
Prolegomenon

Jayanta Ray emerged from the shimmering limousine with the aplomb of a virtuoso pianist. Deftly, he stepped onto the kerb and opened the door for Aparajita, who gracefully put her dainty leg onto the cracked stone slab of the pathway.

Instantly, the dismal atmosphere at the crowded and filthy platform of Bakpur¹ Railway Station lifted ... as the beautiful couple pumped an enormous amount of energy and color into the listless lives of their fellow travelers.



¹ *'The Case of the Touch Artist'* is one of three novellas that are interspersed throughout the main novel *'Dev Kumar'* (1996 © by Subhrankar Mukherjee), which is itself wrapped around the **mythical** state of **Mangal**, and its coastal capital city of **Bakpur**. The following is an excerpt from *'Dev Kumar'*, which explains the backdrop for the present story, also:

“ Bakpur ... the modern, coastal capital of Mangal ... was forged almost three hundred years ago on the anvil of British elitists. But even before the European conquest, the great people of Mangal had acquired a formidable and enduring history. Not only was Mangal pivotally positioned at the centroid of business and commerce between the rich, Gangetic hinterland and the glittering Orient, it was also located at the confluence of three great communities...

“ To the north and east of Mangal stood imperial Bengal and the city of Calcutta, which dominated the eastern region of India ... with diminishing luster each passing year. To its north and west was Bihar, its capital city of Patna a pale shadow of the once magnificent Pataliputra, home of Emperor Ashoka. And to its south was Orissa, culturally perhaps the richest of all ...”

As the youngest ever Ambassador-designate of an Indian Embassy, the sky was the limit for his ambitions.

And at school - in that cradle of elitism at Dehra Doon, under the towering heights of the Himalayas - he had already demonstrated that his superior intellectual capacity in the classrooms matched his amazing touch artistry on the playing fields.

This is the story of a principled man who does not know how to bend ... who exemplifies the power of one ... while, on the other hand, it also tells us the story of lawless men who bend all rules to suit their purpose ... in the endless confrontation between good and evil.



The Touch Artist

Jayanta Ray's Cricket coach once said that he had never seen anyone as quick off the foot at the popping crease as 'Jay', the name by which he had become popularly known.

And on the Judo mats, he had learnt how to discipline his mind and body - from an old Japanese teacher. The old master was a gentle if stern person, who stayed much by himself. But he had one weakness - Jayanta - and he looked upon the boy as the son that he might have had, and he taught Jayanta the mystical secrets of the ancient martial arts of his Samurai ancestry. It was rumored that he had entered the country around the time of the ebbing Japanese excursions in World War 11. For palpable reasons, he had never returned to his homeland. There was something in the way that that terrible war had ended, for him on the slopes of the hills at Imphal and for the world at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, which had convinced the Judo spiritualist to go into seclusion in the mountains, rather than retreat dishonorably in defeat. How he came to be a Judo instructor at Dehra Doon is a story in itself, but by deed and action he taught everyone, without even uttering a word, about honor.

It was this aspect of his Judo training that Jayanta treasured the most, even more than the three-dan black belt that he was awarded for his meritorious performance at an international Judo conference in Nagoya. His Master could not accompany him to the competition, for personal reasons, but he was there in spirit by Jayanta's side, as the adolescent skillfully demonstrated to his astonished Japanese audience the mastery of so young a boy, which they had presumed till then could come only from one of their own.

But as much as he respected Judoism, the sport that he truly loved was tennis. It was not the fiery serve and volley mastery of the likes of

the MacEnroes, but the mercurial touch artistry of the Ramanathans that pulled him to the front of the pack at every tennis competition that he entered, in and out of the country.

From a very early age, Jayanta had the god-given confidence to know that he could do whatever he pleased. Nothing pumped more adrenalin into his blood than the tingling sensation of stepping competitively onto the Judo mats - not knowing what was going to happen the next moment, as he concentrated on the eyes and every movement of his opponent. But competitive tennis was more enjoyable, perhaps because it was less stressful. There was no dearth of adrenalin as he strode into a packed stadium, with battle lines clearly drawn and foot soldiers distributed at all corners to do his bidding. What could be more satisfying than hitting an ace? It was like notching a hole-in-one in Golf; the only difference was that he could do it several times in one match.

He began to seriously toy with the idea of playing tennis professionally.

But he knew not that he had reached the pinnacle of his tennis accomplishments when he lost at the challenge round of the Junior Wimbledon championship. He had vowed to return and win the next year, since it would be the only chance he would have before crossing age restrictions.

When he returned to his school semi-triumphantly, his Principal called him into his office to congratulate him on his fine performance.

“Jayanta,” the old man said affectionately, as he had in the past to some of his pupils who had proceeded to become heads of governments and captains of industry, “... you may not know this, but I have been watching over you very closely from the first day that you set foot in this campus ... a strapping lad, not yet eight. I remember your parents quite well. Your mother, God bless her soul, drew me aside before they had to leave and asked me to look after you. Now, I am very careful about making commitments ... but when I saw you, God knows why, I promised her not only what she asked, but also something that went much further. And may I add that you have done nothing, which would make me ashamed of making that promise. You make me very happy whenever I am reminded that you are a part of this school.