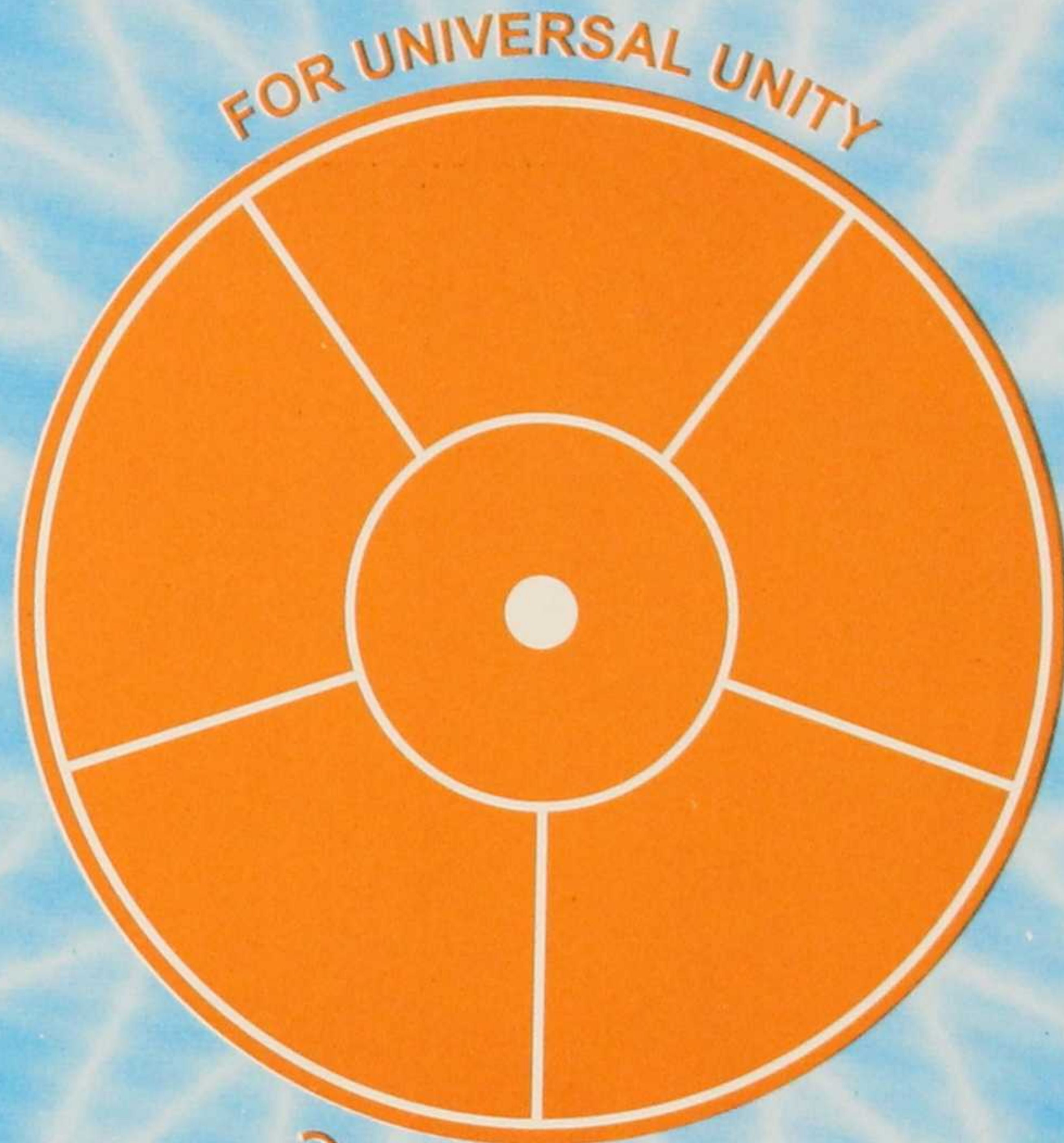


"The Oriya - American



Centenary year of the Mother's Arrival in Pondicherry

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The Transformed Soil

♦ Manoj Das

Jagdish Verma, the renowned businessman, was on a visit to Mathura - not for pilgrimage, but for striking a deal with a trader. He was returning to his town by boat. He was accompanied by his assistant, Shekhar.

A bullock-cart was waiting for him at the *ghat*. Shekhar and the cartel put his luggage in the cart. Verma was about to board it when he seemed to remember something.

"What a mistake I made!" he murmured to himself.

"What was it, Sir? asked Shekhar.

"Never mind," said Verma. "Wait a minute," he instructed Shekhar and walked towards the canal. He was back after a few minutes, holding what looked like a pouch.

On reaching home, Verma told Shekhar, "Carry this small parcel to auntie Champawati. Just tell her that I brought it for her. She will understand. You need not say a word more."

Shekhar was faithful to his master. He carried the parcel - a handful of earth in a handkerchief to Champawati Devi.

Champawati Devi was a widow, belonging to a noble family, respected by all. She loved Verma like her son.

"My child Jagadish is back, is he?" exclaimed the old lady while receiving the small parcel. "How conscientious of him to remember my small demand amidst all his business!"

She lifted the parcel for it to touch her forehead and said again, "When I heard about his proposed visit to Mathura, I asked him to bring a handful of earth from the bed of the sacred river Yamuna. He did not neglect to do my bidding.

"Well, what could be more precious for me than the soil of the Yamuna!"

The lady poured the earth into a silver casket. A drop of her tear fell on the earth.

Shekhar shivered with embarrassment and a sense of guilt. He alone knew that Verma had forgotten to collect any earth from Mathura. He remembered about it only while boarding the cart and went hurriedly and picked up some earth from the canal bank and put it in his handkerchief.

Shekhar knew that Verma was an atheist. He laughed at people's faith in God and at the rituals they performed. But he was an honest and upright man so far as his career

as a businessman was concerned. He had considered the lady's request an infantile. It was enough to satisfy her—he believed. He never thought that the soil of Yamuna had anything special about it or it could really do the lady any good.

Shekhar consoled himself with the thought that after all he had not lied to Champawati Devi. He had only performed an errand.

Time rolled on. Champawati Devi died. Verma retired from his business. Shekhar too had retired, but he continued to be Verma's confidant.

Champawati Devi's grandson had been married to Verma's daughter. Once Verma took ill. His condition deteriorated. His son-in-law, Champawati Devi's grandson, was a gifted physician. He and Shekhar did their best to pull Verma out of his physical predicament.

But one day, the physician told Shekhar, "Uncle, I've given up hope. Nothing is working. Vermaji is sinking."

Suddenly he seemed to remember something. "Uncle, please be here. I will be back soon."

He returned with a small bottle and he poured its content into the patient's mouth. Verma showed signs of recovery and he fully recovered in a few days.

One day, while Shekhar and the physician were on their way to a friend's house, the physician said, "Uncle! Strange things do happen, after all! Do you know what saved my father-in-law? My grandma had passed on to me a silver casket, with the message that it contained some sacred soil. She had cured several ailing people, mixing a pinch of the soil with water and making them drink it! When I was sure that my medicine was not going to save my father-in-law, I decided to try Grandma's prescription—and it worked!

Shekhar gave a start. He knew the nature of that soil. But he also realized that it had been transformed into something truly sacred by the drop of tear shed on it by Champawati Devi—the tear of deep faith, love and gratitude.

Tears came to Shekhar's eyes. "My son!" he told the physician, "please remember my earnest request. Never tell Vermaji anything about the mystery of his cure. Please do not ask me why!"

"I agree" said the physician.

(Can undiluted faith charge something ordinary with a special power? The story suggests that the old lady's faith, through her tear, rendered a qualitative elevation to an ordinary stuff, at last—and ironically—benefiting even the man who thought nothing of it!)