

## Bhairavi by Veerinder Patwari

### Bhairavi – a story

**It was** a long journey from New York to *Tulmul*, a small village in Kashmir!

His journey was comfortable but not as exciting as his first visit to '*Kheer Bhawani*', the holy temple of Goddess Bhawani constructed over a sacred spring, when he was a child.

The panoramic look of the shrine after a long time revived a sixty-year-old memorable incident in Inder's memory!

His grandfather, an Ayurveda medical practitioner, had made elaborate arrangement for his '*thread ceremony*' in the premises of the shrine. The whole family and close relative had travelled in '*Doongas*' (mini house boats used as ferries by local Kashmiri families for excursion while taking the river route for travelling) enjoying the slow pace journey down the river followed by five days stay in the shrine. Besides the fun of a rejoicing family get together for five days Inder had one more reason to enjoy the memories of a miracle he had watched and witnessed at that time!

It was early morning and Inder was accompanying his mother while she was performing '*Parikramas*' (devotional peripheral walking) of the small temple inside the holy spring. Inder overheard a priest convincing a devotee that the colour of the spring water keeps on changing and was trying to convey prophetic messages to devotees. The priest also told them that they were lucky to have visited the temple on an auspicious day when the colour of the spring was pinkish, a divine colour which was seen only on rare occasions. The devotees were encouraged to have a close '*darshan*' of the divine pinkish colour of the spring as it was the right time and the right moment for seeking blessings and getting miraculous favour from Goddess Kheer Bhawani.

Inder, though very young, knew pretty well that the entire family and the neighbours always cornered his mother Shobha for her origin from a low caste and being the wife of a communist known as Sri Krishan. Shobha never got any support or relief from her progressive husband who had rebelled to marry her against the wishes of his high caste family and conservative society. Constant stresses and strains created by the hostile and discriminatory environment she was living in had made her so apathetic that she always had a frozen look on her face. Therefore, when Inder completed one hundred and one *parikramas* he made a wish to *Mata Kheer Bhawani* and prayed to see a smile on his mother's face! And when his mother gave him a smile while hugging him, Inder enjoyed the ecstatic moment with a laughter shouting "Kheer Bhawani has blessed me and I have witnessed a miracle! Seen my mother smiling!!"

That was the impression engraved in the mind of an intelligent and sensitive ten-year-old boy which was the foundation of his unshakable faith in Mata Kheer Bhawani.

Inder, an acclaimed cardiologist, had no family or friends, with no personal ambitions or desires, and lived in New York in a one-room apartment within the hospital campus. His devotion to his profession was his obsession. He had very few face book friends, all of them his patients who had sought personal permission before sending friend requests to him. But his latest friend Bhairavi, an unmarried music lover was an exception.

One year ago, if he had received her friend request he would have out rightly rejected it for not having any biographical details and a page without a profile picture. Instead, 'Bhairavi' had too many links of his favourite 1950-60 Hindi film songs which he used to sing and share with his friend Indu when he was young. His newly discovered face book friend with a veiled identity had thus revived his interest in Indian Classical Music and fondness for 'Raag Bhairavi' which once used to be his all-time trustworthy companion in facing all agonizing and ecstatic situations! Bhairavi had invited him for their maiden face to face meeting in Kheer

Bhawani premises. The old man was so emotionally influenced by this platonic relationship that he cancelled all his appointments including his award ceremony in London, and was enthusiastically waiting for her under the gorgeous Chinar tree close to the worshiping place inside the temple premises.

Unexpectedly the evening of the hopeful day had sunk in to a painful disappointment! It was already over three hours and still there was no trace of Bhairavi. Suddenly he became conscious of his over confidence that he would be able to in recognise her amongst the scanty crowd of people at miniature taxi stand in *Tulmul*, without having ever met her before. He discredited his self-claimed talent of tracking down people with ease and in retrospect realized the necessity of having her photograph. If he had one in his hands it could have helped him to recognise her from a distance. He was certain in his mind that he had not come all the way here for the restoration of faith which was eroded five decades ago. He had no interest in getting back to his roots either. He had simply come to meet Bhairavi and then decide the next step. But waiting in vain for so long dampened his enthusiasm and he began to lose his patience. Abstract speculations with unknown fears made him nervous. What could happen if Bhairavi did not turn up and Kashmir born NRI Dr. Inder Hakim's reality was exposed? Will he be punished for being son of parents who were hated by the society? Or pardoned for being a respectable grandfather's offspring?

Inder's thinking process was intercepted by an attention seeking face who surprised him with a welcome smile. But she disappeared the very next moment while he was unloading his baggage from the taxi. She appeared second time and wished him again but before coming closer and talking to him she joined a small group of young ladies moving towards the temple. Inder was confused at her behaviour. Was she waving to somebody else or was it a visual illusion. But he couldn't be possibly wrong because she was definitely looking at him and addressed him as 'doctor sahib'! Her behaviour raised too many interesting questions in his mind!

Who is this lady others addressed as Ragini ji? Does she know him? Can she be Ragini alias Bhairavi?

It was a mystery for Inder to understand if Bhairavi could send a prepaid taxi to receive him at Srinagar airport why did she hesitate to meet him in the temple at the scheduled time? His mind did think of other possibilities. May be she had a change of mind and decided to cancel the meeting. His suspicion about Ragini being the person behind the face book character Bhairavi was also strong. But in that case if she was disappointed to see an old man, even though his Face Book profile mentioned his age, while he was getting out of the taxi why did she return again and smiled at him? Ragini was gradually becoming a mystery for him and he was determined to unfold it. He prepared himself to talk to her upfront at the very next opportunity.

Inder watched Ragini singing a very appealing devotional chorus song with other singers. While listening to the song, his thoughts again overlapped between his past and present. The combination of words, synchronization of instruments and voices in a devotional environment diverted his thoughts to the memories of his mother. She also used to sing this prayer every morning. Though it amounted to pricking his wounds inflicted to him fifty two year ago, he could not stop the stream of events which had drastically tampered his life.

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**Indu** and Inder both were in their early teens when they met in a local music coaching school run by Guru Ji, a radio artist. Guru Ji had to adjust coaching timing as per his availability from his Government job. He was a learned vocalist and therefore he was aware that '*Jai Jai wanti*' is a morning and '*malkonsh*' an evening *raag*. So he had chosen *Raag Bhairavi* for initial coaching of freshers. Indu generally used to attend morning classes but missed late evening classes. Inder used to help her regularly in updating the continuity. Thus while singing duets based on *Raag Bhairavi* they had come closer to share their personal feelings too. During their five

years of musical association, they had never encouraged juvenile feelings of legendry *Kaamdev* and *Riti* or *Romeo* and *Juliet*. They had instead planned to live for each other as trustworthy friends in all usual or unpredictable, soothing or suffocating, agonizing or ecstatic situations! And that was a commitment!!

Indu's father was a very prosperous, highly qualified and shrewd revenue officer who wanted Indu to join administrative services. But his wife had a deep desire to be a singer herself and therefore wanted her daughter to be one like Shubha Mudgal, Kishori Amonkar or Lata Mangeshkar. Inder had similar pressures from his parents. Due to his father's communist conviction 'Everybody works for identical wages' and influence of Indian People Theater Association he wanted his son to concentrate on singing and join his group of performers. But Shobha, though a radio singer herself, wanted her son to concentrate on academics for ensuring a dependable livelihood. She had planned a career for her only child with a financial support after selling her late father's property.

But both Inder and Indu had their own plans for fulfilling their dreams.

Everything was favourable and going as per their wishes when Inder's father, Sri Kishan was publicly handcuffed as a result of a conspiracy hatched by his opponents. Sri Kishan's fault was that he was deeply influenced by communist ideology. He used to even openly oppose his father and blame him for exploiting his knowledge of diagnosing all organic diseases with a touch on patient's pulse, and monopolizing treatment for asthma, piles and dissolving stones in kidneys with self-made patent concoctions for accumulating wealth. He had organised a mass strike of municipality sweepers but his own associates betrayed and got him handcuffed in public. His ideological rivals had politicized his good social work as anti national activities and thus ruined chances of his release. When his case was presented in court, a sensitive poet, singer and performer who was afraid of imperialists, got psychologically frightened by his caricatured character to such an extent that before Shobha could engage a good lawyer, the sensitive poet committed suicide!

Subsequent happenings had turned circumstances from bad to worst.

Just a day before his departure for joining a medical college in Delhi Inder had come to the temple for seeking Mata Kheer Bhawani's blessings. Shobha had accompanied her son because she wanted to restore his confidence shaken by recent events in their family, with the blessings of the holy Goddess.

Indu, who also volunteered to join them, was accompanying Shobha when she was spotted by some brow raisers who had mustered a voice of hatred against a widow whose husband had committed suicide in police custody just twenty days before. They hyped the condemning process only to prove that only the daughter of a low caste can do such shameless act of coming out of mourning to tarnish the image of her respectable family. She was thus mobbed, targeted and pressurized to leave the temple premises.

Indu's father, incidentally the administrative officer in charge of the festival at Kheer Bhawani Temple, snatched away the shawl which was covering Shobha's face and after snubbing Indu he rudely pushed aside both the mother and the son. Indu helplessly watched all this without gathering enough strength to react to her father's wild behaviour. When Indu, his only friend too turned to be a helpless spectator, Inder's trust in human relationship and faith in the sanctity of the Holy Spring was shattered! That was the last time he had seen both Indu and the Holy Shrine.

Shobha was left alone to face very odd situations after Inder left for Delhi to pursue his MBBS course. She had no relatives from her father's side and her husband's relatives had completely condemned and boycotted her. The last thing Inder heard about his mother was extremely painful when Shobha's neighbours complained of stink coming from her room which confirmed her death three days after she had breathed her last. For Inder, there was nothing left for him to be attached to and he left his home and homeland for ever! His destiny threw him away to the United

States where he worked in a prestigious hospital in New York and was considered a top Cardiologist.

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**Inder's** dive in to his past was like a swimmer penetrating every layer of water to touch the bottom of the lake. While lying down on the wooden floor of the semi-open shelter in the *dharamshala* inside the temple complex, Inder was so immersed in his thoughts that he forgot to take out a bedsheet from his bag to cover himself. Visual clips of events, good and bad, flashed in front of his eyes one after another and he went in to a deep slumber with absolute contentment and solace as if he was sleeping in his mother's lap after many years.

Next morning, when Inder got up from his long spell of peaceful sleep, he was surprised to find his body clad by a costly *pashmina shawl*. He was instantly convinced that someone very affectionate and caring must have obliged him. To his mind there could be only one person in the vicinity of the temple who could possibly do it - none other than Ragini?

Inder was determined to break the ice with Ragini and initiate a free and frank talking exactly the way he used to do with Indu. But before he could do that he noticed Ragini amongst a group of people supporting an old lady. The moment Ragini saw Inder she made the old lady sit down and rushed towards him, "Doctor Sahab, it is an emergency....." Inder immediately followed Ragini and without wasting a second he asked the lady if she was a diabetic. With that clue he immediately diagnosed diabetic hypoglycaemia and saved her with a few mouthfuls of sugar which the crowd got from the nearby *kiryana shop*. Within a few minutes the old lady said she was feeling better. Inder looked up to Ragini for a response but she ignored him and kept conversing with the lady.

After impressing the whole crowd collected around the old lady with his clinical acumen and presence of mind, Inder suddenly got upset the way Ragini neglected

him. His hurt feelings reflected from his face and without a word he left in a huff and walked toward the *dharamshala*.

Irked by his strange behavior Ragini followed him to the *dharamshala*. But before Ragini could say anything Inder took out the pashmina shawl from his bag and thrust it in her hands, "Bhairavi! why did you call me here if you are not interested in meeting me..... take this shawl back... I don't want any favours from you...."

Ragini was shocked to hear somebody talking impolitely to her. It was an anticlimax for a person like her to find Inder much different from what she had thought about him.

"Doctor sahab.. I am sorry...I am not Bhairavi... I don't even know who Bhairavi is....and I don't know anything about this shawl....." she looked equally irritated and threw the *pashmina shawl* back to him.

Ragini reacted sharply to convey that she was not Bhairavi but Ragini. And then narrated a fifteen year old mind blowing incident to support her explanation. She was twelve year old and travelling with her parents when she felt acute breathlessness during an air travel to Delhi. Her distress call was immediately attended by a co-passenger, Dr Inder Hakim and she was rescued. From that day she had registered in her mind the prophetic face of a saviour, who had diagnosed her cardiac problem with just a fingers touch on her pulse. Last evening when she reached the taxi stand in Kheer Bhawani temple she immediately recognised the familiar face coming out of his taxi. She was thrilled to have again come across the great man she adored and thus remained in search of an opportunity when she could talk to a hero who had saved her life.

Inder felt bad for himself for following an abstract shadow in the hope of finding Bhairavi. He apologised to Ragini, put the *pashmina shawl* back in his bag and left the *dharamshala* like a defeated soldier. He cursed his stupidity for having travelled that far to search for a shadow who didn't even have a face to be recognised. How could he be so naive and foolish. But the very next moment his mind was again



clouded by other bizarre thoughts. Did Bhairavi take me for a ride or she herself was unable to come because of some problem? May be she is herself in danger? Suddenly an unknown fear and concern for Bhairvai overpowered his resentful mind.

He sat down in a corner around the temple complex and opened his laptop after a gap of 3 days to check his mail. Inder was surprised to find a message from Bhairavi sent 24 hours before. He read it again and again. *"Life is a collage of multiple situations and circumstances which may be usual or unpredictable, soothing or ecstatic, or suffocating and agonizing! I tried to reach you and almost succeeded. I had been enthusiastically waiting for you at the taxi stand in Tulmul. And then when you arrived, I was not shocked but surprised when someone else rushed to receive you. I was delighted to see the lady once again with you in the temple. Is she your daughter or daughter-in-law? Or your friend ...? I am glad to see that you have people around you to care for you. I am returning you mother's shawl. When my father had snatched it away from her I kept it safely with me with the hope that someday I will put it back on her shoulders. Could not do so! Sorry!! But I am going to hand it over to you because I know this shawl is as much valuable for you as it was for me. Be happy and enjoy life. I will not eclipse your efforts!!"*

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Inder was extremely baffled with the events. He mistook Ragini for Bhairavi and it was a coincidence that Ragini appeared to be waiting for Inder at the taxi stand even though both of them were getting out from different taxis. Inder had tried to move closer to Ragini to talk to her several times inside the temple to find out if she was the person he was looking for, which Bhairavi interpreted as being together with a young lady. What a shame! Bhairavi was around him, watching him all the time from a distance and he was blindly following a shadow. Now he understood the reason why Bhairavi suddenly became invisible after having called him from New York and sending a taxi to receive him at the airport. But what was his fault? He

was only intrigued by Ragini's gestures and mistook her for Bhairavi because the real Bhairavi was out of sight. He did not know whom to blame, Bhairavi, himself or destiny which had always tormented him. He felt like crying at the top of his voice and complain to Mata Kheer Bhawani and say 'Why me?'

"Doctor Sahab, thank you....." a stranger's voice broke the spell of doom hovering over his head, " Madam is better now. She is taking rest in her cottage but I came of my own to request you to see her again because I know she will not go to Srinagar to see her doctor. We respect her a lot and that is why I came to request you. She is very careless about her health. You have seen how she got sick in the morning..."

Morning events again clouded over Inder's mind and he once again started feeling upset. He wanted to delete the memory of this whole episode from his memory but his medical ethics influenced him to think about the patient first who deserved his attention. Without a word Inder got up and accompanied the person.

"Sir, madam is a senior IAS officer staying in *Tulmul* after she retired from service. All of us are surprised because nobody from Srinagar comes to live in such a small village like *Tulmul*. But she is different...! We learnt she doesn't have a family, she is not even married that is what we believe... She does not socialize and lives the life of a recluse but she is a pious and kind lady. Though fully equipped with latest electronic gadgets she uses her lap top only for listening to old Hindi film songs. We see her taking *parikramas* around the holy spring every morning and evening. She keeps telling the onlookers that the color of spring water will soon turn pink and bring prosperity to everybody in Kashmir..."

Inder was so intently listening to the long narration by the person he was following that he did not realize that they were already standing in front of a small cottage just at the back of the temple complex. Before he was ushered inside the house a sudden and strange feeling, which he had not experienced ever in his life,

overwhelmed Inder when he saw the nameplate outside the cottage “Indu Bhairavi”!

Indu was sitting on a couch when Inder entered the room. Her eyes were closed but she was softly chanting something. It did not take Inder long to register the familiar Vedic Mantras which Shobha also used to chant and Inder remembered all of them by heart. There she was.... his childhood friend Indu..... Indu Bhairavi ! May be it was because the patient was in distress and he as a doctor was concentrating on his professional duty that in the morning Inder failed to recognise her. His lips trembled with excitement and muttered, ‘Indu..!’

Indu opened her eyes when she heard Inder calling her name.

“Indu I have come to take you. Will you accompany me to New York..?” Inder’s voice was choked with emotions.

A faint smile appeared on Indu’s face and she almost whispered in Inder’s ears, “Inder, did you notice the colour of the spring today morning? I did.....! It was pinkish.....!”

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