



All in the Stars

Ranjan Sen

Lush green farmland rolled away gently in all directions, as faint snatches of song wafted in the breeze from the clusters of people tending to the crops.

A flock of myna birds wheeled and wove abstract patterns in the sun drenched sky, their effortless grace reflecting far below in the dancing waters of the Godavari.

The serenity of the moment was almost complete.

Almost, except for the diminutive figure perched high on a rocky hillock, angrily choking back hiccupping sobs.

Ilaa's had been a short but eventful life up to that moment.

Born to an impoverished nobleman in the town of Paithan on the banks of the Godavari sixteen summers ago, she had been considered a divine boon by her mother.

Ilaa's father Vishnu Digamber had married Manasi late in life, smitten by her luminous beauty, her harried and caring parents only too happy to see one of their many daughters married into a noble family.

Vishnu Digamber had no experience of the vagaries of life, as he had lived off the inherited land holdings of his ancestors all his adult life. His share of the family inheritance, fragmented by division across generations, had reduced his income to a fraction of what his forbears enjoyed, but that did not deter him from sowing his seed freely. His first two wives had dutifully presented him with three and two sons respectively, unfortunately loutish and unthinking lads whose future their despairing father rightfully predicted as grim.

Indeed, by the time he brought home a young Manasi, the ageing and chastened Vishnu Digamber had had his fill of male heirs.

“These boys will have to share a meagre inheritance between so many of them already...” he gently told his new bride “To add to which, we know they are not capable of growing our family's name or wealth any further... I think it is time to ask Lord Ganpati for a daughter, someone who will marry well into a powerful family and resurrect our fortunes...”

Many months passed after the consummation of their marriage without Manasi conceiving. Since she considered childbearing her primary duty in her marriage, this made her increasingly restless and ever more religious, as she prayed with all her heart in every temple in the nearby towns and villages. If it ever occurred to her that Vishnu Digamber's advanced age could be a deterrent to her conceiving, she never

spoke of it to anyone, not even in a whisper in her mind to the Gods.

And Manasi's unbending faith rewarded her, because on a silken starlit summer night two years after her marriage, Manasi's proud womb gifted Ilaa to her nervous husband.

As she was placed in her father's arms, Ilaa smiled toothlessly, seeming to gaze at him with the sightless eyes of a newborn. Vishnu Digamber's own wrinkled eyes misted over "She is here, my beautiful little princess is here, the mighty *Lambodar* has blessed us..." he whispered to his forefathers.

Ilaa grew in exceptional and unusual privilege for a girl child, as her father flouted all the conventions of their times by allowing her to study with her much older brothers, where she excelled and sometimes even bested them in male dominated subjects like philosophy, mathematics and logic; she often snuggled up to her father in the lengthening shadows of the evenfall while he narrated epic tales of Vedic times, stories of *Parvati*, *Savitri*, *Damayanti*, *Draupadi* – powerful women of legend and myth, who fired her girlish imagination; and she had a most unique gift of reading body language and spotting lies - a gift with which she first earned her brothers' wrath and later their grudging admiration as she was able to tell on them to her father and their mothers whenever they refused to admit to their misdeeds (or do her bidding); and which helped her father successfully negotiate the sale of the many family heirlooms which an impoverished nobleman had to part company with in order to meet his family obligations.

Ilaa was only eleven when a much touted travelling conjuror arrived to perform at the *Raj Mahal* in Paithan. Since the overlord of Paithan was a benevolent and clever man who understood the value of keeping his flock engaged, the entire nobility of the city along with their families was invited to view the wondrous skills of the visitor.

While everybody was spellbound at how he was making *Rudraksha* beads appear and disappear under upturned gold cups, little Ilaa suddenly ran out from behind the women's *purdah* and pounced on one cup "It is here, it is here" she exclaimed, bouncing on her feet and clapping her hands in excitement, her long hair dancing in waves around her. The grandly turbaned prestidigitator smiled tightly and speeded up his sleight of hand, but Ilaa stood happily in front of him and outguessed the bemused man on every move – spreading unseemly hilarity amongst the youngers in the assembled crowd. By the time Manasi had gathered her daughter back behind the *purdah*, the hapless conjuror's reputation lay in shreds.

The beautiful, spirited and clever little girl was noticed by many eyes that day, most especially by a wealthy old cotton grower from Sauviragram, Jnaneshwar Sindhu, who sought a private meeting with her father through common acquaintances to ask for Ilaa's hand in marriage. "You have many wives yourself," Jnaneshwar reassured Vishnu Digamber "You know how valuable the youngest can be. I will treat her like my queen, she will want for nothing at all."

"And neither will her family...." he continued meaningfully, looking into Vishnu Digamber's troubled eyes.

Vishnu Digamber grappled manfully with his dilemma for a few days. On one hand, his pride and deep affection for Ilaa held him back from trading his beloved daughter to a man older than himself; on the other, his by now creeping penury and the combined pressure of his two elder wives forced him to reconsider the rich suitor.

Thus Ilaa was almost twelve when she entered Jnaneshwar Sindhu's extended household, which included her husband's two earlier wives, their children, his younger brothers and their family and even Jnaneshwar's widowed mother – a voluptuous termagant with sharp eyes and a sharper tongue

who considered Jnaneshwar the center of her universe; and who controlled the entire household with an iron fist.

Ilaa was handed over to the old lady as soon as she stepped over the threshold of her husband's house, where she was to live under her mother-in-law's protection and tutelage in the inner sanctorum until she reached puberty.

At their first meeting, Ilaa prostrated herself before her mother-in-law as Manasi had repeatedly instructed, only looking up shyly to agree in all innocence as Jnaneshwar's mother extolled her son's many virtues, real and imagined. "He is so magnificent" Ilaa breathed, not really having experienced men beyond her naive father and uncouth brothers "Your ladyship, let me serve you, teach me to be worthy of him." she finished passionately, thus unwittingly winning over her first and most powerful ally.

During the years till she was ready to join her husband in his bed, Ilaa stayed loyally by her mother in law's side, ever ready to learn and support. Ilaa's confident energy and intellect, nurtured by her indulgent father, asserted itself as she slowly built a reputation as an efficient organiser of the many household servants, a flawless book keeper and very importantly, someone who was almost impossible to deceive – but always deferring to and supporting her mother in law, as Manasi had trained her to be. As she matured, she grew ever more beautiful, lovingly groomed under her mother in law's eyes by skilled servants as the old lady wielded this bright and biddable girl as a weapon against her many older daughters in law.

Based on the many incisive reports from his mother, Ilaa thus already had Jnaneshwar's surprised respect when she finally was deemed of age to consummate her marriage; the presence of this beautiful, strong and clever girl in his bed, along with his mature years, made him a hesitant and somewhat inept lover. But Ilaa in her innocence accepted his ineffectual

fumbling as his gentle love and responded confidently with all the pent up passion of her thirteen years, making him happier than he had ever been before.

“I have waited for you all my life, you are the one dearest to me.” he repeatedly told her, privately at first and over time in front of other family members (other than his mother), as the rest looked at each other surreptitiously with various expressions ranging from annoyance to scorn to outright jealousy.

Jnaneshwar soon spent almost all of his time with his youngest bride, even sharing anecdotes of his business dealings every evening as the lamps were lit. Ilaa listened contentedly in the beginning, but soon her irrepressible nature exerted itself and she began to offer suggestions, which surprised Jnaneshwar with their insight.

It was not long before he started proactively seeking her advice.

The next three years saw Ilaa grow to be Jnaneshwar's right hand in business with her unique skills, wielding increasing authority, although always from behind a *purdah*. She did not bear children during all this time, which gave her some concern, but Jnaneshwar had three sons and two daughters from earlier wives, so he was willing to wait for his child bride to conceive.

Until one day, he did not wake up in the morning.

And Ilaa's little world suddenly fell apart around her.

She realised within hours how dependent she and Jnaneshwar's mother had been on the continued beating of Jnaneshwar's heart.

She was not even allowed time to grieve but was swiftly stripped of her finery, shorn of her locks and banished to a room next to the servants, to be fed late in the day on food left over from the family repast. As Jnaneshwar's sons swiftly took

control and their mothers and wives ensured their own benefits in a disintegrating domestic order, Ilaa found over the coming days and weeks that she had no money, no authority, no rights, no voice and no lifebecause she had become a childless widow at sixteen.

Ilaa tried to contact her parents in the first few awful days, but Paithan was almost a full day's ride away and no servant would make the journey without being suitably compensated. Within two months of her insufferable new life, Ilaa could endure it no more. She ran away to the banks of the Godavari outside the village, vaguely planning to end her life.

As Ilaa blinked through her tears at the sun dappled valley below her, her agitated mind was momentarily diverted by the sight of an English Army battalion, snaking its way along, which triggered an unexpected happy memory.

Two months earlier the visiting East India Company Colonel had brought his educated Captain, a short, wiry young fellow who everyone called 'Tiny', to lecture the village elders on Western astronomy. Entranced by Tiny's vision of a heliocentric universe, Ilaa had once again forgotten herself and called out from behind the purdah on the upper floor "So why do the stars not fall upon the earth like fruit? What holds them up?"

In the ensuing confusion, Captain Tiny's startled hazel eyes had locked with her warm brown ones for an interminable moment. But there were village elders upset at this breach of protocol, an angry Colonel bristling at the unseemly interrogation by an unschooled native woman, amused children suddenly running amok and a bustle of women disappearing hastily to their domestic duties, so no answer was possible.

Captain Tiny and his faithful batman did call next day at Jnaneshwar's *haveli* to explain that he had no explanation - yet. But he never got past the awkward pleasantries with the menfolk in the outer courtyard.

Thinking back to that day, desperate and unhappy as she was, a windblown seed of an outrageous plan started to grow in Ilaa's mind...

Captain Tiny did not discover the stowaway for almost two days. It was only while his batman was pulling off his boots on the second night that Tiny found himself once more looking into oddly familiar warm brown eyes in the mirror, peering out from the giant wardrobe in his caravan.

His trepidation was still battling with his curiosity when she disarmed him completely by asking "Have you seen a falling star yet?"

They talked animatedly through the night, of astronomy and of death; and her plight and his ambition and of nothing at all as well; and then they slept, childlike, through the next day. Her limited English and his faltering Hindi barely reached out across the yawning chasm between their two cultures, but their sparkling attraction built a connection between them that was as old as time.

The camp gossip reached the Colonel before Captain Tiny could. It was too late to turn back to Sauviragram, so the Colonel gave in to Tiny's pleas on her behalf and gruffly instructed Captain Tiny to "Keep the wench, but be discreet – I don't want to fight off a posse of natives just before I return you safely to London."

By the time they reached the coast, their strength of their companionship had taken the entire camp by surprise – especially when their unbidden guest spent long hours not only listening to Tiny's many abstract theories but apparently

understanding enough to engage him in spirited debate. So much so that it seemed only natural that at the end of his army stint, Ilaa would return with Tiny to Cambridge, which had been shut to cleanse itself of the Plague - which had allowed Tiny the opportunity to explore the wonders of India through a junior commission bought in the British Army.

A few days later, as her heart beat faster watching her own land disappear from the ship's windows, Ilaa's tears flowed unabated as she was overwhelmed with the myriad memories of the life that she was forsaking; but then there was Tiny to hold her tight "Whatever you can dream of, we can make true together. You will be respected and loved and protected, my dearest..." he said, looking deep into her eyes "All the questions that you have, all the study that you want to pursue, will be made possible by the greatest intellectual resources in the world..."

Tiny's intense passion and gentle care quickly helped settle her as the ship made its month long journey towards England, offering Ilaa a solace and a relationship she had never known before. All the while, her agile mind and her doting companion worked together to polish her spoken English.

By the end of the journey, Tiny realised that he was not going to be able to share his life with anyone else ever again. But he knew better than Ilaa that the echelons of English society to which he belonged would never recognise, far less accommodate their relationship. So, as soon as they landed, Tiny took Ilaa to his indulgent and loving grandmother Margery Ayscough in Woolsthorpe.

The old lady was absolutely delighted to see her youngest grandson back, who she had raised from infancy after his mother remarried. Wisely, she did not ask questions about his doe eyed, long haired companion, now dressed in a smart dress and bonnet from London, but waited to be told about her.

“I want you to be happy, my dear boy. Not like your poor father, who was so unhappy with your mother that he died young... before you were even born...” she said at last when Tiny finished explaining, sitting at her feet as he used to during his childhood. “But the girl has to become a Christian! I am not having a heathen in my house, nor will the townspeople stand for it.”

In truth, Margery was sadly lonely, other than the farm hands on her property, and she realised that with Ilaa in the house, her beloved grandson would be drawn back there as long as his affection lasted; all the while giving her a companion to lighten the loneliness, heathen though her origins might have been.

Ilaa was duly converted to Christianity. She kept her thoughts to herself and responded sensibly to Tiny’s supportive comments, although she wept inwardly and in the privacy of her room at this final severing of her roots. For her part, the old lady treated Ilaa kindly and they found a mutual meeting ground of tolerant intimacy, but Ilaa only ever fully came to life every time Tiny walked in the door, filled with passion and love, discussing his theories and hypotheses with her.

Many a times he stayed more than the weekend, debating, postulating, making love and then doing it all over again. They returned frequently to her question about the stars, and while she did not fully follow him through all the unmapped terrain his mind was traversing, she felt that their observing nature together was confirming his ideas and somehow helping him build a bridge of knowledge for future generations to walk upon.

And in the ultimate recognition of his glittering career, when Queen Anne came to Trinity College, Ilaa was the only guest who he had eyes for. Captain Tiny smiled with rich contentment when Ilaa pointed mischievously at the stars, as

Her Majesty placed the Royal Sword on his shoulder and pronounced "Rise, Sir Isaac Newton".

Author's Note: Sir Isaac Newton was studying in Cambridge when in 1665 the University closed down for two years to cleanse itself of the Plague, forcing students to return to their homes or pursue other activities. There are no records of his having ever married or having a relationship with anyone, although there has always been speculation why.

Ranjan Sen

Ranjan was born and raised in Calcutta. After reading Economics in and completing an MBA from Delhi University, Ranjan spent three decades with major international banks in leadership roles across multiple countries and functions. He has stepped back now to pursue a newfound passion in Angel Investing and to return to his first love - writing. His short stories have been previously published in prestigious journals like 'Kitaab' and 'The Thieving Magpie'.

His best friend Manisha consented to marry him years ago. They currently reside in Delhi, perilously close to many relatives. Together they have a college going son.

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