

Marble Rocks

a short story

by

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MARBLE ROCKS

Floating on stillness, moving over a luminous mirror that reflects the disc in full, the walls run vertically true to scale heights as great as any cathedral. Slabs of smoothness stand on end, sentinels to a journey halfway realized from source to sea. Here, the Narmada River has few equals as it cuts through marble rocks of white and green and black.

It was on my first journey out from Jabalpur to Bhedaghat that I noticed the small temple on top of a steep hill. There was something about it that kept my attention until it was obscured from view by other smaller hills. So it was that on the very next day I took a tuk-tuk alighting at a T-junction - the nearest point of access. To my surprise there was a small market, a few shops and a few chi shops - amenities I had not noticed the previous day. Even more surprising was the presence of a few Buddhist monks.

Following a lane that wound its way in the direction of the hill I passed through what could be taken for an entrance to a park. As it turned out it was a park, not that you would have known from the local tourist information centre or from any signs or place names. Sometimes I think India likes to keep most of its most fascinating places a family secret as if foreigners cannot be trusted with treasures of such value. Here, however, there may well be another reason for keeping it secret.

I followed a winding path - quite steep in places - through areas both manicured and wild. The path was laid with ancient slabs that also made for retaining walls in places where it was needed. The further I went the more spectacular the view. North was a wide valley mainly flat except for obelisks of rounded stone - 20-30 metres in height - that dotted the landscape. The surrounding area was made up of small hills that were also covered with these giant pebbles. It was a delightful landscape reminiscent of Hampi. To the east, and quite visible, was Jabalpur, a city with clean, wide and spacious streets, an excellent University, and with a reputation for holding conferences with aplomb. Further west and out of sight was Bhedaghat the staging post for the Marble gorge. The south was hidden from view even from the summit by a series of ascending hills.

The temple was guarded by an old man who appeared the instant I set foot on the paved platform on which the temple stood. He offered me chi and a guided tour for a few rupees. Even that meagre amount would have been a waste, for in truth there was little of architectural interest, indeed there was little at all, but the knowledge he had of the place and its history made me feel a penny-pincher of the Dickensian variety.

This was a Kali temple of at least 4000 years lineage. There she was housed in stone just a few feet in height and barely discernable as a figure locked behind a wrought iron gate of weathered strength. There also was the blackened stone on which the sacrifices were made and to my eye ones of recent execution. 4000 years of blood - was there ever such a Goddess of such insatiable thirst.

The whole atmosphere changed. The darkness reached out from the dark past and engulfed me without so much as a 'by your leave'. My active imagination soon had children in the process of being slaughtered acted out in front of me. The old man must have picked up on this change of mood for he confirmed that it had indeed been a place of human sacrifice. But that wasn't all, because, so much of the temple had been destroyed by those wishing to put an end to her malicious ways, then the corpse left to be eaten up by the gardens that I had passed through. She, however, they didn't dare touch. And even that wasn't the end of it for surrounding the temple just as they had surrounded her neck in the form of screaming skulls the 64 Darkinies - Kali's demon handmaidens - were still present. No longer in their original place they were now housed in a special building at the base of the hill further around to the unseen south.

The old man showed me the path to take and I wound my way around the hill until a vista presented itself. The perfectly circular building with domed roof stood out as jarringly as if it had been a flying saucer. It was modern in that it could not have been more than 20 years old. I approached it with wariness for there was no sound and no movement and not a soul to be seen. The doors were open and entering with caution I was brought to a stop but a few feet inside. The Darkinies were lined up around the periphery - stone slabs - 4-5 foot tall - each one sculptured in detailed relief.

Which direction should I take - to the left or to the right? Rationally, this was ridiculous, but still under the dark spell of blood lust it became, no, it was important. I chose to go the way of the flesh and found myself proceeding clockwise. Each face as individual in its horror as in its

form - the ancient hands that had carved these had seen them as surely as they had seen their own faces. I too seemed to recognise them and when there are so many it makes one wonder what one has seen before in the horror of our modern life.

I was glad to be out in the open with a desire to be as far away as possible.

In a vain hope to hold onto objectivity I had counted them as I had passed by - 63 - but I was not about to return to verify my mistake. Looking back from the safety of a path through this strange and terrible park I could now feel a twin compulsion both to return and to go.

Why was it important that I had missed one - why on Earth was it so important that I had missed one? I fled down the path until I was confronted by a Buddhist monk sitting on a small wall. I joined him disturbing his meditations by producing a huge sigh of relief.

He looked in the direction that I was looking - back to where I had come from.

'So you have met them?'

'63'

'Ahh.'

'Ahh, what?'

'Then you still have one to meet.'

'If you think I'm going back there, you can think again.'

'You have no need, she will seek you out.'

'Please, do not jest. It seems all too real to me right now.'

'How is one to avoid one's fate?'

I knew the answer to this Zen Koan, 'By accepting it without question.'

'So what have you to fear?' He smiled at me benevolently.

I looked at him with incredulity, 'Have you seen them?' I almost shouted this at him.

He laughed, 'Think yourself lucky, there are those who have only seen a few, having fled before they saw them all.'

'Oh my God.' I moaned 'One is bad enough to meet in this life.'

Although it had registered that he was a Buddhist monk, the accompanying relevance hadn't quite gelled. Perhaps it was the way I was looking at him for he answered me at length. Informing me that there had been a Buddhist presence at this location since the time of Ashok - the one and only Buddhist King of all India - more than 2000 years ago and that the Kali

temple had been a ruin even then. He suspected the Buddhist presence was a veiled attempt to stamp out her wicked practice that even today was still being carried out in the darkness of the night.

Kali is the demonic incarnation of Parvati, Shiva's wife. Or, should I say, an incarnation of Durga who is an incarnation of Parvati - an incarnation of an incarnation. Or, does she not represent the dark side of our own psychology that which Jung alluded to and to which the Tantric Buddhists ascribe our animal nature, that beast that lives within all of us.

Had he seen her, I queried, in her most terrible form where she is holding her own head by its hair on her outstretched arm?

'In the flesh?' He jovially wished to know.

'Don't answer that question.' I demanded.

'But why not, when all is but an illusion.'

'And if all is but an illusion then she is as real as anything else.'

'I can see you are ready to visit the seven Buddhist Hells.'

'The one my mind is in right now, is more than enough, thank you very much.' I chided.

His laughter was stabilizing and I grasped it with gratitude bringing myself back to the mundane perspective.

We walked back down the hill where he showed me the entrance to a Buddhist teaching academy. He asked if I would like to come in but I declined wishing to put distance between my recent experience and myself, even though of course this was an immature folly.

I walked back out to the junction and crossed the road waiting for a tuk-tuk or bus to take me back to town. There was little traffic and as I waited I watched an old man tilling the soil in the old fashioned way with a pair of oxen and a single blade plough in a tiny terraced field above the valley floor.

The sound of a ring tone sprung like music from the air and I looked around wondering where it came from. It seemed to be coming from the farmer tilling his field and this was verified when he reached the end of his ploughed line he took out from his dhoti a mobile phone. This tickled me far beyond what the incident deserved - perhaps it was the contrast with my recent experience because I laughed openly. And laughed even more when he started gesticulating as if showing someone the work he was involved in. Then, he was shouting into the phone,

pulling it away from his ear he looked at it as if he could not believe what he was hearing.

I imagined it was his wife asking him if he'd go on some petty errand - as if he had time for such a thing.

India is full of such contradiction, such contrast. Where a 4000-year-old homicidal maniac of a God can live side by side with the delirium of a crazy frog.

Gliding on pea green soup, the walls now pink with light, the silence, golden, the air so still the following breeze perfectly matching our speed, and yet it was still hard to breath. Leaning over the bow I was a bird skimming the surface not wishing to ever land and destroy the perfect ambience.

Bhedaghat was a collection of small jetties, a small village, a couple of hotels and a number of chi shops. I walked out of it following the pilgrim path up into the hills. One of the great pilgrimages for Hindus is the circumnavigation of the Narmada River. When I grow too weary for life and no longer care for the pain in my bare feet or the cold of the bare earth on my bones I too will journey there.

It was not long before I came to the entrance to one of the best tourist bungalows in India. I now entered with purpose for I wished to ascertain if they had any vacancies. But this was the tourist season and I had to settle for tea on the grass. The view was spectacular - looking down into the gorge at a place where a stretch of the river ran away from the viewpoint for some distance before twisting around a bend and disappearing out of sight. I was not alone for there was an Indian couple sitting at another table. Remarking on the view I was drawn into conversation only to find that he was the manager of the tourist bungalow - not there - but in Amakantak the source of the Narmada. Would you believe, he was on holiday. He dispelled any hope that I would find any accommodation at Amakantak over the Christmas period but invited me to stay at any other time. An offer I have unfortunately been unable to take up. It is such chance meetings that all journeys are made and all have consequence. As a result of this one I was forced to change my itinerary - Amakantak now off the list - and decided to stay on in Jabalpur and explore the local region. There was also that temple on the steep hill that had so excited my attention.

No longer in a hurry and the company being both amiable and knowledgeable I past a pleasant afternoon. By the time I returned to the jetties the night boat trips through the gorge were about to set off and, set free, as it were, from a mindscape dominated by an itinerary, I jumped on board.

It was a disaster from the very beginning. A bickering couple, tired and disgruntled children, and a man offering a running commentary of mind numbing banality saw to that. With several boats heading out at the same time the noise from the underpowered outboards provided a soundtrack better suited to an action movie. Then ours gave up the struggle and after a brief death rattle there was silence. Just for a moment. Soon there followed angry words and words of anguish and eventually arguments, then a power struggle with the small craft rocking ever more violently from side to side as the combatants resorted to physical assault. Terrible thoughts passed through my mind as I secretly hoped the boat would capsize drowning all the occupants but for myself - an accomplished swimmer. Reality quickly took over as I realized I would be forced to rescue this crew of despair - it is well known that few Indians can swim.

Standing up I shouted as loudly as I could to the last boat heading into the gorge. This had a double outcome as the boat turned around to rescue us and at the same time it silenced and calmed my fellow travellers. No one thanked me. The sullen crew soon found voice as we neared the jetty demanding, well, I didn't wait to find out. I quickly mounted the bank grabbed the first tuk-tuk and returned to Jabalpur.

Fire on the water, the sunrise above and below, the walls brown and red and grey, no living thing stirred as I passed in silence giving.

I was surprised when the government flagged ambassador pulled up. It was on the other side of the road for a start and an official vehicle for another. It could only be stopping for me, as there was no one else around, discounting the farmer in his field. The back door opened and I was asked to get in. Once inside I realized it was the manager from the tourist bungalow in Amakantak. They'd enjoyed my conversation so much they were now offering to take me to dinner and a ride back to Jabalpur later. I was pleased to escape from the Darkinies and

delighted to be hosted to genuine Indian hospitality. The Manager of the Bhedaghat tourist bungalow and his wife joined us and we spent a very pleasant evening in the restaurant of the best hotel discussing an emerging India so full of promise. With middle-class Indians travelling so extensively they had saved the tourist bungalows - a remarkable institution that was a left over from colonial days - much to the joy of my companions who could now luxuriate in their respective establishments without the fear of unemployment. We went back to the tourist bungalow and like the British before us took refreshment on the balcony while surrounded by the sounds and smells of a perfect Indian night. Down below us the gorge was lit up by a moon near full and this captivating spectacle reminded us all that the British were not such fools after all.

Late into the evening we dragged ourselves away to the car only to find it had a flat tyre and that the spare was also flat. This only prompted a war camaraderie of the 'we're all in this together' variety. The Manager from Amakantak and his wife insisted they give up one of their twin beds and the Manager from Bhedaghat organized his staff to have it removed to the balcony. I spent the most wonderful of nights in enchanted repose.

Waking with a start I was fully awake. It was still dark if you could call a moon drenched landscape by that name. First I walked around the garden then with energy to burn I made my way down to the jetties.

Walking to the end of one I saw this light moving out of shadow and coming towards me across the river. The man in the boat with a lamp attached moored right next to me and while helping him out with his catch of fish it struck me that this was an opportunity to see the gorge as it was meant to be seen. We were soon on our way - gliding on light, the slow dip of the oars barely audible.

Then the shadows began to make their magic felt for I could see cast in relief on the marble slabs many a figurative scene. Rounding a bend I was immediately confronted by a face a hundred feet tall, one of insufferable insolence. It knocked me sideways for it was the very picture of contemptuous sloth. Oh how my head hung as I gazed upon my nemesis. I have long been aware of this my most negative of characteristics but to see her face writ large about me, chided me into heart felt remorse. Wasn't it Jesus that said that sloth was the deadliest of sins? For how is one to make amends if one can't be bothered.

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