state and society, we lost touch with our innate selves, our brotherly nature bludgeoned out by bureaucracy.

The second myth, attributed to the Leviathan of Thomas Hobbes, purports humanity as innately barbaric.

Humans, it tells us, are a self-serving lot. Forever driven to accumulation. We are nomadic, brutish, boorish and ferociously feudal beings, waging perpetual war upon ourselves.

Insofar as there has been any alleviation from this blighted state of being, it argues, has been entirely due to the establishment of the very systems of civility that Rousseau's myth complains about. For what was required for civilization to begin was a good push against our innate animalistic instincts.

Caught within this dialectical wrestling match of our opposing origins, we find ourselves at an epistemological impasse, one as old as time itself.

Yet both claimants to our beginnings, are merely contorted fabrications, imposing themselves upon an adamantly occluded past. Fragments of clay-pots, bowls, blades, grindstones, wharfs, cenotaphs and all that emerges from the soils of time, finds itself conscripted to this ancient battle.

But from the gaping voids in the puzzles of time, a third claimant was discovered by the anthropologist Margaret Mead, in the shape of a bone. A femur -the longest bone in the human body, bridging hip and knee, was broken 15,000 years ago.

To break this bone in the paleolithic age, without recourse to modern medicine, would take six weeks to heal. In this time, you cannot run from danger, you cannot drink or hunt for food. Wounded in this state, you are but meat for your predators. Yet this particular fracture had healed.

This bone is evidence that the fallen had found someone who bound their wound, bandaged them, carried them to safety and tended to them through their recovery. The ancient femur reminds us that the origins of our civilization belong not in the push or the fall, but in our ability to rise again.