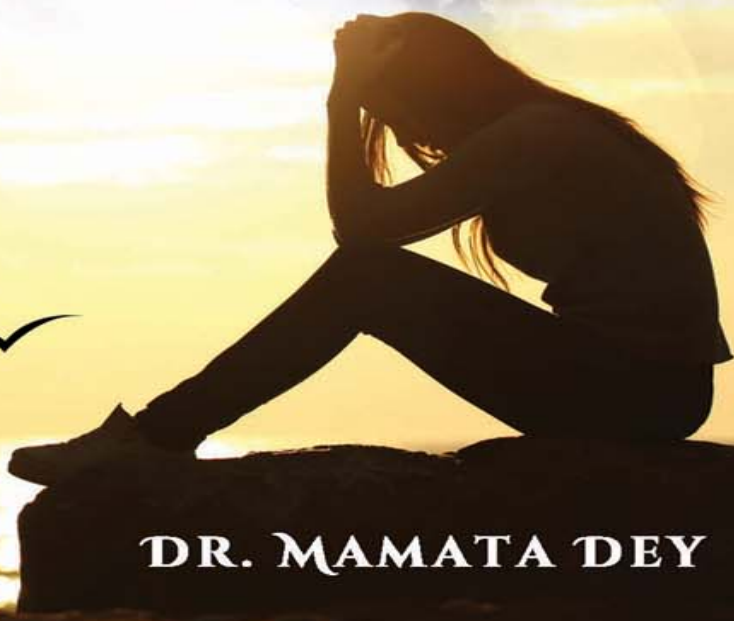


GOD IS THERE, AFTER ALL



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The supposedly haunted house stood large and looming in the distance, silhouetted against the pale moonlight. Facing the narrow road that led to the only high school in the village, the house, atop a hill, orcharded trees bearing flowers and fruits that withered up on the branches, being untouched by human hands for many years. The boundary wall was not too high, but no school boy ever dared to jump over it and enter the grounds for fear of ghosts. It was rumoured that a tramp who had slept in the verandah one stormy night was found dead the next morning with blood oozing out of his tightly closed lips. Fruit trees of almost every variety was there in the garden and while mangoes, jackfruits and litchis hung lusciously from the branches in summer, red and yellow berries in winter tantalized way-farers. If anyone made bold to scale the wall and enter, others dissuaded him with such vehemence that he had to drop the idea. The poor Indian peasants who comprised almost three fourths of the inhabitants of the village, imagined all sorts of strange noises and voices emanating from the house not only at night but also in the day time. Nearby there was not any other house and even if there had been one, the inmates must have shifted long back.

Originally, the house had belonged to a wealthy zamindar who had settled in the city and rarely visited his ancestral home which was being looked after by his servants. His only son had settled and obtained an American citizenship and was perhaps too busy earning and spending money to claim ownership of the house. The Zamindar's lone sister had been widowed at an early age and had no issue. After the death of the Zamindar some twenty years ago, she had stayed in the house with a middle-aged man-servant to help her with her domestic chores. God knows what happened but one stormy morning the villagers found them dead in each others' arm on the verandah of the house. It was a clear case of amour that ended in suicide. That was ten years back and after that the people said that they had seen the ghosts of the lady and the servant strolling hand in hand in the verandah of the upper storey. Perhaps they

imagined it, but over the years the house came to acquire the name of a haunted house.

The village which we are talking about is in one of the South-Eastern coastal districts of India where innumerable little tributaries of rivers meander their way into the Bay of Bengal. Located on the banks of one such river, the village boasted of a pretty little Shiva temple at the top of a hill on one side, and a high school on the other. There were hardly any Government Offices and the few Government employees who stayed in the village, used to commute to the town by bus. The town was a good twenty five kilometers away. Beyond the river there was a thick wood of eucalyptus trees and beyond this small forest, one could glimpse a part of the Bay of Bengal in all its grand and shimmering beauty, nature laughing in full glory unspoiled by human touch, the wave lapping up the shores, like a little baby playing happily in his mother's arms. Such beautiful places are easily detected by adventurous, inquisitive interfering human beings who soon change them into crowded noisy picnic spots. But thanks to the insignificance of the village, this place had remained undiscovered by outsiders for a long time and the natural charm of the village continued to remain virgin and unspoilt.

That day the whole village was bursting with the latest sensational news; an office-goer to the town had just heard that the house had been sold and the news had spread among the five thousand inhabitants of the village like wildfire. Who could have bought it ?, they wondered ! The American based son of the Zamindar had negotiated the deal with a not-so-old man, who had bought the house at a very low price. And it was heard that he was also going to stay there permanently. Well, well, this was news indeed ! In the market place speculations were rife as to whether the owner would be rid of the ghosts, or the ghosts would be rid of him.

“Do you know he is coming today?” The Gram Panchayat asked the headman on a fine morning as they were returning from a bath in the river after the completion of their morning ablutions. The headman who was a Brahmin did not reply but just kept on muttering some mantras, holding his sacred thread. After they had walked on for some time, he seemed to ponder over the matter, and replied “Yea, and we must welcome him with

at least a garland of flowers. You see it's just a form of courtesy. After all he'll soon be like our family member for I hear he is staying here permanently. At least, we must be there at the bus stop to receive him”.

It was an insignificant stop by the road side. Usually few other people, other than the office-goers boarded or alighted the bus, which halted there just for minute or so. On that particular day, the villagers were already assembled there long before the bus arrived at half-past two. A not-so-very-thick garland had been woven and along with the headman of the village a few half-clothed children had also gathered there, their eyes wide with curiosity. On seeing the approaching bus. they stopped their animated conversation and waited for the bus to halt. A man alighted and the villagers held their breath in admiration, for he was strikingly handsome, dressed in milky spotless white dhoti and kameez. He could be of any age, between twenty six and forty five; they kept on guessing. Behind him stood an old man of about fifty five years of age, who looked around here and there to catch sight of any vehicle that could carry his master's belongings to the house. The luggage comprised of a cot, a table, a sack containing few utensils a suitcase and a trunk .“Namaskar”, the headman greeted the stranger with folded hands and the others followed suit. The man reciprocated with a similar gesture, a smile lighting up his face. “We have gathered here to welcome you,” some one said “After all, now you are like a member of our own family. Your joys are our joys, your sorrows are our sorrows. Anyway, where are the other members of your family, your parents?” he queried.

“ He has none and he's not yet married”. The old man replied curtly, as he and the man got up on a rickshaw, while the puller picked up his belongings, and away they rode up to the house, leaving the villagers gaping behind them.

“A very disagreeable pair”, one of them broke the silence, “I daresay, typical city manners”.

“Of course not”! The headman retorted angrily, “my aunt and uncle live in the city and I'm sure there is not a more well-mannered, friendly and agreeable couple”.

The crowd dispersed, rather disappointed. The villagers had hoped that the man and his servant would consult them and seek their advice in doing some sort of a 'puja' before entering the house, but nothing of that sort happened. As the man opened the gate of the house, it made a terrible creaking sound, for the gate had not been opened for years and rust had gathered on it. Master and servant immediately set about cleaning the house. The water of the well looked black and dirty, but it would do for washing the floor. After a hard labour of three hours of washing and mopping water off from floor, the rooms looked quite clean.

"Aren't you feeling hungry, Sir"?, asked Prasad "I'm famished," Baba said laughing, as a row of sparkling white teeth flashed out. "But first, I must sit down for meditation".

He went away to an inner apartment while the servant hurried off to buy some grocery from a nearby shop. "No ghosts there?" The shopkeeper asked, "Not at all, we don't believe in ghosts and that is why we bought the house," Prasadda said in a matter- of- fact manner. When he reached home, his master was still in meditation. The sun was setting and a strange calm had descended on the village. He lit the gas stove and within half an hour, a meal of rice, dal and boiled potatoes had been pressure cooked. Baba's meditation was over and both of them sat down to eat. Since both of them were awfully hungry, the meal though consisting of only mixture, or "Khicddi" of three items, tasted like ambrosia. And soon the beds were made, and both of them retired to a sound sleep.

In the morning, a local youth called upon them. "Namaskar", he said most reverentially, with folded hands, "we are staging a 'jatra' today, and we want some donation".

Anand Babu (Baba), as the gentleman was called, handed him a twenty rupee note. The lanky youth lingered on to have some more friendly conversation.

"You must come to the 'jatra', tonight, if not we'll mind it". He said exuberantly,

“Our master doesn’t go any where”, Prasadda said as Baba went indoors.

“Can’t he speak?” the youth studied Prasadda. “Are you his spokesman? Well, I’m sure if he retains his disagreeable nature, he cannot remain for long in this village”. He walked away angrily.

Soon word spread around the village that Anand Babu was a proud man, a very disagreeable person. For almost a week he was the topic of discussion in every home and shop. “What does he do for a living?” “Doesn’t he ever talk or come out of his house?” “No, he was seen going to the town by bus today.” “Is he dumb?” What sort of prayer does he do for hours”, “from where does he get money?” “is he himself a ghost ?” These were some of the questions which bothered the villagers, providing food for gossip. And just as waves which come and go giving place to fresh waves gossip about this man gradually died down giving place to newer discussions.

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