

The Story of the Ghat

If events could imprint themselves in stone, then you could have read a lot of old stories on my steps. If you are interested in old tales, come, sit on my steps. Listen attentively to the lapping of the waves, you will be able to hear many a forgotten story.

I am remembering another day in the past, a day very much like today. Leaves gently rustling in a cool morning breeze, the river Ganges running full, only four of my steps showing above the high tide, fishing boats at anchor bobbing on the waves, sun's rays of an unusually pure golden hue spread over the river.

It is really not that long in the past, although it may seem so by your reckoning. You see, my days frolic and float away along the river, my nights and my days cast their shadows on the Ganges, only to be wiped off clean, not leaving any traces anywhere. That is why time does not hang heavy on me and my heart stays ever so young, although my exterior looks so old.

See this Ashath tree here, the one that has sent its roots through me, crushed my ribcage and holding my stone heart in its grip? It was just a tiny little sapling on the day I am remembering about now. I was quite old then but I was still very erect and straight of stature.

The other girls used to call her Kusum -- the girl I am remembering from a day in the past that was just like today. The literal meaning of Kusum is a flower. She had this special sweetness about her. The bells on her anklets carried this special note. It is not that she was that gregarious but she certainly was very popular. Kusum used to spend a lot of her time by the river -- she seemed to have this special relationship with the river.

After some time, Kusum was not coming by any more. I gathered from her friends that Kusum has been married away to some remote village. A year went by and I had almost forgotten about Kusum, when I was startled by feeling her footsteps on my steps again. However, the bells on her anklets had no song in them anymore, there were no anklets. I got to know that little Kusum had been widowed.

And she had become quite lonely too. Most of her playmates were married and gone by then. She did spend a lot of her time by the river. A she sat there by the riverbank with her chin on her knees, it seemed to me that the waves used to call her name, just as her playmates used to do. And she was growing up, full of youthful beauty, but ever so veiled as a flower that blooms behind a screen of leaves.

Ten years went by like this. Then on a fall day, when my steps were slightly damp with dews, a holy man, a Sannyasi, arrived at the village and took up residence at that temple right by me. In Bengal, a Sannyasi is a man avowed to tread the path of the right, the path straight and narrow. He was young and tall, he was fair and handsome.

The crowd at the temple just kept growing, as the word spread about his coming. He was so kind and gentle with so much care and concern about one and all that came to visit him.

All the people in the village got to come and make his acquaintance except Kusum. As the crowd started growing around the temple and the Sannyasi, Kusum, having become somewhat reticent

by nature by now, had stopped coming to the ghat. Then one balmy evening Kusum came by and took up her old seat on my steps.

The Sannyasi was on his way down to the river by my steps as the view of a lonely girl seating on the ghat steps caught his eye. When he was pondering whether to go back to the temple and not disturb the blissful peace of this lonely woman, Kusum looked up and they saw each other. Did it seem like they have known each other for a long time, perhaps from their previous incarnations? The Sannyasi asked her name, she told him her name. No more was said. Kusum went back home. The Sannyasi sat on my steps for a long time that night .

From the next day, Kusum used to come and visit the holy man almost every day. She would come and touch his feet in obeisance. She would stand by and listen carefully as the Sannyasi read the scriptures. The Sannyasi would be explaining the holy words to her. Kusum would listen attentively, whether she understood it all or not, follow his instructions to a word, and do the temple chores.

Thus went the winter. Spring came, when I noticed Kusum's absence from the ghat, the temple and the Sannyasi's meetings -- until one evening when I sensed both the Sannyasi and Kusum on my steps.

"Did you send for me my lord", Kusum asked.

"Yes. I have noticed your absence. Why this negligence in serving the Lord?", Sannyasi replied.

At first Kusum did not want to discuss the matter, but started talking after an affectionate reassurance from the Sannyasi.

"I have sinned my lord. Lord, I used to worship a person with all my heart and devotion and that used to fill me with joy. But I had a dream a few nights back where he was with me, holding my hand and speaking words of love to me. The dream ended there, but when I met him the next day, I just could not see him the way I used to. The view in my dream kept coming back." Kusum said.

I could feel the feet of the Sannyasi, pressing hard on my steps as Kusum was speaking through her tears.

"Who is this man that you dreamt of", the Sannyasi asked.

"I cannot tell you that, my lord", Kusum replied.

The Sannyasi insisted, "You must tell me, who is this man".

Kusum hesitated, she said, "Lord, it is thee."

As she spoke those words, she fainted. He stood there as a stone statue.

When Kusum came round, he said, "Kusum, you have listened to me and done whatever I asked you to do. You have to follow this, my last instruction today. I will leave this place today. We will not meet again. You must forget me. This is your task. This you must do."

Kusum bowed, touched his feet, said, "Yes my lord."

The Sannyasi left.

Kusum said, "He has ordered me to forget him."

And slowly climbed down my steps into the river.

Who else but the river, the banks of which were her playground ever since she was but a mere child, would give her solace at this time, the time of her dire need?