



The Speaking Stone

*Ratnadip
Acharya*

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Dedication

In the loving memory of the late Srimati Lila Acharya, my mother. During the formative stage of the book she was staying with me, in Mumbai, and passed away when the book was about to release. Her blessing is the basic foundation of the book.

About The Author

Ratnadip Acharya is the author of two successful novels, *Life is Always Aimless... Unless you love it* and *Paradise Lost & Regained*. He is a columnist for the Speaking Tree in The Times of India. He contributed many write-ups in different collections of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. He lives in Mumbai with his wife, Sophia and son, Akash.

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WARNING

The book has several images to explain the story, unraveling the questions that may come to the readers' mind while reading the book. So flipping through the back pages of the book prematurely may lead you to view one of the images which could act as plot-spoilers, hence it is not recommended.

DISCLAIMER

This is a work of fiction and must be read as one. Though the major historical characters, places, avenues, institutions, mountains described in the book indeed exist, the entire storyline is the creation of the author's imagination and any resemblance to any character alive or dead is purely coincidental.

Author's Note

Writing this historical thriller was a unique experience. I didn't even know when, how and why this unusual idea struck my mind, but once the idea of writing this thriller and mystery novel about a little-known part of India overwhelmed me, I was greatly diffident. I couldn't imagine that one day I could write a full-fledged novel on this intriguing plot with so many turns and twists. But every time I sat to write, early in the morning, I could feel an indescribable and indefinable force possess me and take control over the process of my thinking, deciding the words and incidents as well as the flow of events. I became a medium and that unknown source of all intelligence of the universe took charge. I merely surrendered myself to that shakti.

During this long process of writing this novel many people helped me. I wish to thank them all.

Sri Ashok Mahanta, professor of Sanskrit from Jadavpur University, for helping me with the poetic Sanskrit expressions.

Gokul Ram Singh, my friend for more than a decade, a gifted designer, for his unstinting help with patience and love. Without him, the book would have been incomplete.

A brilliant team of editors who edited the work with immense patience and care, and asked me repeatedly to rework on different sections of it, at times, to my dismay, too. Their wise touch made the book beautiful.

Anindita Ghoshal, my closest friend, a historian par excellence, for her trust in my works and in this book. For the last many years she has been continuously inspiring me to write better.

Both my brilliant sisters, Mahua and Madhumita, for their love and blessings.

I wish my father the late Ranjit Acharjee were alive now. He would have been the happiest man to see this novel publish.

It was indeed a wonderful experience to work with Aksora Publications. Chiefly, I am greatly indebted to Albert Soj and Charles Rosario for their generous help to the publication house in all possible ways in its nascent state. I look forward to working many more times with this enthusiastic team.

Sophia and Akash, my wife and son, my life and my heartbeat, for making my life a magic. Sophia used to offer hot steaming coffee to me when I sat to write early in the morning and little Akash would always insist that his photograph must be displayed somewhere in this book.

And last but not least you readers, who have trusted in me and my works. Hope this novel will live up to your expectation.

Ratnadip

May, 2019

Mumbai

यदा त्वम् तस्याम् सत्यमेव स्नेहिष्यसि,
देवीत्वेन च निरूपयिष्यसि ।

*Yadaa tvam tasyaam satyameva
snehishyasi deveetvena cha
niruupayishyasi*

*When you truly love her, make her your
goddess...*

-Kālidāsa

The greatest Sanskrit poet & dramatist

Prologue

A pigeon fluttered its wings impatiently as if to give a signal to its beloved that the setting sun would soon glide down and disappear somewhere behind the western rim of the sky. That soon a diluted darkness would envelop the place where they had made their home for a long time; that soon the full moon would sail up in the sky, unhurriedly, transporting the little world around them into a magical land.

She was happily perching on the tall branch of a tree because from up there it could easily say goodbye to the last shaft of sunlight in its own way. It fluttered its wings again after a while but on this occasion not to invite her mate but in an effort to puff up the layers of her feathers for she knew that the approaching evening would bring another guest with it. It was fog. The darkness of the night encouraged it to descend more vigorously upon the earth. Once she puffed herself up it helped her ward off the chilling cold of the night considerably.

She looked around, moving her nimble neck gracefully. But her mate, the other pigeon, was nowhere in the immediate vicinity. She looked at the moon now. The pale full moon of the late afternoon was slowly gaining its full glow as sunlight had already dimmed.

Suddenly another pigeon came flying and settled on the same branch beside her. This pigeon was slightly larger in size and its feathers white with occasional light brownish patches whereas the other pigeon, smaller in size, possessed spotlessly white feathers which accentuated its immaculate beauty. The larger pigeon now rubbed its neck against the smaller one and both the pigeons closed their eyes as a feeling of pure ecstasy filled them.

An inaudible moan escaped the smaller pigeon now. It was her way to tell her beloved that the entire night was left at their disposal for love-making and that for now, they must witness the beauty and calmness of the rising full moon.

Her mate must have been well-versed in understanding the words of her heart from just a little shift of her head or her muffled squeak. It also looked at the direction she was gazing.

And there, in the distant sky, the full moon of the foggy evening was rising up. As the moonlight became a little more intense it manoeuvred through the mist and reached the forest, the trees, the pigeons and the gigantic rocks of the mountain right behind the tree where the birds perched. There was a pleasant nip in the gentle wind, blowing almost in silence. The leaves of the trees were shaking languidly; they were longing to be covered with a layer of mist; something they felt they deserved after being scorched by the sunlight throughout the day.

The entire mountain was peacefully silent. All one could hear was a pastoral music that issued from the deep ravine a little ahead of the lines of trees when the wind blew through it. But this enchanting music had no effect on the mighty mountain and its rocks and stones, standing motionless, expressionless and silent, weathering the elements, wearing a stoic look for time infinity. A thick growth of vegetation made its way from different cracks of the rocks. Yet there were many large rocks, standing speck-less for eternity. On those rocks, many strange images were carved. Hundreds of large-sized stones were also found lying scattered around and the images of gods and goddesses were carved on many of them, too. No matter how desperately the thickets and vegetation around tried to cover those images on the rocks and stones, some mysterious force always foiled their effort as though those images cut on the rocks and stones must not be obscured by bushes or obliterated by time.

The moon glided a little up in the sky. Its tender light penetrated the fog, girdling the mysterious mountain in its bosom,

and touched the rocks and stones softly. Its magic touch made the images on the stones and rocks alive in a strange way.

The pair of pigeons could never discern as to why they loved to feast their eyes on those rocks of the mountain where so many unusual images were engraved. They would spend no less than an hour on every full moon night, watching the play between light and life on those rocks and stones. And then they would return to their nest in silence as peace stole their heart.

Now a pleasant quietness and stillness descended upon the mountain before a mild footfall broke its sublime tranquillity. Suddenly appeared there an old monk with long flowing white beard, clad in two pieces of thin saffron cloth; one was his loincloth and the other one he wrapped around his chest and upper arms. The chill of the winter night seemed to have no effect on him. There were prominent wrinkles under his eyes and on his forehead, his hair snow-white, but yet his agile movement and backbone, as straight as a ramrod, didn't qualify any visitor to the mountain of rocks to hazard a guess at his age. To be on the safer side they all called him 'Ageless Saint'.

However, there was a certain reason behind it. The visitors to this mountain of rocks claimed that for decades they hadn't witnessed any change in his look or stature. They were actually pilgrims to the mountain of rocks. In spite of the repeated efforts of many of them, nobody could ever make him speak. All he would do as a response to their questions was to reward them with a benign smile and an assuring nod of his head. Some of them even doubted that he was speech-impaired. It was not easy to meet him either. Apart from a few auspicious days never did he visit the mountain during the daytime. They claimed that he visited the mountain only when darkness fell and no one was around. It was also rumoured that he worshipped and meditated in front of the largest image on the rock at midnight.

It was a 40 feet tall image of the head of Lord Shiva. Here it was widely known as Kaal Bhairava. Like all other images of

the rock mountain, it was also a low relief type of sculpture with a ten-foot-high embroidered headdress. It had a prominent third eye and its earlobes were decorated with circular earrings. On his headgear, small images of celestial figures were carved out and looking carefully at the image of Kaal Bhairava one might feel that those tiny celestial bodies were desperate to be one with Kaal Bhairava. Kaal Bhairava was a fierce manifestation of Lord Shiva associated with annihilation. The deity was called upon as a protector as he guarded the eight directions of the universe. Bhairava was also described as the protector of the timid.

All that they knew about 'Ageless Saint' was that he lived in a small hut, deep in the valley, near a stream, far from human habitat and didn't encourage any visitor to his place. They considered themselves lucky if they bumped into him on an auspicious day in the mountain of rocks for it was an open secret that as soon as pilgrims started thronging in the mountain, he disappeared in silence. But the more elusive Ageless Saint became the more curious the natives were to know about him. Yet none of them dared to invade the shroud of mysterious silence about him. It was whispered that there was some secret treasure hidden in those majestic rocks, those rock-cut and stone carved images of gods and goddesses which was only known to him.

Ageless Saint walked ahead slowly, taking in everything around him. He searched for those two pigeons. They had disappeared for the night. The remembrance of the pigeons brought a small smile to his lips. There was something common between those pigeons and him. Though long back he had stopped counting his age and years, he was pretty certain that this pair of pigeons had been here for many many years. Probably he was a young boy when he had seen the pair of pigeons for the first time.

Their unusually long life didn't astound him and he had accepted them as a part of the mountain and rocks as the mountain had accepted him as a part of it, with the fullest trust, unquestioningly, with the love of its caring touch for the last many decades.

Ageless Saint reached near the rock where a gigantic image of Kaal Bhairava was carved. He touched the rock. It was cold to touch. Involuntarily his eyes closed when he felt a kind of calmness, serenity and peace from the rock filling his body.

He sat cross-legged on a piece of stone in front of Kaal Bhairava and meditated for long hours. Once he opened his eyes the night was about to end. The darkness was slightly liquid. He passed a long glance at the huge rocks and stones scattered around him. They were in hundreds. The images of many gods and goddesses were engraved on them. But the images of Lord Shiva monopolized, followed by those of Parvati, Lord Ganesha, Nandi Bull and a few more. Joining his hands, Ageless Saint gave a respectful pranam to all the images.

Even though no one knew who made those images, how and when those images had come into existence, Ageless Saint found himself deeply connected to them. He was thankful that visitors here were few and far between, barring on a few auspicious days. He had heard that no more was the princely state, whose part this mighty mountain was, ruled by kings. A few years after the independence of India this tiny state joined the independent India.

But it made little difference to him and the rock mountain. Only a handful of people knew about the mountain of rocks; probably, because it belonged to the most neglected part of India.

As the first shaft of light of dawn touched the mountain Ageless Saint retraced his steps towards his cottage, a few kilometres away from the mountain, when the chirping birds and whispering trees reclaimed the rocks and the mountain.

One of the strangest things in life is that the secrets and treasures of the world open their arms to embrace you only when no secrets matter to you anymore and the treasure you have found within yourself is more precious than any other worldly treasure, a thought passed through Ageless Saint's mind. A pair of birds squeaked from a tree nearby as though they were seconding his thought.

Chapter 1

December 2016, Mumbai

“Sir, we are about to close,” a courteous but curt voice materialized from near his shoulder. These words, however, had barely any effect on him as he just groaned sleepily, without budging even an inch.

The middle-aged man standing behind him hesitated for a moment before placing his fingers on his shoulder and tapping on it.

“Sir, it is well past one-thirty. We must close now at any cost. You know those Colaba police, na?” the man in uniform urged him. After all, he could not afford to speak in an authoritative manner with someone who frequented their pub, always drank enough to make the pub owner richer by a few thousand, behaved well with all the butlers unlike many other young men his age, and, above all, was always generous to give tips to the workers in the pub. He was quite a favourite with the staff of this famous pub, Voodoo, a little behind Hotel Taj Palace in Colaba. They looked up to him for another reason, too. It was his demonic capacity to drink and remain composed and collected even after that. Never before had it happened that he placed his head on the table, pillowed on his locked arms and slept blissfully. Whenever he visited Voodoo on weekends he was accompanied by one or two friends and the attendants in Voodoo knew that one of those friends, who didn’t drink, was always at the wheel while they returned from the pub. But tonight he was all alone and completely drunk. They were not sure as to how he would ride home.

"Sir," the uniformed man called him again, tapping on his shoulder, a bit impatiently now. This time as he leaned to touch the young man's shoulder the hanging end of his tie touched his ear and earlobe. What the earnest request and tapping of the attendant couldn't do, the hanging end of the tie seemed to have done it effortlessly. Probably it sent a tickling sensation down his spine as he raised his head with a sleepy smile.

"Sorry," said he, looking up.

"Sir, we are well past our closing time," repeated the man.

He passed a searching glance about and as he found the pub empty except for him a sheepish smile came over his lips.

"I am sorry," said he, trying to get to his feet.

A pleasant sweet smell of Black Label whisky issued from his mouth.

"May I use the toilet once before leaving?" he asked with his usual politeness and then headed to the Men's with an unsteady gait.

He returned from the toilet after a few minutes, wiping his face with a handkerchief.

"Are you sure, sir, you can manage to go all by yourself?" asked the concerned attendant.

"I will," replied he and staggered to the entrance of Voodoo.

The attendant watched his six-foot-tall frame leaving the pub and hoped he would reach home safely. He consulted the watch. It was a quarter to two.

Outside the pub the young man stood for a few moments, trying to gather his thoughts. He looked around then. The street in front of him was deserted. At the corner of the street, two stray dogs were sleeping, coiling themselves against each other to feel warm in the cold winter night. A thin wisp of smoke was spiralling up from a small heap of ashes. He knew the durwans from the nearby

buildings might have lit the fire with the foliage and old discarded cardboard to warm themselves up. He did a mental calculation and tottered ahead at a slow pace. All that accompanied him was his hesitant footfall and a faithful shadow. He walked past Kashmir Emporium, Rustic Rajasthan, and an antique shop whose targeted customers were usually foreign tourists, and arrived behind the Taj Continental where scores of four-wheelers were parked. As he looked at the cars, parked in an astonishingly disciplined fashion to make the most of the space, a thought struck him. Most of the cars were white. He had no difficulty in finding his car. He opened the rear door of the car and plopped himself down on the seat. It was not long before he stretched at full length, occupying the entire back seat.

Soon he fell asleep when the crashing waves of the Arabian Sea, in front of Hotel Taj Continental, played a lullaby for him. It was the first night he slept in the car.

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Next morning what woke him up was not a shaft of sunlight or an impatient tap on the car window by the durwan of the parking area but an angry bickering of a pair of stray dogs. He squinted his eyes half open and it took him a few moments to realize that he was not at home but was lying on the rear seat of his Duster RXE. He peered hard through the see-through glass and saw two dogs fighting to their heart's content over a piece of long colourful ribbon. For a moment he wondered if it was the same pair of dogs that had been sleeping together as the most intimate mates last night. He checked his watch. It was a quarter past seven. He got down from the car, checked his mobile phone, wallet and began to walk. The hangover from the last night's boozing was still there but he loved walking in the pleasant chill wind.

He walked ahead with a determined stride as his destination was certain.

Cafe Leopold was barely a few hundred metres from the parking area behind Hotel Taj. It was the most popular cafe among the foreign tourists in Colaba area. Quite often a strange smell of beer, fried chicken, and the smoke of cigarette issued from it and many tourists who frequented the cafe found this smell intoxicating. But early in the morning, the entire cafe was filled with the perfume of *dhup* and incense sticks.

A couple of attendants were laying the table, placing the chairs around the tables. One of them cast him a sidelong glance and told him with a customary stoic manner, "We have opened just now. So don't expect anything more than omelette and sandwich."

"One double omelette, two slices of bread, and a cup of coffee would be more than enough," said he with an affable smile.

The attendant indicated a table to him, motioning with his head.

"First I will use the toilet," said he and headed directly towards the washroom with an air of a man who frequented the Cafe.

He was quite accustomed to the frosty replies of the attendants of Cafe Leopold. Every time they gave him a curt reply with a faraway expression on their face he remembered *Shantaram*, an epic novel written by an Australian fugitive, Gregory David Roberts. It was one of the most authentic books written about Mumbai and more than eighty percent of the novel was about Colaba and the places near it. In the novel, the girlfriend of the protagonist used to tell him, on a lighter note though, "Every time I want to be treated like shit, I visit Cafe Leopold."

Once he left the cafe it was five past eight. The otherwise bustling Colaba Causeway where pavement sellers and their prospective customers made the entire causeway lively and active throughout the day was wearing a forlorn look now.

He moved ahead slowly, taking in everything around him. There was a strange kind of romanticism about this part of the

city which he always found heady and exciting. He walked past Bata, Restaurant Cafe Churchill, McDonald's, Strand Book Stall and was about to take a right turn from Cafe Mondegar when a man caught his attention. He unfolded a folding table, spread a tablecloth over it, placed a large-sized carry bag on it, undid its zip and brought out from the depth of the bag a few things wrapped in newspapers. Slowly he removed the layer of old newspapers around his wares and placed them tenderly on the table as if they would be hurt if roughly handled.

He gazed at the wares set up by the pavement seller when curiosity aroused within him. There was an old wall clock of around one foot diameter with a body made of wood. Its discoloured body had lost its sheen long back. There was an age-old magnifying glass with a metal body, a few fancy cigarette holders which were, without a shadow of a doubt, no less than a century old, a couple of silk scarves that certainly had seen better days, and the list went on to include even metal buttons and pairs of cufflinks.

Now the pavement seller removed the largest stuff he had. It immediately drew his attention among the large selection of merchandise. It was a piece of stone on which some images were carved. This piece of ebony stone was around twenty inches tall and six inches in width and four inches in depth. But the strange thing about the stone that arrested his instant attention was that it appeared to be exactly the half of a piece of stone twice its size. The original stone was vertically bisected with some sharp tool and as those images were engraved on the piece of stone vertically, one image after another, all that this piece of stone had was half the actual images.

"May I check this?" he asked the pavement seller, indicating the piece of stone.

With a nod of the head, the pavement seller said yes to him.

He held the stone up with both his hands and brought it close to his face. It was quite heavy for its size and cold to touch. There were four faces carved on the stone. He studied those faces

carefully and realized how difficult it was to conceive the entire face from only the vertical half of it. It was even more difficult as the eyes of all those images were partly closed. Now his attention was caught by the third image from the top. It was certainly an elephant head. It was very likely to be an image of Lord Ganesha, the god with an elephant head. All the images were intricately carved. The smooth edge of the stone, along which it was vertically cut, had three prominent holes, just above the eyes of the first three images. There was no hole above the eye of the fourth image. The first three images looked like those of gods and a goddess and the fourth one looked more like the face of a woman with ethereal beauty. The stone looked almost like this from the front:



(The front side of the stone)

Now he turned the stone and then another interesting thing arrested his attention. A few words were engraved on the

stone in an artistic fashion. He could easily make out that those words were in Sanskrit. But unfortunately only half of each line was available there. As it was the left side of the single piece of the stone, considering the front side as a reference, all that was engraved on the rear side of the stone was the last half of each line; the inscription on the stone was:



मम उभयखण्डम्
विशय पौर्णमासीं कौमुदीम् ।
तमोमयं प्रदेशम्
मत् दूरम् विनिःसरति ।
त्वाम् महार्घं निधिं

(The rear side of the stone)

He was not one of those who were easily drawn towards anything that promised to belong to another part of the world and of a different era. But for some inexplicable reason, he felt attracted to this piece of stone. It was as though reaching his hands the piece of stone was urging him to help it meet its other part, as if its cold exterior was promising him a priceless gift once it met its estranged other part, as if like one of the forcibly-separated conjoined twins it was in search for its sibling and reaching his hand it felt for the first time that it might get to meet its other half one day.

Are these poetic thoughts the outcome of last night's Black Label? But earlier also many a time I downed almost the entire 750ml bottle on the rocks. He thought for a moment and checked his wallet. Luckily, there was enough cash with him. As he had increased the usage of cards and other electronic means of transaction extensively, using cash had taken the back seat.

He paid the pavement vendor one thousand rupees. "Is it enough for this piece of stone?" he asked him.

"I don't bargain with anyone. If I like my customer I give my products to them, if not I keep it with myself," the voice of the pavement seller was calm and collected. He paused and added, "And I have taken a liking to you."

"Just wanted to know one thing, do you really expect to get customers for this strange array of products so early in the morning? Colaba Causeway doesn't come to life before midday."

"Exactly, that's why I come here early in the morning and wind up before eleven, though I don't come every day. When the causeway is too crowded nobody would prize the unique products I bring with me. Nobody would care to know the stories behind each product I have," replied the pavement seller. There was no trace of bragging in his words.

However, he was not sure if it was a ploy of the pavement seller to sell a few more things to him.

"I am in a bit of a hurry this morning. Someday I will catch up with you. You seem to be an interesting man. Would you mind packing it for me?" He indicated the piece of stone to the pavement seller.

After a minute, as he was about to leave, the pavement seller asked him, "What is your name, sir? I love to know the name of my customers. Just the name would do." He was holding a small notebook on his left hand and a pen in his right.

"Saikat, Saikat is my name," he answered with a smile.

“Thanks, I name all my products. And when no one is around I talk to them. I named this piece of stone the Speaking Stone. Obviously, the stone doesn’t speak or possess any special power. But I think this piece of stone has a great story to share only if someone tries to find it,” the pavement seller paused, jotted down something in his tiny notebook and added, “have a great day, sir.”

As Saikat walked away the pavement seller studied his features. Saikat was tall with a long face. His eyes were deep in the socket, nose sensitive, lips thin and neck long. He had a strong square jaw and he parted his hair on the left. The very first impression his look gave was that he was a thoughtful man and that it was difficult to understand what was going on in his mind.

Chapter 2

*December 2016, Chandannagar,
West Bengal*

She cast another glance at the spiral-bound dissertation proposal, lying on the bed, and again tears welled up in her eyes. In silence, she walked towards the bed, picked up those spiral-bound files with laminated front and back cover and held them against her bosom tightly as though they were her children.

“Sorry, baby, I have failed you. I didn’t know those so-called scholars are so commonplace, stupid and ordinary,” whispered she. “But don’t worry at all, I will always treasure you with me. You are the fruit of my love, testimony to the fact that I am capable of listening to my heart; that I can walk alone off the beaten track, unlike those dull folks who proudly call themselves professors and intellectual giants. Take my word, one day I will prove those dull donkeys, occupying the respectable positions of VC, senior professors how superficial their so-called knowledge is. How heartless could one be to speak in such a casual manner about my work? Can she imagine how much love, sincerity and dedication was invested in the process of making this dissertation proposal? Wait, let me reach the top one day, and then I will demonstrate to those shallow so-called historians and petty intellectuals what actually history is and how it is written...”

She was seething with futile anger. It was the first time her smooth-sailing splendid academic career and activity had been challenged. In fact, it was not only challenged but also trivialized by an expert historian from Calcutta University.

Being the first-class second in Masters in History from Jadavpur University, arguably one of the best universities in West Bengal, she had no difficulty in securing her first job as a history teacher in Chandannagar Government Higher Secondary School. She was barely twenty-five then. Another six months and she cracked NET (National Eligibility Test) with a fabulous 89.5% percentile. Clearing NET was the first stepping stone to get a job as a lecturer in a reputed college. All she was waiting for then was an advertisement for an opening for a doctorate in her branch in one of the reputed universities in West Bengal. She dreamt of working with one of the eminent historians from Bengal for her Ph. D (Doctor of Philosophy). She was certain that she would clear the written test for the candidate selection for Ph. D. and had already worked on a long and authentic dissertation proposal though the subject she had chosen was very unconventional. It was '*The History of Terracotta Designs*'.

She had been advised by one of her close seniors from academia that it was better to weigh up the depth and originality of her dissertation by getting it read by a renowned historian. He had even introduced her to Urvi Mukherjee, a prominent figure of Indian History from Calcutta University.

She had already heard of Urvi and knew well that she possessed a handful of enviable degrees from many universities and institutions across the world and would visit foreign lands quite often to present her papers on various issues like the East India Company and its activity in India, colonialism, caste system in ancient India and its effect on present India, architecture of modern India, chiefly the subjects those attract the attention of British and American historians about India and the other third world countries. She was ecstatic beyond words once Urvi Mukherjee agreed to *glance over* her long write-ups.

She was certain that the depth of her article, candour, hard work and love with which it was written with first-hand experiences would floor Urvi Mukherjee and the day she cleared the written test for Ph. D., Urvi would love to be her guide and mentor for her doctorate.

Since the submission of the dissertation proposal several months back she had called Urvi few times, hesitantly and with a palpitating heart, all eager to listen to her feedback.

Every time Urvi would say in a distant tone of voice, "Please allow me some more time," and cut the call. And at last this morning when she called Urvi, she seemed to be in a relaxed mood.

"I looked into your work. It appears from your work that you live in a make-believe world of romanticism. Isn't it?" materialized Urvi's professional voice.

Her heart skipped a beat. "I am afraid, I haven't got you, Ma'am," said she, in her uncharacteristic timidity.

"Look, under my guidance, no less than twenty students have done their Ph. D. over the years and I need not have to mention that they all now have Dr as a prefix to their name," said Urvi, spacing her words with a pause and then added, "Never before did I come across anyone who chose such a fancy topic for his or her dissertation. Whatever my little understanding says that you must understand what the world wants to hear from you. I suggest you write a proposal on Environmental History, Partition or Gender Study. Such subjects interest our historians from Europe and America and have a global appeal, too. Think about it and I hope you will certainly come up with a snappy write up on one of these subjects. Best wishes." The phone line went dead. But her eyes were already swimming with tears.

That shallow historian of a Urvi tried to wreck her confidence, calling her work a fanciful thought. What the hell does she know? She would prove Urvi wrong one day, thought she, wiping her tears, keeping her dissertation on the bed again. 'Be rest assured, my child, I will not sit in peace until you see the light of the day,' announced she determinedly, loud enough to hear the words herself and then a thought struck her. She decided to visit the District Library of Chandannagar this afternoon. It had a wonderful collection of books on Indian History. Who knew she might bump into a book that offered her a unique topic for a new

dissertation proposal; something that might attract the attention of those run of the mill historians.

She consulted her watch. It was ten thirty.

I will go to the District Library as soon as school breaks this afternoon, she told herself, taking long strides to the mirror.

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Once she reached the District Library it was a quarter to four.

“We close at six on the dot,” informed the solemn-looking librarian as she left her jute bag with the librarian and collected a small plastic token from him as an acknowledgement of the deposit. “The purse and mobile phone you can carry but make sure to keep the mobile phone on silent mode.”

With a silent nod of her head, she told him that she was aware of these guidelines. Now she walked ahead and was soon welcomed by tall bookshelves. The mahogany bookshelves were old, a little taller than her and didn’t have any door with see-through glasses. Books standing on different racks of each bookshelf were numbered on their spines. The bookshelves looked grave, silent and watchful as if holding hundreds of books in their bosom down the years they had also become wise. She walked past the sections dedicated to fiction, contemporary literature, physics, mathematics, botany and zoology, astronomy and astrology and reached the cluster of bookshelves dedicated to history.

She passed a sweeping glance about, reading the headings attached to the top of each bookshelf. It was to help the visitors reach his or her desired destination without wasting time in rummaging through different bookshelves. In every section of this sprawling library that housed no less than two hundreds solid bookshelves, an instruction was written on the wall at various places, urging the visitors to keep the book after reading from where it was picked up.

There were bookshelves dedicated to Renaissance and European History, presidents of America and the way they shaped the country, Mughal Dynasty in India where she found, to her utter surprise, the works of William Dalrymple, too, and the list went on. No fewer than three bookshelves were exclusively for those who were interested in studying the history of Indian Independence. But none of these study materials evoked her interest.

Hundred thousand students of history might have done their Ph. D. on these subjects; the last drop of juice was extracted out of it; probably there were no new insights she might throw on such subjects. At the same time, she would hate to work on the topics Urvi Mukherjee had suggested to her. She knew such works were lifeless and that the students who chose to work on such subjects were also well-aware that such dissertations were simply superficial gibberish though they promised to add a prefix, Dr, before their name.

Suddenly her attention was arrested by a bookshelf with no heading on it. It was the last bookshelf in the history section. A very thin layer of cobwebs covering the racks of the bookshelf was a clear indication that for no less than a month no one had touched a book on this shelf.

She passed a cursory glance at the titles when a particular title aroused her curiosity. It was a Bengali book and the nearest meaning of its title in English was 'Stories beyond and after Rajmala'. She took the book out of the shelf and leafed through its pages. An intoxicating stench emanated from the book; a smell that lovers of old books are often mad for. Half the spine of the book was torn and so, too, were the first few pages where the author's name, publisher's name, dedication, contents were printed. She checked the book carefully now but couldn't find the author's name anywhere.

She was a voracious reader of not only the works of history but also nonfiction of different flavours and genres. But yet she was certain that she hadn't heard this word Rajmala before. Though

this old book didn't promise to provide her with an ingenious idea for her dissertation proposal, she felt like going through a few pages of it.

Finding an isolated corner of the library she sat at a table, her chin resting on her cupped hands. The book was lying open on the table in front of her; probably it was feeling grateful as someone was touching its words, sentences with her eyes after so many years. Probably those words came alive, constructing a vivid and fascinating visual creation of everything she was devouring from those pages. She remained seated there, totally engrossed, turning one yellowish page after another after every few minutes, without budging a bit in her chair.

Suddenly a voice materialized near her, "Didn't I tell you that the library closes at six on the dot?"

Somewhat surprised, she looked up from the book and saw the librarian standing in front of her with a faraway expression on his face.

"I am sorry," said she, apologetically. She had reached the 55th page of the book. She checked the last page. It was a 237-page book. I will take another six hours to complete it; she did a mental calculation and kept the book from where she had taken it.

Suddenly she felt deeply grateful to Urvi. Had Urvi not passed disparaging remarks on her dissertation proposal, she might not have thought of writing a new dissertation. And there was no possibility of her visiting the library this afternoon, let alone the chance of knowing that such a book existed on the earth.

Now her mind travelled to that princely state about which she was reading for almost last two hours. She knew so little about it. Though it joined India a little after independence and had been granted statehood soon, this state remained one of the most neglected parts of the country due to lack of decent communication system and industrialization. But never had it occurred to her that this state carried so many stories of mystery and unique heritage

in her heart, and what was more, that these stories were never a recognized part of the Indian History.

In her mind's eyes, she created a majestic palace, a tranquil lake, a distant mountain full of rocks and stones with images of gods, goddesses and celestial figures and felt a deep urge to see them with her own eyes one day.

"What is your name?" asked the librarian as she collected her jute bag.

"Shuvashini Guha," replied she, curtly.

"Subashini," repeated the librarian as he recorded her name in the register where the name and visiting hours of all the visitors were recorded.

"It is not Subashini, it is Shuvashini," she said with a force. "Though I am a Bengali I write Shuvashini."

"Okay, Shuvashini," smiled the librarian, jotted down her name and looked at her.

She was around twenty-six, dusky-complexioned with thick curly hair that reached till her shoulder. A tiny diamond was glistening on her nose ring. She had a broad forehead, small nose and large eyes with equally long eyelashes. The whites of her eyes were unusually white and when she looked at someone unblinkingly it gave an impression that she was aggressive in nature and was always ready for a debate or altercation if required. Her hands were long and fingers small, shapely and properly manicured.

He gave her a courteous nod and she left after giving him a small smile.

Chapter 3

February 1900, a Princely State, a part of undivided British India

The setting sun threw a mauve light on the swans gliding effortlessly in a large lake. Emanating from their iridescent wings was a strange light. Standing behind an iron railing near the lake he feasted his eyes on the swans. Their movements generated successive ripples, distorting the image that otherwise the lake would have reflected. Now the largest swan among the flock squawked. It was a harsh and piercing cry; a signal to all the swans of its flock that it was the time to return home for the day.

The swans came out of the water now, spread their long wings lazily, shook them until the last droplet of water sprinkled about and then they waddled home. They were all walking in a line, completely in a disciplined manner, no swan tried to outrun the other one before it. Gazing at the line of swans always reminded him of his infantrymen who were equally disciplined and most importantly, respectful to the core of the royal family.

The water of the lake was tranquil again. Barring a few lotus leaves scattered towards the edge of the lake the entire lake was clean and its limpid water silent. He gazed at the water surface when a satisfactory smile made its way to his lips. The lake water reflected a gigantic palace standing a little distance off the lake.

I wish father were alive now. Probably nothing would have made him happier and more proud. It is the first palace constructed by the Manikya dynasty. One day the name of this palace will go down in history and probably along with that my name too. If a new episode of Rajmala is written this grand palace and I will

also find a place in it one day, he thought with a sense of inner joy. Rajmala was a series of volumes, chronicling the history of Manikya dynasty chronologically. The king belonged to this kind and generous dynasty that ruled this little state for centuries.

But then another thought crossed his mind. The royal priest had told him that four days later there would be one of the most auspicious days in the recent months to perform *prashad-sanchar*, a puja that was needed to be performed before he formally started using the palace as his home. Though some more construction work in the western section of the palace was pending it was certainly in a good state for his entire family to shift there from the present bungalow, adjacent to the palace. He wanted the palace to be named before the puja and for the same purpose, he had invited a very special guest all the way from Calcutta Province a month back. His joy knew no bounds when his guest had agreed to visit his palace. As per his commitment, he should have reached here day before yesterday but yet now there was no news about him or his arrival. His special guest was not anyone from any royal family of Bengal but a man with a towering personality and creativity unimaginable.

He wrinkled his brows in thought and then walked towards the quarters of royal messengers. Behind him walking were two royal guards, holding spears with a glinting head, occasionally they were casting deferential glances at their king as the stories of his glory and benevolence never ceased to inspire love and respect for him in their heart.

In fact, the royal soldiers vied among themselves to be the king's personal guard; a position that was looked up to by the infantries.

No sooner did the king reach the quarters for royal messengers than a sharp voice uttered, "Long live His Highness, Maharaja Radha Kishore Manikya."

It was a large-sized parrot with an unusually long tail and a red hooked-beak, perching on an artificial tree branch in a cage,

large enough to accommodate no less than ten parrots. This parrot, Subhadra, belonged to one of the rarest species of parrots found in Jampui Hill, around 60 miles away from the kingdom of Radha Kishore Manikya. This rare bird could imitate whatever it was taught to speak with an extraordinary perfection. However, it had a unique habit of repeating what it heard often even though nobody intended to teach the same to it. What is more, it could repeat those words in the same pitch and metre they had been uttered.

The king, Radha Kishore Manikya, bent his head slightly towards the bird to accept its greetings. Behind the cage for Subhadra, there was a large aviary, dedicated to homing pigeons, who acted most of the times as a royal emissary. They were trained by a team of expert natives who knew this region very well. They would carry the homing pigeons all the way to the key places like the palaces of other kings or influential landlords from the eastern part of Bengal and Assam, traversing the distance either on a horse or by walking. Such expeditions might take several days; and then they would return home, following the same route. Once the same route was followed to reach a certain destination and also while returning, the pigeons with their unique sense of identifying a route could easily take the message from one place to another. Usually, the feathers of the homing pigeons of each kingdom were marked with a unique mark so as to identify the state or the king they belonged to.

Two men were tending the pigeons, inspecting them carefully; the silent pigeons were paid more attention for a long silence of these otherwise frolicsome and sprightly birds could be an indication of approaching death or a severe ailment.

Seeing the king both the attendants rushed to him and joining their hands in a respectful pranam they said, almost in unison, "Long live, Your Majesty."

The king, Radha Kishore Manikya, reciprocated their pranam with a warm namaskar; a very rare conduct of a king to his subjects;

something that made him favourite with the local natives of this land. Before the king could ask them anything, the taller among the two caretakers of the pigeons told the king, "Your Majesty, there was a message for you from the king of Sylhet district. The royal messenger took it to your bungalow just a while ago."

"Thank you," said the king and headed towards the bungalow on the right side of the palace. He walked along the gravel path, hemmed in on both sides by periwinkle and marigold flower plants. The flowers were in full bloom on this winter evening.

A gentle wind blew and the flower plants shook a little as though they were welcoming the king. An absent smile came to the king's lips. He loved this quaint place and its naive natives so much that he would never think twice to shed his blood for this land and its people.

Suddenly an impatient sound of a trotting horse from the direction of the stable broke the peaceful chain of thoughts of the king, and almost immediately a displeased look came over his face. Without looking in the direction of the stable he knew that it was his distant brother, Indra Kishore. Indra Kishore was 32 and took to everything in life that the king or other natives naturally disliked. Though time and again the king had been advised by his prudent ministers that he must take Indra Kishore in hand and tell him sternly to put a stop to his unruly activities that might bring humiliation to the royal family, for some secret reason the king was always mild and soft towards him. Every time the king felt like being hard on Indra Kishore he remembered his father, Krishna Mohan, who was a trusted right hand of his father, the then king Bir Chandra Manikya. Krishna Mohan had once saved Bir Chandra's life, putting himself on the line. Indra was a toddler then.

Radha Kishore remembered his ailing father telling him, "Radha, without Krishna, you would have been an orphan long back. Remember, the responsibility of taking care of his family in my absence is entrusted upon you."

Radha Kishore heaved a deep sigh and looked in the direction of the stable. All he could see in the approaching darkness was a cloud of dust rising up as the horse had already disappeared.

Radha Kishore walked ahead, occasionally passing a glance at the palace standing in silhouette.

“Your Majesty, there is a message for you from the royal messengers. As per that, he will be reaching here tomorrow by midday,” said the queen, Maharani Tulsibati, handing a rolled parchment to the king as soon as he entered their private room. The two royal guards accompanying the king had left once the king entered the private room where except for the king, queen and their children no one was allowed to enter without permission. Two large candles, standing on a sturdy candle-stand, were throwing light everywhere in the room. The shadows of the king and queen on the wall were dancing slowly as per the whim of the flames of the candle. In the centre of the high-ceilinged room, there was a four-poster bed. All the four wooden bedposts and the headboard of the bed were intricately carved. The canopy over the bed was a thin sheet of muslin. It was slowly flapping and emitting from it was a mild light. All pieces of furniture in the room, right from the upholstered sofa, dressing table to the flower vase, were designed with taste. The large-sized dressing table with the Belgium glass was a recent gift from the king to his beloved wife. There was a large oil painting of his father, Bir Chandra Manikya, on one of the walls of the room. It was the best painting of his father that the king had, though he was not happy with it and always felt that the painter couldn’t do justice to his father’s kind and yet firm look. Every morning the king started his day after spending a few minutes in front of it, seeking the blessing of his godlike father. But every time he stood in front of the painting he remembered Sudhakar Chatterjee, a painter with a photographic memory, who was the official royal painter now. Sudhakar possessed an inexplicably powerful memory and whatever he watched once he could reproduce it in his artwork with an astounding accuracy, taking care of each minute detail. The king knew if Sudhakar

Chatterjee were there as a royal painter during his father's regime he would have had drawn many paintings of his father which would have been so lifelike that standing in front of them the king might feel his father talking to him.

The king passed a satisfying glance around the room, bestowed a loving look to his wife, and then unrolled the parchment. He checked the date and time twice before his heart filled with joy. Maharani Tulsibati was correct. As per the royal message from Sylhet his special guest should reach here tomorrow by midday.

"First of all, how many times I have to tell you that in private you must not address me as Your Majesty? It sounds as if you are one of the ordinary citizens of the state," remarked the king, and added after a pause, "Besides, you are no ordinary queen, Yasodhara. People of this state worship you as a godly figure."

Though the actual name of the queen was Tulsibati the king preferred to call her Yasodhara. Since the king devoured the Dhammapada, the collection of the Buddha's sayings, he became an ardent disciple of the Buddha and began calling his wife by the name of Gautama, the Buddha's wife. That is Yasodhara. He often claimed that he witnessed all the great virtues of Yasodhara in his wife. Maharani Tulsibati came from a very humble background but took lots of initiative in women's education in Tripura. She ran a school named Tulsibati School and had a natural talent for poetry.

"I have furnished the room for our guest as best as I could think of. Would you like to have a look at it, Radha?" asked the queen with her characteristic calmness.

"Yes. Let's go," said the king, keeping the parchment on a three-legged table with a circular top.

"May I ask you something, Radha? Why are you so taken to this poet and his work? There are so many Bengali poets who are more renowned than him now. Moreover, don't you think that by paying too much of respect to a particular Bengali poet you

Now the horse-cart stopped in front of the king's bungalow. The horses huffed through their nose and hit their hooves against the gravel path as though they were impatient after a long canter.

The curtain of the small room attached to the horse-cart was pulled now and disembarked from it was a tall man. His long dark curly hair reached till his shoulder, his nose unusually sharp, complexion dusky but the most striking thing in his features was his pair of eyes. They were limpid, silent and unusually bright. Looking into such a pair of eyes one might feel hypnotised and transported into a peaceful world. He was wearing a long mantle. It was difficult to gauge his age.

"Thanks a lot for considering that my invitation is worth keeping," said the king humbly, garlanding the tall man standing in front of him.

The tall man didn't reply immediately. He passed a long glance at the multitude of local people gathered on both sides of the road to see him and then at the palace and the long trees all around this place and the beyond. He drew a deep breath now as if to gulp fresh air, reaching him after being filtered by the hundreds of trees around.

Then he spoke, "Your Majesty when the woodlands of Tripura have sent out an invitation to their floral feast through the courier of the west wind, I have come as a friend." His voice was low and slightly sharp, in a way a contrast to his imposing personality. Yet it possessed a unique quality. It sounded as though his words were coming from a far off land.

The king had already heard of the poet's unique style of speaking. Utterly mesmerized, he bent down to touch the poet's feet but the poet promptly retracted them.

"Your Majesty, I am well aware of your unblemished humility but kindly don't make me a victim of it," the poet told the king and held him against his heart.

It was a rare sight for the natives of Tripura to witness their king touching the feet of someone in a public place.

A small boy with his father was watching the entire episode unfolding in front of him. Curious to the core, he asked his father, "Baba, who is that tall bearded man? Why is our king paying so much respect to him?"

"Hush, my boy. He is a great poet and writer. Our king says one day this man will make our entire country proud. The entire world will know us through him. His name is Rabindranath Tagore."

"Rabindranath Tagore," repeated the small boy. Unknowingly his voice hushed with pride.





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