Chapter 2: Lost Spring

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Exercise 2.1 — Understanding the Text

Q1 What could be some of the reasons for the migration of people from villages to cities?

SOLUTION

The text points to natural disasters as a primary push factor. Saheb's family left Dhaka because storms swept away their fields and homes, leaving them with nothing to sustain themselves in their village.

Economic hardship is another key reason. The fields gave them no grain, so survival itself drove them away. As the women of Seemapuri put it, if they could feed their families and sleep without hunger in the city, they would rather be there than on land that yielded nothing.

Beyond the text, one may infer that the lure of the city — the hope of finding work, earning wages, and accessing services such as schools and hospitals — also draws rural families to urban centres. The promise of even marginal improvement over subsistence farming is enough to set entire communities in motion.

The result, as the text shows, is not prosperity but displacement: the migrants end up as squatters in places like Seemapuri, living in mud structures without sewage or running water, surviving through rag-picking rather than the 'gold' they had hoped to find.

Answer: Natural calamities (floods, storms) destroy crops and homes; economic failure of agriculture forces migration in search of livelihood and survival in cities.

Q2 Would you agree that promises made to poor children are rarely kept? Why do you think this happens in the incidents narrated in the text?

SOLUTION

Yes, the text strongly supports this view. The narrator herself half-jokingly promises Saheb that she will start a school for him. When Saheb runs up eagerly a few days later asking, 'Is your school ready?', she is embarrassed because the promise was never seriously meant.

She then reflects that 'promises like mine abound in every corner of his bleak world', acknowledging that hollow assurances are a routine part of these children's lives. They are given hope they can never act on.

Such promises are rarely kept because the people who make them often speak impulsively, out

of sympathy or social guilt, without any real intention or capacity to follow through. There is no accountability, no mechanism to enforce the promise, and the poor child has no power to demand fulfilment.

Additionally, systemic indifference plays a role. The state promises schools and law enforcement, yet Saheb's neighbourhood has no school, and the child-labour laws protecting children in glass furnaces are never enforced. The gap between stated intent and action is vast, and it is the children who pay the price.

Answer: Promises to poor children are rarely kept because they are made impulsively without real intent; systemic apathy, lack of accountability, and the children's powerlessness make fulfilment unlikely.

Q3 What forces conspire to keep the workers in the bangle industry of Firozabad in poverty?

SOLUTION

The text identifies two interlocking worlds that together trap the bangle workers. The first is the family itself — caught in a web of poverty and the stigma of caste. Born into a community of bangle makers, children grow up believing that making bangles is their god-given destiny, their karma. The grandmother voices this fatalism: 'Can a god-given lineage ever be broken?' This mindset kills initiative before it can take root.

The second world is external and equally oppressive: the sahukars (moneylenders), middlemen, policemen, bureaucrats, and politicians who exploit the workers' vulnerability. When the young men consider organising into a cooperative to reclaim some control, they are immediately afraid: 'Even if we get organised, we are the ones who will be hauled up by the police, beaten and dragged to jail for doing something illegal.'

There is no leader among them to help them see things differently. Years of mind-numbing toil have killed all initiative and the ability to dream. The young men echo the lament of their elders, and the cycle — poverty, apathy, greed, injustice — repeats endlessly.

The combined weight of caste identity, internalised fatalism, economic exploitation by middlemen, and state machinery that criminalises rather than protects organising workers conspires to keep these families in permanent poverty.

Answer: Caste-based fatalism, exploitation by sahukars and middlemen, a corrupt or indifferent state machinery, and internalized hopelessness together trap bangle workers in an inescapable cycle of poverty.

Exercise 2.2 — Talking about the Text

Q1 How, in your opinion, can Mukesh realise his dream?

SOLUTION

Mukesh dreams of becoming a motor mechanic. Unlike the rest of his family who have accepted bangle-making as their inescapable fate, Mukesh shows a flash of daring — he insists, 'I will walk' to the garage even though it is far from his home. This determination is his greatest asset.

For his dream to be realised, he would first need access to a vocational training centre or a garage willing to take on an apprentice from a poor background. In India, schemes like the National Apprenticeship Programme or state-level skill development initiatives exist for this purpose, though awareness and access remain limited in communities like Firozabad.

Non-governmental organisations working in the area could play a crucial role by linking children like Mukesh to such opportunities, covering his initial expenses, and ensuring he is not pulled back into the bangle-making cycle by family or economic pressure.

Most importantly, enforcement of the laws against child labour in hazardous industries would free Mukesh from the furnace and create the space for him to pursue his chosen path. Mukesh's individual courage is real, but without structural support — legal protection, access to skills training, and a mentor — the dream risks remaining just that.

Answer: Mukesh can realise his dream through individual determination, access to vocational/skill training, NGO support, and strict enforcement of child labour laws that free him from the furnace.

Q2 Mention the hazards of working in the glass bangles industry.

SOLUTION

The text describes several serious hazards. Children and adults work in dingy cells without air or light, in extremely high temperatures around glass-blowing furnaces. Prolonged exposure to this heat damages the body and drains workers' vitality.

The most lasting harm is to eyesight. The workers sit in dark hutments next to flickering oil lamps, welding coloured glass into bangles. Their eyes become more adjusted to the dark than to light outside, and as a result many workers lose their eyesight before they reach adulthood. Mukesh's grandmother watched her own husband go blind from polishing glass.

Working in such conditions is also illegal for children, yet the law is never enforced. The text notes that 20,000 children slog their daylight hours in hot furnaces, 'often losing the brightness of their eyes'. They are denied schooling, sunlight, and a healthy childhood — the 'lost spring' of the title.

Answer: Workers face extreme heat from furnaces, near-total darkness, lack of ventilation, and progressive loss of eyesight; children are illegally employed in conditions that destroy their health and deny them education.

Q3 Why should child labour be eliminated and how?

SOLUTION

Child labour must be eliminated because it robs children of their childhood, health, and future. As the text shows, children working in glass furnaces lose their eyesight, grow up in poverty, and have no opportunity for schooling or development. It perpetuates the very cycle of poverty it pretends to be a response to.

Child labour is also illegal in hazardous industries under Indian law, yet enforcement is virtually absent. The law, if enforced, 'could get him and all those 20,000 children out of the hot furnaces' — the text makes clear that the tools already exist.

Elimination requires action on multiple fronts. Strict enforcement of child labour laws, with penalties for employers, is essential. Equally important is providing families with alternative income sources so they are not economically dependent on their children's earnings. Universal access to free, quality schooling — with mid-day meals and other incentives — must make education more attractive than labour.

Social attitudes, particularly the fatalism rooted in caste ('it is his karma'), must be challenged through awareness campaigns and community-level education. NGOs, local government bodies, and the judiciary all have a role to play in breaking the interlocking systems of exploitation that make child labour seem inevitable.

Answer: Child labour destroys children's health, denies education, and perpetuates poverty; it must be eliminated through law enforcement, social security for families, universal schooling, and dismantling caste-based fatalism.

Exercise 2.3 — Thinking about Language

Q1 Identify the literary device in: 'Saheb-e-Alam which means the lord of the universe is directly in contrast to what Saheb is in reality.'

SOLUTION

The literary device here is irony (specifically verbal/situational irony). 'Saheb-e-Alam' means 'lord of the universe', yet the boy who bears this grand name is a barefoot ragpicker scrounging through garbage dumps for survival. The glaring gap between the exalted meaning of his name and the wretchedness of his actual condition creates a powerful ironic effect that highlights the cruelty of his circumstances.

Answer: Irony — the name 'lord of the universe' starkly contrasts with the boy's reality as a homeless ragpicker.

Q2 Identify the literary device in: 'Drowned in an air of desolation.'

SOLUTION

The literary device is metaphor. One cannot literally drown in air or in desolation. The author transfers the quality of being overwhelmed and submerged (associated with drowning in water) to the emotional and physical atmosphere of the old temple, conveying a sense of total, suffocating abandonment.

Answer: Metaphor — 'drowned' is applied to an atmosphere of desolation, conveying total, suffocating abandonment.

Q3 Identify the literary device in: 'Seemapuri, a place on the periphery of Delhi yet miles away from it, metaphorically.'

SOLUTION

The literary device is metaphor (the author explicitly signals this with the word 'metaphorically'). Seemapuri is physically located on the outskirts of Delhi, but in terms of civic amenities, opportunity, legal identity, and quality of life, it exists in a completely different world — as if it were miles and miles away. The metaphor captures the social and economic gulf between the slum and the city it borders.

Answer: Metaphor — physical proximity to Delhi is contrasted with vast social and economic distance, highlighting the exclusion of Seemapuri's residents from city life.

Q4 Identify the literary device in: 'For the children it is wrapped in wonder; for the elders it is a means of survival.'

SOLUTION

The literary device is antithesis — two contrasting ideas (wonder vs. survival) are placed side by side in a parallel structure. The same garbage holds entirely different meaning for children, who approach it with curiosity and hope, and for adults, who see it purely as a means to feed themselves. The parallel phrasing sharpens the contrast between childhood imagination and adult desperation.

Answer: Antithesis — the contrasting attitudes of children (wonder) and elders (survival) toward the same garbage are placed in a parallel structure.

Q5 Identify the literary device in: 'As her hands move mechanically like the tongs of a machine, I wonder if she knows the sanctity of the bangles she helps make.'

SOLUTION

The literary device is simile. The girl Savita's hands are compared to the tongs of a machine using the word 'like', emphasising the mechanical, repetitive, and joyless nature of her work. The simile also underscores the irony that a child's hands, which should be playing, have been reduced to the rhythm of a tool.

Answer: Simile — Savita's hands moving 'like the tongs of a machine' compares her mechanical labour to machinery, stripping her of childhood spontaneity.

Q6 Identify the literary device in: 'She still has bangles on her wrist, but not light in her eyes.'

SOLUTION

The literary device is antithesis, reinforced by symbolism. The bangles on her wrist symbolise the auspiciousness and hope of marriage ('suhaag'), while the absence of light in her eyes symbolises a life of unfulfilled promise, poverty, and sorrow. The contrast between the symbol of joy on her wrist and the emptiness in her eyes makes the statement deeply poignant.

Answer: Antithesis combined with symbolism — bangles (symbol of marital joy) contrasted with lightless eyes (symbol of a life drained of hope and fulfilment).

Q7 Identify the literary device in: 'Few airplanes fly over Firozabad.'

SOLUTION

The literary device is hyperbole used ironically, functioning also as a symbol. The statement is literally true — Firozabad is not on a major flight path — but its deeper meaning is that the world of flight, aspiration, and limitless possibility is simply absent from this town. When the narrator asks Mukesh if he dreams of flying a plane, he goes silent. The sentence encapsulates the narrowness of the horizons available to these children: their world is bounded by the dusty

streets of Firozabad, and the sky above it is empty of the machines of progress.

Answer: Symbolism/irony — the absence of airplanes over Firozabad symbolises the total absence of aspiration and opportunity in the lives of its children.

Q8 Identify the literary device in: 'Web of poverty.'

SOLUTION

The literary device is metaphor. Poverty is compared to a spider's web — a trap that is sticky, inescapable, and woven tightly around the victim. Just as an insect caught in a web cannot free itself, the bangle workers of Firozabad are caught in a complex, interlocking system of caste, debt, middlemen, and police oppression from which they cannot escape.

Answer: Metaphor — poverty is compared to a spider's web, conveying the sense of an inescapable, entrapping system.

Q9 Identify the literary device in: 'Scrounging for gold.'

SOLUTION

The literary device is hyperbole. Saheb is literally scrounging through garbage dumps for anything of value — coins, scraps, sellable waste. Calling this activity 'scrounging for gold' exaggerates its worth, but the exaggeration is ironic and purposeful: for these ragpickers, garbage is as precious as gold because it is their only means of survival. The hyperbole captures both their desperation and the value they must assign to worthless refuse.

Answer: Hyperbole — garbage-scrounging is elevated to 'searching for gold', exaggerating its value to reflect how precious even scraps are to the ragpickers' survival.

Q10 Identify the literary device in: 'And survival in Seemapuri means rag-picking. Through the years, it has acquired the proportions of a fine art.'

SOLUTION

The literary device is irony, with an element of hyperbole. 'Fine art' is a phrase reserved for skilled, elevated creative work — painting, sculpture, classical music. To say that rag-picking has 'acquired the proportions of a fine art' is deeply ironic: it elevates the most degraded form of labour to the status of a refined skill, highlighting how completely this community has been forced to perfect the art of surviving on other people's waste. The irony is bitter rather than celebratory.

Answer: Irony — describing rag-picking as a 'fine art' bitterly highlights how completely survival on garbage has become the only skill this community can refine.

Q11 Identify the literary device in: 'The steel canister seems heavier than the plastic bag he would carry so lightly over his shoulders.'

SOLUTION

The literary device is metaphor, with the two objects functioning as symbols. The plastic bag that Saheb once carried lightly was his own — he was a free ragpicker, his own master, choosing where to roam. The steel canister belongs to the tea-stall owner; it represents wage labour, loss of freedom, and the burden of having a boss. The physical weight of the canister symbolises the psychological and social weight of servitude. The comparison is not merely about the actual heaviness of the objects but about what they represent in Saheb's life.

Answer: Metaphor/symbolism — the heavy steel canister (employer's property, wage slavery) is contrasted with the light plastic bag (freedom of the self-employed ragpicker), symbolising Saheb's loss of autonomy.