



The Pilgrim's Journey

Bashir Cassimally

Cupping his hands to collect water as he bent down, Dev saw his reflection in the sacred lake of Ganga Talao - the image of a young man in the prime of life, a stubble on his face. The early morning rays rippled on the surface. Dev could not stop gazing at his image until the mist descended rapidly over the lake, shrouding it all.

In preparation for the holy night of Maha Shivaratri, he filled in some water from the lake in a pitcher to carry back home. He had stayed there for the night, praying and meditating, not partaking of any food. The crowd was swarming to the lake, and he pulled out discreetly. He was loath to mingle with other pilgrims preferring to

stay on his own while they chanted the devotional mantra in honour of the deity Shiva: *Om Namah Shivaya*, I bow to you, Shiva, in my inner self.

The annual pilgrimage reminded him of his late father. Each year, they would walk over twenty kilometres from their home village to the lake. In his older days, his father would struggle with the trip, and Dev slowed down to harmonize their paces. How different to his first-time experience. He was six years old and was so excited, hopping along until he was exhausted. His father carried him in his arms to the lake, and for the first time, he had a glimpse of Ganga Talao: misty and calm. A stillness so perfect that it filled him with enchantment and made his heart throb. Dev felt around for his father's hand and gripped it tightly.

Ganga Talao, a volcanic lake located in the island's central part, is overgrown by a humid tropical forest. Impenetrable and concealed, it was first revealed to a sage over a hundred years ago through a dream. In it, he saw the lake and its underlying connection with River Ganga on the other side of the Indian ocean. Inspired, the sage grappled inside the island for a week with no provisions except for the food of the forest. After a week of penance, he perceived through the mist, the lake: pristine and pure, like in his dream.

Ever since the devotees have been rallying to the lake in growing numbers for the Maha Shivaratri. In time, the landscape around Ganga Talao has been transformed - the buildings on the lakefront, the asphalted roads and the myriads of cars, and other facilities for the pilgrims. But Dev reflected that the pomp and gloss had also sadly settled in.

On the way back, he passed by the statue of Lord Shiva. The statue towered some thirty metres high over the lake. A dense crowd had amassed to watch a high-profile dignitary, seated inside a crane cabin, hoisted up to the eye level of the Lord himself.

Dev left the Ganga Talao distraught. The Maha Shivaratri was the night of refuge within the divine - the cosmic night when

everything became still. But it now seemed that the ostentatious displays and rites had become all-important. He scoffed at these, becoming upset and restless. The days of peace and contentedness he had experienced on the lake with his father were all but gone.

Walking tirelessly for hours on end, Dev reached the nearest town. Volunteers were serving food and drinks to pilgrims, but he passed by, indifferent, hardly noticing them and the richly decorated *kanwars* they bore on their shoulders. He arrived at the old railway track, disused since the 1960s, now a walkway linking the central towns.

Eucalyptuses, Flame trees, Tecoma trees, Jacarandas and Indian myrtles thrived on each side of the trail. Shrubs and creepers made the lower level and grass covered the ground. Flowers were ever so plentiful, as some trees blossomed in summer while others in the mild tropical winter. The nectar oozing from the flowers attracted the insects, which lured the geckos and birds of varied sizes, shapes and colours. A pair of zebra doves, with black and white stripes, was cooing on a branch. And there were other insects too. An oasis of life, dwarfed by the jungle of sky-high concrete buildings around. Yet, the trees would soon be cut off to make way for a light rail.

Dev passed by a grand, fancily decorated marquee set up by the town council where food and water were offered, and the pilgrims could lie down for rest or a breather. But Dev chose to amble on. Further down, he reached a bare, unadorned place where drinks and food were being served on a tray in the open. The volunteers were old people who could no longer make the pilgrimage on foot to the holy lake. Instead, they prepared the *prasad* - the food consumed by pilgrims - which they humbly served. The public benches along the trail had been removed for the coming rail works. So Dev sat down under a tree with wide outspreading branches to eat his first day's meal. It was now past 1.00 pm.

He reflected it might well be his last trip along the walkway – the lifeblood of the neighbouring towns, the place where the residents converge, meet, converse and stroll. The younger ones saunter up

and down, the elderly plod and the workers stride forth while stray dogs scamper, bemused as the walkway bustles with life each morning.

Dev felt sad and helpless. Plucking a tender leaf from the tree, he instinctively brought it to his mouth to chew. Pungent yet tasteful. Slowly, he chanted the devotional mantra he could not utter at the holy lake: *Om namaya Shiva*.

He closed his eyes, leaned against the tree and fell asleep.

In his dream, the tree embosomed him like his mother when he was a child. A black mountain in the form of a pyramid capped in snow loomed through, the fog slowly descending upon it. Everything became peaceful. The mountain became an abode of stillness, of that which is not. And the quiet and calm penetrated him in his slumber.

When he opened his eyes, he went through a feeling of well-being. Appeased and calm, he observed the people around him. The graciousness of the old man who had served him a drink revealed itself, and Dev bowed respectfully to him. A group of middle-aged pilgrims were eating *prasad* together. They looked exhausted, and he cheered them up with a few encouraging words. When he looked at the passers-by on the trail, he could somehow perceive their anxieties, doubts and misgivings. Like he had been granted another eye, one that could see the essence of the smaller things.

Dev looked up at the tree - a rubber fig one. Its main branches were endowed with fine aerial root-like stems that formed delightful three-dimensional lattices. These hung down from the main branches and over time reached the ground, penetrating it and further anchoring the tree.

The tree belongs to the same family as the edible fig tree, the banyan tree and the peepul tree: all sacred trees across different lands. The roots are the foundations of the tree through which it stands, and the trunk supports it through the ages. Only the leaves change. They wither - the old brown ones falling down to be replaced by fresh

green ones, which capture the sun's energy. The trinity of life within the tree.

Dev reached home late at night, worn out. The pilgrimage had taken him on a lifetime journey: the Ganga Talao and the night spent there, memories of his late father, the walkway and its trees, and the dream of self-realization under the fig tree. The notices put up on the trees calling for protests against the cutting of trees and the dismantling of the walkway were still fresh in his mind.

He took a day off to join in the peaceful protest in the town of Rose Hill. Several hundreds of demonstrators aligned themselves, forming a human chain to deny entry to the woodcutters. The riot police sirens could be heard wailing in the distance, and soon the sound became louder as the cars converged towards the protest location.

The riot police officers, about forty of them, stepped out and slammed the doors simultaneously with a bang, instilling awe and fear. They strode on menacingly towards the dissidents, converging to a section of the walkway, truncheons and cudgels in hand. Without a word of warning, they hit indiscriminately at the demonstrators, mostly young people. Several of them, including Dev, collapsed on the ground. The human chain was breached. Down on the ground and dragged viciously by the legs, Dev offered no resistance. Instead, he marvelled at the canopy of trees - abodes of life - and envisioned the walkway turned into a tree cemetery, paving the way for a new world.

Shortly after, an army of woodcutters arrived with chainsaws to raze the area to the ground. By late afternoon the place had fallen into ruin, flattened out, without life or hope. Several hundreds of trees were felled on the same day. They bled. The sap oozed out endlessly. The reek of suffering, agony and death pervaded the place.

Only one tree stood out in the derelict landscape – the rubber fig tree rescued by the three old women who had circled it with their arms outstretched. They were the three old sisters living nearby. Even the hardened riot police officers had not dared pull them apart. In their younger days, the sisters had sat under the fig tree to eat, read, and play. They had swung to and fro using its root-like stems.

“The tree has a life of its own,” they said. “It endears itself to humans who choose to connect with it, birds who sing to it and the smaller creatures who seek refuge in it.”

At dusk, the sisters left for home.

“The tree is safe at night”, they said. “It's an ill omen to cut down a tree after dark when the tree's spirit is sleeping, for fear it will come to haunt the slayer.”

Regardless, the riot police, unafraid of the foreboding, sawed down the tree before quietly disappearing into the darkness of the night.

The tree did not bleed. Perhaps it was too old or had given up on life. In its lifetime, it has given shelter to countless forms of life: big, small and microscopic, imparting the essence of things to those taking the time to pause, connect with it and relate to the lifeforms under its canopy. The three sisters and Dev, among others, stayed on this path.



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Bashir Cassimally lives on the Island of Mauritius where he does some gardening, loves hiking and snorkelling. He writes for local magazines and has been published in Brittle Paper, Honeyguide Literary Magazine, The Island Review, Adelaide Literary Magazine, in an anthology of poems on Love and in an anthology of COVID stories published by the Arts Ministry. Hopefully will be spurred on to write more now that he's retired.

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