

The Old Kali Temple

By Arghya Dey

Prologue

I woke up early in the morning. I had a very sound sleep at night, though I dreamt a very weird dream. I had read two books on the previous day. One of them was 'Ancient Temples Of India' and the other one was 'Incredible Rampur: The Beauty Within'. They were beside my pillow, resting on bed. The second book reminded me of my promise to my best friend Atul.

I hurriedly prepared myself to visit the mysterious Rampur.

Chapter One

I walked around the place to verify the claims of the villagers of Rampur. But nothing suspicious caught my attention. The old Kali Temple at the crest of the hill looked like any other temple. There was nothing special about its broken ceiling, greenish walls infested with algae that was red once and the nearby well that was not so deep.

Rampur was a small village in North Bengal. Atul, my bosom friend lived there. As it was our summer vacation, I did not have a problem in accepting his proposal to be there for some days.

I thought it would be an ordinary stay. But, to my surprise, I found an element of curiosity. It was that old Kali temple. On the insistence of Atul, we visited there some times.

Atul lived with his parents in a two-story house in the northern corner of the village. His parents were very humble and down to earth. Then I understood that politeness and kind behavior were in Atul's genes.

The temple was further north. The path to the temple was uphill and it was very narrow. It went through the shadows of large trees that kept it hidden from the eyes of local residents.

One day, when we were returning from the temple through that path, we met a complete stranger. He was an old man with white beard. His eyes were dim and his skin was wrinkled. His torn clothes and thin physique suggested that he was a beggar, though we were not sure enough.

He looked angrily at us. He seemed to know Atul. He said, 'Are you the elder son of Dharmesh Pal, who studies in the city?'

‘Yes’, Atul answered, ‘But sorry uncle, I can’t recognize you.’

‘You need not’, surely the man had a hot temperament, ‘But don’t you know that the place is haunted? Don’t come here again or I will inform your parents.’

‘Ok, uncle’, Atul continued his journey to his house. And I followed him.

It was not the case that we were unaware about the local residents perceiving the temple as haunted. But I, along with Atul, believed that it was a mere superstition.

Atul had told me the story of the temple when I had arrived in his house on the very first day. He had been aware of many versions of the story since his childhood days.

The story went like this:

‘Almost 400 years back, a foreigner came to the village of Rampur. He was a strange person. He lived in a small hut and did not communicate much with the villagers. But the most awkward thing about him was his dress. He looked like a king, without a crown. His armour was extremely glittery and the dhoti was very expensive. Besides, he had some jewels placed in his rings, that looked precious. But the people of Rampur were mostly honest and hence nobody thought that they could ever be stolen.

He told the villagers that he was a businessman in a far away land. When the villagers asked him what he was doing there, he replied he was just having a leisure time there. Besides, as the Kali temple was famous at that time, many strangers used to come there to visit it. And when he resided there for more than a

year, the villagers lost interest in his whereabouts. But some times, he was seen in the Kali temple.

The things were going as usual. The villagers were busy in their daily works. But the situation did not remain same for a long time.

It started with stealing. The pets were being stolen at random from their houses. The villagers started to have a doubt on the camaraderie of one another. There were some rumours that were spreading fast. But nobody was sure of anything.

The chief of the village organized a meeting one day. There almost all of the villagers complained about the thefts. But the necessary conclusion could not be drawn.

But surprisingly, after that meeting, everything was back to normal. The villagers felt relieved when nothing occurred in more than three years. They thought that the village got rid of that unknown thief, finally.

Their misconception did not last longer.

Though, this time, the thief went a step further. Now the children went missing, one by one. The villagers took some measures to protect the future generations. They started forming groups that would look after the village at night.

Not only that, the children were all locked up in their homes. Their playtime began to reduce drastically until it turned into a big zero. The whole village was submerged in an ocean of terror. The bountiful rain, that once resembled a boon to the village after a scorching hot summer, could not bring a drop of happiness to their petrified and terrified faces.

The anguish and agony in the hearts of the parents of the missing children could not be washed away by the showers. They all visited the temple with a prayer to get their children back. Everything seemed to turn lifeless. There was no joy, no happiness. The face of the village turned pale in horror.

All attempts to protect the children were going in vain. But the rumours paved the way for a new thought, a new doubt.

Some of the villagers doubted about the hand of that stranger to be behind all these incidents. Though they could prove nothing, they waited for the right chance.

And to their astonishment, the opportunity did arise! They could catch the thief red handed. Yes, it was the stranger. He was not there in his usual royal dress when his attempt to abduct a child went in vain.

Rather, he looked like a beggar with cheap torn clothes. It might be his camouflage so that no one could recognize him in the darkness of night. But his face was quite familiar in the light of the lanterns, which were held by the local residents.

The people were very much exasperated. All of them wanted to know what he had done to the kids.

He was taken to the temple and locked up in a hidden dungeon by some villagers, after his several refusals about having any involvement in all these matters. The agitated mob went to the village to gather some more people.

But when they returned and entered into the dungeon, there was nothing. They all searched the empty dungeon carefully. But they knew that there was no exit route. Or at least they thought that

until someone pointed towards a tunnel, a narrow one that obliterated into the darkness of an abyss.

They all went through that path. The darkness was just immeasurable. Even the lanterns in fifty-odd hands could not remove all of its presence. After going for almost an hour, they could reach the end, at last. But alas! They still found nobody.

The path had merged with a meandering rivulet in the ebony forest. It was not possible to search someone in the dense forest at midnight. They were all tired. Also, they all knew that they had no chance of catching the stranger. The worst feeling was that the stranger escaped and they could do nothing.

But there was more twist in the tale. When they returned to the temple half-heartedly, they could hear a lot of hue and cry.

There were some more villagers who claimed to see the stranger fleeing in a different way, which also went to the woods. Some others told that they saw him running in another direction. And they all argued that they saw right. Everything was mixed up that night. Their verbal war led to no reasonable conclusion. Even some had the theory that he might be a powerful black magician.

Whatever might be the case, the people never got the children back.

But sometimes, when the night was dark and the air was full of silence, one could see a ray of light in the temple and feel his presence trembling in the candle-lit temple-walls in a form of a silhouette.

If he were still alive, he would have been at least 400 by now. But it was totally impossible for a man to live that long.

Some people said that he was a 'tantrik' or an worshipper of Goddess Kali who needed the children for sacrificing to her in order to gain celestial or spiritual powers.

According to them, he became a ghost after death and started to guard the temple. Now, there was also no trace of the hut where he lived, as well as the dungeon.

Still sometimes it was heard that a child had gone missing in 20 or 30 years. But no one had the courage to destroy the temple, in fear of Goddess Kali's rage as well as the 'tantrik' ghost.'

I, along with Atul, argued with some people about how a temple could be haunted. It was a place meant to be sacred & even if ghosts existed, they would not dare to cross path with the divine goddess Kali residing in the temple.

But they all had firm faith in the story.

As the place was lonely, our visit through the uphill path hidden by the big trees was a secret to everyone, until that old man saw us.

'From this time, we have to be more careful', I suggested.

Atul nodded affirmatively.

That evening, Atul counted that we had been there thrice in the four days and there was nothing unusual.

After being there for six days, I was a little bit of bored and wanted to return to Siliguri, the city where Atul & I studied and which was also my hometown.

But Atul had a different idea in his mind. He said, 'Let's not search just to find if anything ghostly exists in broad daylight. Surely, we

have not been there ever at night. But before that, let's just look for the secret dungeon hidden inside the temple.'

'Do you also believe in the story, Atul?', I exclaimed, 'It was a mere lullaby and we did not find anything interesting in the temple in our any visit. And do you think that such a dungeon actually exists? The whole story is a crap, man! They cooked it up for their enjoyment, to get more tourists.'

'How are you so sure, Aryan?', Atul countered my point, 'Even we did not have the courage to be there at night and you come to the conclusion that it's not haunted! Are you kidding me? I think we did not search that carefully in every nook and corner. Even we could not be in the whole temple till now. There are many parts which are blocked and could be reached only if we tried various different routes. Do you know how many routes are there which lead to different parts of it? The temple is much larger than you think, Aryan! We also have to find out if such a tunnel exists. Come on, man! It will be our grand adventure. And what will you do in Siliguri now?'

He further encouraged me, 'We have enough time to squander, Aryan!'

I found Atul's point of view quite reasonable. I should not have been so sure without getting underneath the wrapper of this newly found adventure properly.

'I am with you, Atul', I said heartily, 'Let's begin our mission to find that dungeon.'

'Yeah, that's my boy!', Atul laughed.

Still then, we were only using the route that led to the front side of the temple, beside the unused well.

It was a good idea to change our route. I asked Atul, 'Do you know the alternative routes?'

Atul smiled and answered, 'Yes. I know several ones, my friend. From childhood, I had a dream to unearth the privy truth about the temple. But I was never able to fulfill it. But now I feel I will.'

'Let's start from tomorrow. But let's make the plan first. We will talk about it in the evening.'

'Ok', Atul said.

Though Atul was aware of different routes in the wilderness which all led to that mysterious temple, he did not explore all of them. Even he was not sure if some of them really existed. Still, we had something to start with.

'Atul, do you know where the rivulet is?', I asked.

'There are no rivulets here, friend. It's possible that the place got dry over years. But it may still exist in the dense part of the forest, where I never have been before.'

We spent the evening making different strategies. And soon we became tired. We knew that the most significant approach would be to start next day, without thinking about our tentative failure.

Atul looked a little bit of depressed at night. He was sitting in his room alone, with a novel. It was possible that he was actually not depressed, but submerged in the yellowish pages of that old novel.

When I went inside, he closed the book and put it down on the table. He was looking concerned about something.

‘Jignesh da may still be there somewhere’, his eyes looked like they were about to be filled with tears.

‘Who is Jignesh?’, I could not veil my curiosity.

‘He was a keen observer. Or he still may be. I had gone to the forest with him sometimes, just because both of us loved mysteries, and had a common zeal about the wilderness, as well as the temple. Even his younger brother used to accompany us often.’

Atul paused for breathing. He continued, ‘But nobody knows where he is now. One day, he went missing and no one knows if he is alive or dead. Some say that he has become a saint in a monastery. But they may be just rumours. I don’t know.’

‘Where was he last seen?’, I asked.

‘According to my knowledge, he went to explore the temple by himself. He never returned afterwards. I sometimes have a nightmare that I am sitting beside his corpse in the back of that cursed temple.’

I tried to console him, ‘May be the news you heard is actually true. He is now in a monastery.’

‘May be’, Atul replied.

The next day, we started our journey in the morning. As usual, we told Atul’s parents that we were going to visit the local area more explicitly. We took some dry foods like cake and nuts with us

along with some necessary items. They would come handy when we would need them badly to overcome hunger.

We went in a different direction. It was quite clear that the path was not a thoroughfare. It was covered with grass and the leaves that fell from nearby trees. The sunlight was peeping through the leaves and creating a magical contrast of light and darkness. Even some places seemed to be untouched by the golden rays for a long time.

‘Do you have the electric torch, Atul?’

‘Yes’, he replied, ‘In my bag.’

The more we were walking forward, the darker it was getting. This place was full of Lali, Gokul, Sal, Canes and different other trees, though still most of the trees were totally unknown to me. Some parts of them were glittering in sun, But mostly the place was devoured by darkness.

Now the path did not remain plain; it was getting tougher for me to carry on. I was not accustomed to walk an uphill path while using a knife simultaneously to get rid of the bushes and shrubs that blocked our way. But Atul seemed to have no problem. He might be habituated with it as he had used the different paths through the woods before.

I did not know if I would be able to remember the path back to Atul’s house in case I got lost in this jungle. I was also afraid that there could be snakes in the area. But when I looked at Atul’s calm and determined face, I was relieved a bit. I also drove away the thought of getting lost midway.

The forest was getting denser and darker. We had to stop until Atul brought his torch out of his bag.

‘It will not be that dark when we come out of this forest’, Atul said.

‘Is it the dense part of the forest that you mentioned?’, I asked Atul.

‘No, Aryan! It’s still far away. There are some barren fields creating discontinuity in the stretch of the forest.’

‘But we have a good news, Aryan’, Atul continued, ‘We are near the temple.’

After walking a few minutes, we were out of the forest. Yes, Atul was right. I could see a part of the ruins of the temple. Then, there came out some other structures in my sight which were completely separated from one another.

‘Here we are’, Atul said, ‘We are in the backside of the temple.’

‘Though it is referred to as an old Kali temple only, it has some extensions. These were the quarters believed to be made for the priests. They are all abandoned now, with some relics of their past users. Look at that large rock, Aryan! There are some smaller temples of Goddess Kali and Lord Shiva hiding behind it. Though we can’t reach them from here’, Atul pointed his finger to the west to show me that gigantic piece of rock which had a wrapper of verdancy on its surface.

We passed the fallow field to reach those quarters. They were in a very bad condition. The broken parts were subdued by the branches of large trees. The rooms were full of dust and cobwebs. It was hard to digest the fact that people actually had

lived there. It was hazardous to health to be there for long. I came out of the quarters, followed by Atul.

I was stunned. I signalled Atul to remain silent and pointed my index finger towards that rock.

He was also as surprised as me. In front of that rock, it was the old man, who threatened Atul in a previous visit to the temple. He was walking to and fro in a staggered motion.

‘Has he seen us?’, Atul whispered.

‘I don’t know.’

We hid behind a bush to have a close watch over him. ‘But how could he get in here? Was he following us?’, I asked.

‘I don’t think so’, Atul replied, ‘But there is another possibility that we had completely struck off. What’s about a path that joins these different places?’

‘But you said that there are none.’

‘Now I doubt it. It is clear that these places were not scattered hundreds of years ago. But over years, they became detached from one another by natural barriers. What’s if they are still joined by a secret path which is unknown to us? Or there may be more than one path. The tunnel which helped the ‘tantrik’ to escape still may be here somewhere.’

‘So, you are suggesting that the old man knows a lot about this place? And he has used a secret path, right?’

Atul smiled, ‘The chance of the old man following us while we were totally unaware of his presence is extremely low. He has not been here before our arrival using the same route because we

had to make our own way with the knives. Hence, for now we can come to the conclusion that he is indeed using a secret path. But the most important question is: what is he doing here?’

The old man was looking anxious. We watched him for several minutes, but nothing extraordinary happened.

It looked like he was waiting for something to happen. Or he might be conscious about anyone seeing him.

Suddenly, he was still. We heard some footsteps approaching near him. It was a tall man with dark complexion. The old man said, ‘Where are others, Jatin?’

Jatin answered, ‘They are almost here, Chacha.’

‘Was there any problem coming here? You were not seen by anybody, were you?’

‘I maintained complete secrecy.’

‘Good’, the old man continued, ‘The meeting is very important for us. They should have been here in time. They should be taught a lesson on punctuality.’ He was really angry.

After a few minutes, there were two more people. They looked very wary and they kept a careful watch over the surroundings. The two persons arriving later were much younger than Jatin, who seemed to be around forty. But the most common thing about them was their dressing sense. Their clothes were torn and extremely dirty. There were mud and dust all over the clothes, as well as their bodies.

They moved their eyes over the place quickly for the last time. Then the old man disappeared into one of the deserted rooms, followed by other three men.

We waited patiently behind the bush. After becoming sure that none of them was there, we silently came out.

‘When we searched the rooms, we found nothing. We might have missed something important there’, I said.

‘Hmm’, Atul nodded, ‘Surely there is something about those abandoned quarters. But I am thinking about another thing. Follow me.’

Atul went to the eastern side of the forest. ‘We have seen three of them emerging out of this area. Obviously, they used a path unknown to us for coming here. It might be actually a distinct path, like ours, just to visit the quarters behind the main temple. Or, it may have a connection with several other paths joining these apparently scattered parts. Let’s see’, Atul said.

‘It is noon now’, I said, ‘We may come tomorrow also. Unless we return quickly, we won’t be able to reach your house before evening.’

‘We still have enough time, Aryan. My house is just two hours’ walk from here. We can still utilize at least one hour and half here.’

‘Then we may not find the source of this pathway. Ok, we will explore in the woods to find any clue. This path also may be like ours, rarely used and almost non-existent. But we have to be very careful to return to the rear of the temple in time’, I said to Atul cautiously.

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