



The Mystery of the Yogini Idol

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Life was not particularly happy for Tarak, and when the nation-wide lockdown was declared due to Covid 19 pandemic, it compounded his woes. Since he was in a government job and had a secure and steady salary during the months of lockdown, he did not suffer like the ordinary people, but his problem was different. The sudden lockdown and the following work-from-home regime made him feel like a prisoner of his nagging wife. Earlier, he could go out and remain out of the house whenever he wanted to on the pretext

of visiting clients for new insurance policy as a LIC agent which he made his side business. Now, holed up with his wife in the same space of the flat, he started to suffer claustrophobia. Living with her was difficult, because he knew of her infidelity, and he stopped cohabiting with her. He could neither accuse her of any wrongdoing because he knew that would certainly invite the dreaded 498a upon him, nor he could leave her because of her teenage daughter preparing for her secondary examination. He had everything in life, but he felt he had nothing, because he always felt that he lacked an understanding and compassionate wife. Living with her was so negative and degenerating to him that it filled him with a sense of despairing emptiness. However, his love for his daughter was so great that it compensated the love he could not feel for his wife anymore.

Needless to say, the lockdown brought about a new reality of existence and that necessitated new arrangement. To facilitate physical distancing and online mode of study, Tarak assigned a separate room to his daughter Ankita, with a multitasking computer. Little did he know that prolonged and continuing reliance on computer and smart phone in order to compensate for the physical isolation and for online mode of study would one day give rise to serious issues of mental health. When the lockdown was lifted and offline school mode was semi-normalised, tests and PTM were held offline. Ankita, who, according to her DPS teachers was earlier a good student, now started to show symptoms of withdrawal from people and preferred isolation, staying most of the time within her bolted room. Earlier she was particular with regularity, often winning medals and citations for her high attendance and discipline, now became very irregular and inattentive. In the PTM held after the tests, the class teacher showed Tarak the scripts of her daughter, with most answers marked wrong and most pages left blank. Tarak met the subject teachers for consultation and they expressed their sympathy for his daughter and promised to give good marks in the internals so

that she could somehow manage to pass the examination. On their suggestion, he met the coordinator, who admitted that a new psychological problem had cropped up among the young people probably due to the online mode, and he also showed Tarak some journal articles which termed the problem as 'cave syndrome'.

When the results of the final examination came out and Ankita passed it with below the average marks, Tarak thought it would be better if he changed the school for a fresh start so that the new setting of the new school might help her to fight the unnameable depression. So, he took her to the nearby Techno school and got her admitted there. Thankfully, for the students of the so-called 'lockdown batch', marks were not considered important for admission. For the first few months everything was as usual, and Tarak heaved a sigh of relief. But the very moment he felt relieved, he was jolted out of his complacency, because the same problem resurfaced, that Ankita refused to go to the school. This time Tarak failed to persuade her; his wife Mira also could not prevail upon her daughter. So, a compromise formula was worked out, and Ankita was admitted in Allen, the Kota Coaching Institute, and Mira chose to stay with her daughter in a rented house near the Institute, located at the other side of the town. Tarak was left alone in his house, and at weekends he went to meet them.

This arrangement was good for every one of them. After two years, when the results came out, although impressive, her results fell short of the NEET-JEE standard. So, Ankita failed to secure a seat for engineering course in a government college. However, she decided to study it in a private college and selected KIIT. It was on the occasion of getting her admitted in KIIT that Tarak went to Bhubaneswar, accompanied by his wife and daughter. After the admission was over, he got two more days in hand and he decided to go out for a sightseeing. And it was on this sightseeing trip that

he visited the famous Yogini temple at Hirapur. There were not many visitors in the circular temple which contained niches for sixty-four yoginis, some idols were broken or missing from their niches. While Tarak was wondering about the exquisite idols carved in black stone, he was approached by a dark and melancholic person who told him that he was doing penance because he had broken some idols in the past and that he had been busy in carving one or two idols, and for which he had been trying to procure a rare black stone from Chhattisgarh. The man also confessed to him that he needed money and to get that money he wanted to sell one of the idols he had finished carving. Tarak had no intention of buying an idol from a stranger, he knew very well that his wife would never allow him to waste money on such things. And, there could be legal implications. So, just out of curiosity or whim and in order to empathise with the dark person, he asked the price. The man looked at him somewhat indifferently and told him that it was a priceless thing, however he might give it to him at fifty thousand bucks. Tarak was surprised, it was exactly fifty thousand rupees that he had in his side bag, a bundle of crispy notes, apart from the UPI and some hard cash in his purse. He thought it a coincidence that the person asked for that amount. Tarak politely told the person that the price was too high for him and that he was unable to buy it. The man showed no further interest in him and walked away and went out of sight.

In the evening when they came back to their hotel after the sightseeing, Mira asked Tarak about his side bag, for it was not with him. Tarak went into a huddle and called the cab driver before going to the police. At the police station, after a complaint was lodged for the missing side bag, he overheard the constables talking about Kalapahad. The SHO asked Tarak to tell him the incident in details and when Tarak mentioned his visit to Hirapur temple, the SHO nodded his head and said that such mysterious incidents had been happening with the foreign tourists as well who had lost their money bags after

visiting the temple and after meeting a mysterious person there whom the police had not been successful to track down and so the police nicknamed him 'Kalapahad'.

Tarak was very upset not only because he had lost the money but also because he had no memory of when he saw the bag last time. He gave up thinking about it in exasperation and returned home by train. His wife and daughter also returned with him because classes were scheduled one week later. He was concerned about his mental health and the age-related amnesia. And there was no respite for him. To add insult to his injury, Ankita once again refused to go to KIIT, and declared that she would like to study statistics in the Hindu College in New Delhi. Tarak was at his wit's end by his daughter's whimsicality. He started to believe that the parents were really a victim of the one-child policy. And before he could say anything about this, his wife burst into a childlike excitement at the prospect of going to New Delhi and living there. Tarak had to yield to his wife and his daughter's wish, and to meet the last date of admission, he had to fly with them to New Delhi. There, after admission, he arranged PG for his daughter and wife, and flew back home alone to join his office.

In the morning, alone in his house and no one to take care of him, Tarak was in a hurry to get ready for office and he was searching for his dress in his luggage which he did not open after returning from Bhubaneswar because he had no time to open it till then. A big surprise was awaiting him, for, the moment he opened his trolley bag and searched inside it for his dress, his hand touched some solid object. He brought it out and to his utter horror, he found a black yogini idol in his hand. In a moment of disbelief and panic, he threw the idol on the floor. It fell with a thud and slid to the wall. Trembling, Tarak stared at it and then tiptoed to it. It was staring at him ominously. It did not break and he lifted it fearfully and then without looking at it kept in a drawer and then hurried out for office. He panicked because he had no idea about how it got

into his luggage and decided to tell his wife about it later in the evening.

Back from his office in the evening, he again went out to meet his ailing relative and then came back and cooked his meal for dinner before going to sleep, desiring for a spell of untroubled sleep after the last week's hectic activities and irregular sleep. He was so tired and desirous of sleep that he had no memory of the idol which he found inside his luggage and which he hid in a drawer. He even forgot to call his wife and talk about the matter.

That night he slept deep and slept long, but his sleep broke towards the dawn and he woke up in a nightmare. The digital clock was ticking on the wall and it was 3:33. Something strange was touching his lower body and he switched on the light and saw the idol lying there on his bed. How could the idol be there and what was it doing in his bed? He was jerked into terror, shame and the uncanny. And his mind boggled at the supernatural turn of events. He realized that he had a wet dream.

In the morning after bathing, he took the idol to a locker of an old almirah and locked it, all the while thinking about some old curse and also about visiting the temple priest who earlier performed some dark rituals and also gave him vials of charmed water to sprinkle in the house in order to make his married life safe and smooth. He thought of an old curse because few years ago while he was shopping in the City Centre Mall, in an isolated dark corner a room called House of Horror came into his notice. And he impulsively bought a ticket and entered the show. He was the only entrant and the inside of the room was very dark. So, he switched on the mobile phone flash light and navigated through the alleys full of skeletons, vampires, skulls and other scary objects kept there to scare the visitors in the dark. Someone inside the room shouted at him to switch off the light and he switched it off and then met a ghost-lady seated on a couch at the centre

of the room, and the couch with the lady kept lurching at him till he ran out of the room in fear. Now he felt that the same ghost-lady might be revisiting him in the form of a yogini idol. He thought of talking about this to his old friend who had some knowledge about black magic and vashikaran. He even thought of visiting a psychiatrist.

In the following week nothing happened. He started to consider the whole episode as hallucination and delusion resulting from his distraught mind. And thankfully also, the episode started to fade out of his mind and he focussed on his usual day to day duties.

Things once again became problematic two weeks later when his wife returned home from New Delhi for some work. As there was no intimacy between husband and wife, at night Tarak and Mira slept in separate rooms. Mira was asleep in an adjacent room. Tarak was also asleep but around midnight his sleep was interrupted by some noise, which he found coming from his wife's room. Baffled, he dashed towards the room. The door was ajar and seeing him, his wife started howling and cursing at him. When he asked what the matter was, his wife garbled out that she was attacked and there was an attempt to suffocate her to death, and in the most disturbing turn of events for Tarak, she accused him of attempting to murder and thus getting rid of her. Tarak was appalled at her words. She was correct because there was no one else, except him, in the house at the moment. Mira was crying so inconsolably that he had no way to defend himself or comforting his wife. His mind was simply reeling at the suddenness and the ugly turn of events. And he was hopelessly left to see the inevitable happening and unfolding before his eyes, Mira packed up her bag and left the house with her brother who in the meanwhile arrived at the crime scene, it was usual for her family members to arrive as quickly as possible whenever she made a phone call to them, her parental house being not very far from her husband's house.

Tarak was so alarmed and exhausted that he had no energy to go back to his sleep. He sat there for a while, trying to calm himself down and think the matter rationally. He was unable to figure out things, so he went to the bathroom. He was so disturbed that he did not switch on the light, and in the dark corner he saw something moving. He gaped into the dark to ascertain what it was, perhaps it was a thief or an assailant. But he saw nothing, except a shadow running across the room and vanishing into the next room. Tarak followed the shadow and entered the room when in a flash of remembrance, he realized that it was the very room where he had kept the yogini idol in the locker of the old almirah. Then everything started to become clear and the truth dawned upon him. It became quite apparent to him that the mysterious idol might be behind all the ominous occurrences in his house. And he realized that he had to get rid of the cursed idol for his personal safety, without letting other people to know about it.

Tarak waited for the daybreak. In the morning, he took the idol out of the locker and started his car. He drove twenty kilometres towards east to the Gazoledoba Teesta barrage, but found the place full of people who were either catching fish or selling or buying them. He saw fish sellers had come from the town to buy fresh river-fish and sell them in the town market. He was planning to throw the idol into the water of the dam, but seeing too many people there he aborted his plan. Then he drove twenty kilometres upstream to the Sevoke Coronation bridge where he desperately threw the idol into the river from the height of the great bridge. The newspaper with which he wrapped the idol flapped violently in the wind while the idol went down and Tarak could hear the tearing sound till there was a loud thud as the idol met the water and then went into its watery grave. The violent flapping of the newspaper and the loud thud attracted a guard at the bridge who asked him about what he had thrown in the river. Tarak said it was a yogini idol and did not wait to see the puzzled face of the guard. At the end of the bridge, the monkeys of Sevoke

basking in the sun on the roadside railings stared at him, and kept on staring while he drove past them.

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