

The Forbidden Place

Shamit Bagchi

Strains of sweet music floated in from the outside, soothing the scorching souls as if burnt out by the radiating heat; someone was playing a flute, somewhere. The music seemed to come from very far off, and yet it had that healing touch, leaving people spellbound by its sheer melody, and simple tonal patterns. It continued its melancholy charm for some more time, then stopped. The fakir was here, this was certain, the little boy Kanhaiya knew he would come today and ran out shouting "Fakir baba, where were you, all these days?".

Ramnath, Kanhaiya's friend, also came out and both ran towards the large banyan tree, which spread its branches as if beckoning others to join it in its penance to stand upright and pray, for hundreds of years. But no one would agree to join it, they would all sit below its lush dark shadow, an oasis in the surrounding heat. Fakirchand sat at the raised stone platform, and had just placed the flute into his bag, that only gods and he knew contained what. He was especially a favourite among the village children, wherever he went. He used to give them exotic fruits, some knick knacks, various charms and gleaming coloured stones and many other interesting things. To adults he gave books and manuscripts with magical formulae and such.

"What did you bring for us ?", asked Kanhaiya, as Ramnath and he literally peeked into the bag that Fakir had.

"Nothing", replied Fakir.

"But tell me what do you want to know, I will answer all your questions", he reiterated.

"That is not fair", said Ramanath and sat there disappointed, with a glum look on his face, almost crying.

"Dont you want to know anything ? Look at the world around you, its so vast and there are so many things that are unknown, that make you think, make you want to know, challenge your mind, do you think you know everything ... "

"Well I dont want to know any of that" said Ramanath turning away.

"What about you Kanhaiya ?" he asked looking at Kanhaiya.

"Let me think", said Kanhaiya, actually he had lots of questions, but there was one particular question that he had wanted to ask for days and that is why he had eagerly awaited the fakir's arrival. He was the only one who would know, he was sure. He feared to ask as no one knew what that was, not his mother or

Ramnath's father or mother nor Jeevan bhaiya or anyone else he knew. Some said it was a dangerous place, some said it was a beautiful paradise, some thought it was a tunnel and some speculated it was a mammoth palace inside the sea, only its luminous turrets and minarets visible.

"Dont you want to know about the lights ?" Kanhaiya asked Ramnath.

Ramnath heard the question and it was as if he was brought back from the dead. His eyes lit up and he shouted "Yes, yes".

Ramnath remembered those days when he and Kanhaiya used to play all day near their house and some times stray towards the faraway bushes and hillocks, with the cattle and some of the other shepherd boys. There was a clear stream that they would jump into and splash water and sometimes swim across and stand on the other side and call out to each other, from each bank listening to the echoes. It was on some of those days, as evening set in, they would still keep digging the earth, looking for earthworms and trying to make a sand monument or set out to climb a tree, and pluck the poison berries or run behind ants as they marched in a line towards their colony.

On a few occasions they had seen it - that one brilliant shimmering glow of light and sometimes smaller colourful flashes of light from somewhere across a great distance. They had argued and fought and spoken about that place. It used to some times come in their dreams too. They were sure of finding treasures, great riches and beautiful angels, powerful demons, great beings, a glass palace and much much more. It had been a dream for them to go to, they had a special place in their hearts for it, which whenever they got time from their games, they would discuss about. He described it to Fakirchand.

"I want to be a king in that palace, is it not a palace? I think it is", said Ramnath, giving the fakir a piercing look, pointing in the northerly direction.

"Which place are you talking about ? Is it that place of lights"

"Yes baba, that is the one special place we want to know about, what is it, is it a palace under the sea ?" asked Kanhaiya.

"That is a place full of dangers, do not even think about it, you can go there only when you are old enough, like me, it is a place full of unknown twists and great mysteries" warned Fakirchand.

"Have you gone into that place, is it a palace"

"No I have not gone there and it is not a palace, it is a long and deep tunnel, a dungeon, through which no one dares to enter, only a few can escape if they go in. Those lights that you see are at the entrance to the place, it is a great fire burning since ages, through which you need to pass to enter the place"

"Can we go there, what will we find inside ?"

"It is a trap, a kind of labyrinth through which if you pass I have heard you can get a special charm through which all the happiness of this world can be

achieved, but let me warn you, not many attempt to make it through that tunnel, it is not for the faint hearted"

"Will we find treasure inside ?"

"Maybe, some say a great ancient treasure lay hidden inside, I am not sure, but let me caution you again do not go there, it will be futile, you will just lose your life and bring misery to your parents. If you want to go there keep these with you, now I will leave", said Fakirchand giving each of them a small rectangular metallic plaque with something inscribed on it in unrecognizable characters and before they could ask him what it was, he got up and started walking, singing a poignant song, in a deep rich baritone:

*They were all never meant to be,
Do not be so proud, that you have them all with thee.
Run behind what is, the essence, knowledge,
All else is futile, do not run behind them, dont you see me ...*

*I was never the wanderer that you now see,
No one to take care of, hence I help everyone, including thee
Run behind what is, the essence, knowledge,
All else is futile, do not run behind them, just like me ...*

He went away, on his way wandering around, country to country for days together, staying somewhere for a few days and then moving on again, a lonely journey of exploration, sometimes even across seas.

The next day they were playing in the field when Kanhaiya had an idea, which would later turn into an obsession, he would go to that tunnel and explore it to find the treasures that it held. He would come back, and give all the treasures to his mother. He would go in and get the treasure. If Ramnath wanted to accompany him, he too could come and they would share the treasure. This he mentioned to Ramnath and Ramnath just stayed silent for a while, thinking, weighing Kanhaiya's words, most of all he was nervous to go. Then they struck a deal that they would face the struggle together and come out victorious. They would start tomorrow.

That night Ramnath was about to go to sleep when his father entered inebriated, having drunk heavily at the nearby liquor shack, and started yelling and abusing, his mother tried to control him. There were some altercations between him and Ramnath's mother after he was served with food.

"You nasty lady, what do you do all day? Cant even get me a some good delicious food, just go away from here", he shouted at his mother, running after

her clutching an iron rod.

"Bapu, why do you do this, every night, the same drama", said Ramnath.

"You little scoundrel, just wait till I get you", his father thundered.

As his mother had run out of the room, his father followed her out too.

By the time he could get her, she took the bucket full of water, that she had kept ready and poured it on him. Ramnath even at that time chuckled at the spectacle as his father now back in his senses, went in, took a bath and went to sleep. The half eaten plate remained and Ramnath took it and threw it outside, a few dogs came from the dark and started eating whatever was left of the food. He had to run away he decided from this mess, he was fed up of this life and was never going to come back here, he would go away, after he had got hold of that treasure.

The same night as Kanhaiya was in deep sleep he started dreaming of how he had already found the treasure chest overflowing with precious stones, gold coins, and golden ornaments and stacks of money. He had given everything to his mother, as he had no father, his father had gone somewhere far off long before he was born, and he stayed with his mother. He also dreamt how his mother was so full of pride and joyous about the bravery and courage her son had shown, at going into that dungeon of death and bringing back such valuables. His dream showed him that they would live in great peace and he would be married to a beautiful girl and his mother and they would stay happily ever after. All their misery and poverty would vanish into thin air. They would be the happiest and for this the first step was he had to go to that forbidden place, he got up with a start to find it was already morning, the day of reckoning had arrived, he had to do it today, it would be a matter of a day or so and he would return with the riches. The sun's rays welcomed the day and beckoned him to start out on his journey to conquer his destiny and become worthy as a king.

Early in the morning he completed all the morning ablutions and was ready, he went to Ramnath's house and discovered he too was awake and ready too, unlike other days when he was always late. With a determined face Ramnath told a goodbye mentally, to his house, his parents, the village and all who stayed in the village. They went about, just like any other day, as if going to play marbles or running in the shrubs, but they had a bigger plan, they would walk down to the forbidden place. Kanhaiya knew the way but not the complete path, the sun was mellow and they set off, with a mix of fear and anticipation in their hearts. Walking through uneven terrain, hillocks, shrubs full of thorns and insects and through little forests, the strange sounds from the forests sometimes scared them to death, yet they continued. By the afternoon they sat under a tree and had fruits as lunch, always alert that any wild animals would appear.

Sometimes they met people and they told them they were going to a nearby village. At one time a pack of robbers, just went by them, as they hid behind a series of massive rocks. By the time the sun was setting they were nowhere near the place. Now they started fearing the worst, may be a tiger would attack them or scorpions and only 'Bhagwaan Jaane', god knew what else. Kanhaiya was now not as confident as he was at the beginning about the destination. Ramnath thought they had to wait till it was dark and they would know. Both felt they were close to the place, their destination, both agreed. They just waited at the spot they had reached, and as night fell, they were sure that their adventure would not get completed in a day, and they felt that was not a problem any longer, as long as they could lay their hands on the treasure.

As the sun went out extinguished by some divine intervention the spot they were in turned pitch black, their fears grew so strong as if there were four boys now, the two of them and their fears, they stood beside them and whispered back to them:

"Go back , you should not have come here"

"Yes go back, there is no such place, it is all an illusion, remember what Fakir baba had told you?"

"It is dangerous even if you find it"

The two just stood their trying to kill their fear brethren, but they would appear again and again, reborn everytime they were done away with.

Then as they got accustomed to the darkness they could see a faint aura of luminosity, as if a fire was burning somewhere, a fire it was, the fakir had told them, they were so excited, overjoyed, but where was it coming from ?

They located the direction and kept walking in the same direction, after a while they came to a place with a row of jagged rocks and now could see at a height below where they were standing, a great fire burning; huge flames leapt from the ground and there were sudden flashes of green, red and blue lights. They had reached their destination, no it was just the start of 'The Place'.

They started to climb down the rocks and Ramnath suddenly stumbled and fell and trying to catch him, Kanhaiya fell too and gave a cry of pain; by the time the fall ended, they had reached the surface, with some bruises. But they had now to face the fire, they slowly proceeded towards it and could already feel the heat radiating and burning their skin. They ran back. How were they to cross this fire ? They thought and as nothing came to mind they thought they needed to think about God and all their troubles would be gone. They were the chosen two, they would be allowed in, they were confident. As soon as they told a few prayers, the intensity of the fire seemed to subside and they ran through at breakneck speed towards what looked like a monumental door made of iron, they had crossed the first hurdle, unhurt. Now they knocked at the door

and nothing happened. Then Kanhaiya remembered the plaques and he brought it out and touched it on the door, nothing happened, then when Ramnath touched the door with his too nothing happened. Then both touched the door with their plaques and there was a roaring sound, a deep rumble, that sent shivers down both their spines, the door slid and opened and inside they saw two torches, flames shining, at either end of the door on the wall, the rest of the room or cellar whatever it was, glowed dim red. They entered with bated breath and with firm steps. As soon as they had entered the door closed shut in a brilliant flash. They were inside and they were trapped. Both touched the door together with the plaque that fakir had given them, but this time it remained closed. A nauseating feeling, a claustrophobia enveloped them and they felt sick and as if about to faint. What was it, a smell so sweet that it was almost sickening. They walked forward slowly, holding each others hand, close together, eyes wide open and ears keenly listening for all sounds. The silence was broken as someone said "Welcome" in a loud booming voice. They looked around and found nothing other than the dim red glow and the torches burning on either side of the wall. "Welcome, new visitors", said the voice again. Then a few more torches lit up and the place was warm and looked bright and clean. The roof was nowhere to be seen, it was so high, now he realised they had actually been moving down the dungeon all this while and had reached a lower surface. The walls were a bit different here and at the bright room there was a table with a few fruits and sweets and such delicacies. They jumped at it as they were hungry and ate up everything.

They had just for a moment forgotten they were in a totally new and supposedly dangerous place. They sat on the ground and burped and started speaking to each other and laughing, as they rested, they were feeling tired and this was a pleasant place, they could start their search for the treasure after a while, they decided. Just then a beautiful lady walked up to them, she was draped in white and had a beautiful smile, and offered the two glasses of sweet juice. Kanhaiya was suspicious and asked her "Who are you?".

Ramnath was just looking at her, she was so pretty, just like a queen.

He said, "This must be a paradise as some people told me in the village, they were right, and this must be the Pari"

"Who knows she may be a sorceress. Who are you?", he asked again.

The lady smiled at them and just walked back and disappeared at a distance.

"This is a very mysterious place, I am very scared" said Kanhaiya, as Ramnath nodded.

"It is mysterious I agree but at least it's better than my house where I had to see those quarrels and shouts everyday, a new distraction, hope my mother will be alright"

"My mother must be crying in fear and uncertainty, on where I might have gone", said Kanhaiya, worried that he had not mentioned anything to his mother. "It will be another day and we will go back. But how will we carry so much treasure, I dont know" said Ramnath yawning and throwing his hands in the air, yearning to sleep. "Lets have a short sleep", he said and they agreed and just lay down. They woke sometime later, and found the room just as when they had gone to sleep, the room was small and there was a tunnel on one end, as they entered it they found it broadened into a much more wide tunnel. A hearty laughter was heard and then a voice roared "Find the special object and you can escape from here or else you cannot".

This news fell like a thunderbolt on them, first they had to find the treasure and now this object, without which there was no escape. What was this object without which they could not escape? They just got more and more confused. Now they frantically rummaged through whatever they found, which was at first not much apart from egg shells and spiders and insects and sometimes pieces of cloth and stones of different sizes and shapes. The first day they had not faced any problem, they started walking through the tunnel each one searching in one direction for doors or objects and keys or hidden openings, some places were filled with cobwebs and some places shining like new. They started running as the tunnel seemed never ending and they had to cover the whole tunnel today.

"Run faster and you may find the room that has the treasure, else it may be too late ... ", the booming voice said this time.

They followed the voice and started running faster and knew not when they would find the room.

Then as they were both running trying to reach that invisible room Ramnath started thinking if he could run faster and reach the room first, the treasure would all be his. Just then they entered a region full of watter and water started pouring from above as they were drenched and started to run faster, Ramnath left Kanhaiya behind and at this point, there was a cracking sound and then they looked up to see a wall coming down from the ceiling. It split the tunnel into two zones, on one zone ran Kanhaiya and on the other Ramnath.

"Now each for his own. Whoever runs faster, the treasure would be his"

Every now and then they would find a table exactly like the previous containing fruits and sweetmeat. But they were running separately divided by the barrier. So one could not help the other and each would sometimes lay down, sleep and then get up and start running again. On the way they went, through different zones, some dimlit, and some bright and decorated with amazing and exquisite walls and carpets and frescoes.

As they kept running, now they had completely lost track of how many days they had been upto this, they had grown older into two handsome young men. And now they met the dangers and all those obstructions on their path with even more aplomb. Ramnath had grown into a tall, lean man with an aquiline face. Kanhaiya of a slightly dark complexion and heavy set jaws and a sweet smooth face.

One day as Kanhaiya was running he imagined the place was full of demons and devils lurking in all corners and just as his fears, they came true and they all attacked him together with their full force, but as soon as he started to think of fairies and gods hoping they would protect and heal him, such figures started to emerge, some would bestow upon him special powers and even weapons, swords, daggers, bows and arrows and other such weapons with which he would face the heinous demons and devils. It turned out that when he thought of or imagined ghosts and devils he would see them and when he thought of gods, such benevolent beings would appear, as if everything were based on how he imagined things. This was one strategy he used to protect himself throughout.

One day, Ramnath saw a beautiful nymph standing at a distance with open arms, as if tempting him to come and embrace her. He was filled with lust and could not control and ran towards her and tightly embraced her, only to find the nymph turning into a mass of blood, puss, sweat and pungent decaying material, and it started to envelop him, as he started feeling a strong, storm-like force pulling him down, as if towards death. He just left the mass of blood and gore and ran away from the apparation, and jumped into a nearby stream to cleanse himself off the decay. It was the same again and again and yet he could not stay away from the temptations. On one such occassion, Ramnath fell in love with a fairy and stayed back with her enjoying the food and all the fruits and her love, he had become lazy and decided he wanted to go no further.

Kanhaiya never came to know this as they were separated and kept running unaware of everything else, now weary from the unending journey. Yet not ready to give up the riches he had to discover. He was tempted by the fairies and beautiful nymphs and terrified by the demons and trolls, but was always sucessful in slaying them. Just as he was crossing a bridge over a deep stream, a beautiful young nymph came and he with the swish of his sword's blade cut off its head, which fell into the water and she collapsed on the bridge, he continued in his quest and ran on.

One day Ramnath realised he was going to lose the treasure and left the nymph, and the enjoyments and continued again on the run towards the room of treasure. Both of them were unsure and yet were running towards an unknown mirage of a treasure of their dreams, without knowing if it ever

existed.

They had not yet found the object, that would allow them to escape from this tunnel too. They ran on and on ...

They had grown old by the time they were able to reach it, the end of the tunnel, then the booming voice informed them, that it was the end of the tunnel. They had reached it now after fifty years of running and had not been able to find either the treasure or the 'escape key' but were only able to cling on to their lives, they would have to run back to the beginning to find either, else they would remain trapped and die out of suffocation and starvation. They were neither ready to go back; they had not the strength left to traverse the great length that they had covered once, yet there was no option left. Totally exhausted they just sat down on either side of the dividing wall and neither of them had been successful in finding the treasure. They sat down and started thinking why they had failed, and how on their return trip they could be more successful. Neither had tried to reconcile after they were separated.

Kanhaiya shouted "How are you ?"

To the surprise of both they could hear each other.

"I am feeling very very weak, how about you Kanhaiya ?"

"Exactly the same here too", he replied.

They had not bothered to help each other on the way forward and even though they were separated, neither had thought that they could tackle their problems together, the artificial separation had blinded them into thinking that each was for his own and they had been converted into competitors, the cooperation had been thrown to the wind.

"Do you still think there is a treasure here ?" asked Ramnath.

"Maybe it is hidden in some crevice or some room somewhere, I have an idea, I am thinking" replied Kanhaiya.

"Atleast we can try again"

"I do not know, I cannot even get up, my legs ache, my heart is pounding, after this long run, I dont even want to move", murmured a dejected Kanhaiya.

"Take some rest and then we will resume"

They took some rest, they were to go all the way back for years together and they could not go as fast as they had come, since they no longer had that kind of stamina left in them. That was when Kanhaiya thought, now that they had wasted all their life behind this futile chase for gold and riches, without any real breakthrough, he came upon an idea, if they get the treasure, he set a goal that he would give all his share to the villagers in their village, so no one would suffer from lack of food. He also decided that he would open a Pathshala, a school for the children in the village, something he had never gone to, but heard about from his mother. He told this to Ramnath and Ramnath too agreed that they had spent

all their life in vain, he too promised that he would open an orphanage for the destitutes and help them lead a life of respect and dignity as there were many beggars that he used to see in his village, and feel very bad about. They would never crave for the treasure for themselves, they would help each other as they went on the journey back. They had each set a goal and as soon as they did that, a voice boomed from within the tunnel:

"Now you have found the key to escape from here, a goal in life, until now you were two goalless strangers in this foreign land of darkness, and now for the first time, I can give you a hint to find the way out and also the treasure - GO BACK HOME. You will find your treasure in yourself, your own people, your own home, your own life, your hidden treasure".

The voice continued "You had everything hidden within your mind – the gods had conspired to place the greatest treasure inside yourself so that, even if you searched everywhere else in distant places or anything external you will not find it anywhere, even if you do find some pleasures, it is all transient small little pleasures and little things that can never match the power of what is there within you".

There was a flash of lightening and in that moment of vivid lucidity, the two paths merged and so did Kanhaiya and Ramnath, they got combined into one person, so did many other who realized the truth, it was all the same ideal that applied everywhere and the person started walking down the straight path, which was now dark, there were a pair of lanterns on the walls and he picked up a lantern and started walking towards the beginning, it was bright - the glow of blinding light and he was going back, back home. Unless you reach home you can get nowhere, conquer the inner path traverse it and everything else would be crystal clear. So here was the treasure, the real treasure. They had got it at last, they need not have struggled so much, they had it from the start, they only never knew, they did.

Now Kanhaiya realised why the fakir had given them the key to this dungeon, he had intended them to learn the truth of life, the hard way. The realization that they were the real treasures and they need not go anywhere to find it, that the dreams are in the hands of the dreamer, he has just to open his eyes.

And any forbidden place would reveal itself.