

# The Banyan Tree



Aman had set up a factory of woolen garments in his hometown Meerut and today was its inauguration. He had left his job 8 months ago to pursue his dream of having his own business. His factory was located on the outskirts of the city. The workers of the factory greeted him as he entered inside. He himself cut the ribbon and the whole factory echoed with the sound of applauds. After doing some basic inspection, he came out of the factory, took out his lunch box and sat under the banyan tree that was present adjacent to the factory. His mind was preoccupied with random thoughts when he noticed something unusual. There was no shade of this large banyan tree visible even when the sun was directly above. Aman was wondering about it when he received a call on his mobile and his mind was diverted from this thought. After having wrapped up the call, he picked up his lunch box and went inside the factory once again.

There was production going on in this factory 24×7 and the employees worked in shifts. Slowly and steadily, his business gained momentum and this boosted Aman's confidence to the extent that he spent most of his time in the factory.

It was the night of 22nd November when Aman was in the factory busy with work. Suddenly, his gaze went to his watch and he noticed it was 1.00 AM midnight. He gave some instructions to one of his employees and came out of the factory. He was just about to open the lock of his car when he heard the sound of bangles. He turned around and saw a girl standing just two feet away from him. He stepped back in horror. The girl was in a red bridal dress and her face was covered with a veil.



She gently lifted her veil and Aman was mesmerized by her beauty. She seemed to be in her mid-twenties and there was a touch of innocence on her face. Aman couldn't stop himself from staring at her and he couldn't utter a word. After a few seconds of awkward silence, the girl said in a soft tone- 'Hello Sir. My name is Rupa and I live in the nearby village. I have lost my way and need your help. Can you please drop me?'

Ya sure why not?' Aman said in a stammering voice. He still couldn't understand how she appeared suddenly out of the blue when there was apparently no one around when he came out of the factory. 'Sorry if I have disturbed you. I will figure out my way', said Rupa on finding Aman lost in his thought. 'No no, I was just wondering why you are dressed in this bridal attire?' Aman said, trying to sound as casual as possible. After a few seconds of silence, she replied- 'Can we go as it is already too late Sir?'

Yes, please get inside the car. And you can call me Aman', he said, thinking if he should not have asked her that question.

She was quiet throughout the journey except for guiding Aman with the directions. After half an hour, they reached an isolated place which seemed quite scary to Aman. There is an eerie silence in the atmosphere', he thought.

Thanks for dropping me, this is my home', Rupa said pointing to a lone house, surrounded by trees on both sides.

'Oh, that's great. It was nice meeting you Rupa. I will take your leave now.'

By the way, it would be great if you spend the night at my home. It's already very late and it would not be safe to travel back at this hour of midnight. You can take some rest and then leave early in the morning.' Rupa insisted. 'She has a point', Aman thought.

'All right Rupa, thanks for your concern', Aman said with a smile. He took out the mobile phone from his pocket to inform his wife that he would be coming back the next morning, only to notice that there was no signal.

Aman went inside Rupa's house. It was a small room with one charpai, a broken chair, and a small cupboard. The CFL had a dim light which indicated there was a very low voltage. 'At least there is electricity in this house', Aman thought considering the remote location of this house and Rupa's apparent financial condition. 'But how come she was dressed in this bridal attire and that too when she was all alone', Aman still couldn't get over this. He was still thinking when Rupa came into the room holding a tray with two cups. She had changed to a black & magenta printed kurta with churidar and dupatta. 'Damn, she looks beautiful', Aman thought while she handed him his cup of tea. After a few formal talks, Aman asked the question that was floating in his mind-'So you live all alone here, I guess.'

'Yes', Rupa replied with a blank expression on her face.

'Maybe, she is not comfortable telling about her personal life,' Aman was thinking when suddenly the entire room was filled with darkness. 'Power cut again', said Rupa with a sigh. 'I will just bring a candle from the other room.' Suddenly, Aman's gaze turned towards the main door and he almost screamed in horror.



A pair of eyes were staring at him directly from an 8 feet distance. The eyes were glowing in the dark which made Aman sweat in the month of November. 'Who is there?' Aman was barely able to speak and all of a sudden, there was complete darkness once again. 'Are you comfortable', it was Rupa's voice. She came there with two lighted candles. The room was illuminated now and it gave Aman some relief. 'Ya I am fine', Aman tried to calm himself. 'It must be a cat or some nocturnal animal. Their eyes glow in the dark', his rational mind came to his rescue once again.

Rupa came and sat beside him which diverted his mind. She placed her hand on his lap. Aman was now tempted to look into her eyes. She looked even more beautiful in the glow of candle light.

Aman kissed Rupa who did not resist. Aman was now head over heels for Rupa.

Aman woke up the next morning by the chirping of birds outside. He looked for Rupa, but she was not there in the house. He saw a note lying on the broken chair, picked it up and read through it. Rupa had mentioned that she was going to fetch water from the well, which was a bit far from there. She also mentioned meeting again next Saturday.

Aman was already getting late since he had not even informed his wife about his whereabouts, so he immediately got ready and stepped out of the house. He took out his mobile phone to check if there was any presence of signal. The screen was completely blank and after pressing a few buttons, Aman realized that the phone was not working at all. 'Maybe the phone is switched off due to battery drainage.' Aman was trying to think as optimistic as possible.

When he reached home after a 2-hour long drive (after going through some wrong directions), he saw a man in police uniform standing at the gate, having a conversation with Anjali (Aman's wife). As soon as she saw Aman, she came running towards him.

Where have you been? We have been searching you for 3 days. I had to file a missing report about you at the police station yesterday."

'Relax sweetheart, I tried to inform you but there was no signal. I was stuck with some important work at the factory. I am sorry for that. But just hold on, did you say 3 days? I was with you only last evening. Please don't exaggerate in front of the police.' Aman responded with a smile.

'Are you out of your mind; you went to the factory on 22nd November eve and today is 25th November.' It has been around 3 days, and I didn't receive a single call from you. I enquired in your factory and no one has any clue about you. They only knew you visited the factory on 22nd and left at midnight. After this, you were not even reachable on your mobile.' Anjali said in one breath.

'Are you kidding me? Today is Friday, 23rd November and yes, I was busy with some urgent work and I am sorry for not having called you', Aman couldn't understand if Anjali was trying to play some prank on him. He observed her closely, but she looked damn serious.



Wow, slow claps for you Mr. Aman. I think you are either working too hard that you tend to forget dates or.....' she left the sentence midway.

'Or what?'

'Or you are having an affair with someone and you were busy with her for the last three days.'

Enough Anjali, what's wrong with you?' Aman was hardly able to control the tone of his voice.

Wait!! Let me just show you the date today', he took out his mobile phone thinking he anyway needed to charge it before it could be switched on. As soon as he pressed the unlock button, the home screen popped up in front of him. 'Strange! The phone is working now', Aman was anyhow relieved to find the phone in working condition. As soon as he saw the date at the top of the home screen, he felt the ground slipping under his feet. He couldn't believe his eyes.

'Sunday, November 25'

Aman still couldn't believe his eyes. 'Go get some rest first, then we will talk', Anjali was a bit worried now.

The next few days were quite hectic for Aman and the workload didn't permit him to think about the weird happenings in the past. He had to travel often regarding his business and once he returned home from one of such trips, he realized that Rupa had mentioned to meet him next Saturday. (which was tomorrow)

He left the home on Saturday evening around 6.00 PM and drove towards the factory. After doing a basic inspection of the production going on in the factory, Aman left the place and drove towards Rupa's home. When he reached her residence, she was already waiting for him at the gate.

Rupa accompanied him for a drive. After half an hour's journey, Rupa stopped the car in front of a Dhaba. 'This Dhaba is famous for its chole-kulche. I used to frequently visit here until last year.'

'Oh great, but it means you haven't visited here since a year. Any specific reason', Aman asked casually. Rupa stared at him blankly for few seconds and looked the other way.

Aman reached his home at around 12.30 AM midnight. He unlocked the entrance door from outside and went straight to the kitchen. He lifted the lid of the casserole to find it empty. He looked around, hoping Anjali would have cooked something for him.

'Did I forget to tell her that I'll be coming home tonight!!' Aman tried to recall while opening the refrigerator to check if there was anything kept inside. 'It wouldn't be a good idea to wake her up. Let me see if I can arrange something.' He felt relieved seeing a packet of Maggie kept there. 'At least I won't have to sleep hungry', Aman thought, switching on the gas stove.



He woke up the next morning with a gentle touch on his forehead. He opened his eyes to find Anjali standing beside him. 'Are you feeling better now?' she seemed a bit worried from her tone.

Yes, but what happened?' Aman still couldn't understand the context of that question. By the way, I was expecting to get dinner at home yesterday. I came back home at 12.30 AM and I had to survive on Maggie.' Aman said in a tone to make her feel guilty.

But instead of guilt, there was an expression of shock on Anjali's face. She stared at him blankly, completely flabbergasted. 'Where had you been? You had high fever last night, so you slept early at 8.00 PM after having dinner. Has the fever affected your brain that you are saying all this nonsense stuff!!'

'Am I suffering from hallucinations?' Aman murmured after drinking a glass of water.

Aman called one of his close friends in the evening and explained everything to him. 'I need your help Rohit, please', he said.

After a few minutes, they were driving through the broken roads which led to Rupa's house. Aman immediately stepped out of the car as soon as they reached their destination, only to find a big lock hanging from the main gate.

What to do now, is there some other way to confirm what could have happened that night?' Rohit asked, unable to give any suggestions. 'Let's visit that Dhaba where we went that night. I had put my signature on the register that was kept at the counter. If I could find my signature, I will be assured that I was there with Rupa that night', Aman was resolved to find answers to the questions floating in his mind.

Do you think we are at the correct location?' Rohit was doubtful by now that something is wrong with Aman. 'Yes, I am sure there was a Dhaba here,' Aman stood there perplexed, looking around.

Bhaiya, is there a Dhaba named "Pancham Dhaba"? We visited here a few days ago but I am unable to find it now', Aman enquired from a tea stall owner nearby. In response, the man's eyes turned wide and he replied-

'Saheb, that Dhaba closed one year ago.'

'Now there is only one way to unwind this series of puzzling events, and that is to confront Rupa. Let's go and enquire about her in the village', Aman was sure he would get his answers after meeting Rupa.

Aman and Rohit drove again to Rupa's house and Rohit parked the car outside the gate. The door was still locked from outside. We will get some clue about her from the locals of this village', Aman said, wondering if the time spent with Rupa was itself a mere delusion.



After walking for around 500 metres, they saw a few houses in a row. Aman stepped inside one of the houses and Rohit followed him. They knocked on the main door a few times before an old lady opened the door.

'Amma, we want to enquire about someone from this village. Can we please come inside?'

The old lady led them to a room where a charpai was placed. She offered them water and sat down.

After giving a brief introduction about himself, Aman told her the main purpose of coming there. 'We are looking for Rupa. She lives in this village itself. Her home is locked, and we need to meet her urgently.' Hearing his words, the expression on the lady's face changed all of a sudden and she stared at Aman, with fear visible in her eyes. 'Please tell me everything my boy, I may be able to help you.'

Aman narrated the entire episode in one go. Then suddenly he remembered something and added, 'She was in a red bridal dress when I saw her for the first time. It was a bit weird for me!' The old lady seemed to be in a state of shock and fear after hearing this. Aman realized there was something strange which they had no clue about.

You will find it hard to believe but,...........' she left the sentence midway.

'But what Amma, please say it clearly', Aman could not control his nervousness anymore.

'Rupa,...... Rupa is not alive anymore', the old lady said in a whispering tone.

What???' The glass of water slipped from his hand and fell on the ground. I guess this lady is psycho. Let's go and ask somewhere else. I was with Rupa three days ago and she is saying Rupa is not alive.' Aman stood up from the charpai.

'She died a few months ago. In fact, she was murdered and almost everyone in the village knows about it', the lady said, staring at the ground.

Enough of this crap. I don't believe this', Aman himself seemed to be in dilemma but he still couldn't accept this fact.

Please sit down boy. You don't have any other options. If you don't believe me, could you yourself give a logical explanation to all these events which you have witnessed in the past?'

Aman couldn't give an answer to this. There was a complete silence of two minutes after which the lady sipped water from her glass, cleared her throat and continued-

It was a case of honour killing. Rupa was in love with a boy from a lower caste. Her parents were not ready for their marriage at any cost. So Rupa decided to go against her parents and ran away with the boy. They had selected a random place in the outskirts of the village where they had decided to tie the knot with each other. Rupa was dressed in a beautiful red bridal attire, the same dress in which you saw her that night. Only a few of their close friends were present at the location that day. But



somehow, her parents came to know about this, and her father reached the place along with few other men of the village. He couldn't control his anger and slapped her in front of everyone and commanded her to return home as he couldn't allow this marriage. But Rupa was reluctant to let go of her love. The discussion turned into a heated debate and her father took out the pistol from his pocket and pressed the trigger, before anyone could stop him. The boy, however managed to escape amidst all this drama. Later, the girl's body was hanged from the banyan tree there to set an example for others. From that day, it is said that the tree itself is cursed and even the shade of the tree is lost somewhere. Her soul still wanders there in search of her love, which couldn't be fulfilled.'

Aman couldn't hear a word after this. He realized it was the same banyan tree adjacent to which he had set up his factory.

But the house; what about the house? I had spent an entire night with Rupa in that house', Aman mentioned about Rupa's home where he found a lock hanging today. Take me to that place', the old lady said with a perplexed look on her face.

This is where I had spent that night since it was too late to go home at that time.' Aman said pointing to the house as they reached the location.

The old lady replied with a sigh- 'As far as I know, no one lives here. Look at the condition of this house, you can see the bushes and grasses growing in the veranda. It seems it is left untouched for a long time." This news didn't shock Aman as he had already received enough. He looked at Rohit who seemed even more frightened.

'What to do now Amma, I couldn't think anything further.'

'It's better you close the factory, else the consequences can be worse', the old lady warned him.

The factory was shut down and all the workers were given compensation for losing their job. Aman had to undergo a few counselling sessions to come out of his mental trauma. He didn't see Rupa after that day but still gets scary dreams about her taking him to that isolated house and dragging him into the depths of the forest.

### FEW MONTHS LATER

A school was getting erected in that same area which had the factory once. It was one usual evening when the contractor came there for usual inspection. When he was about to leave, he saw someone in a red bridal dress sitting under the banyan tree and sobbing.

What happened young lady, how may I help you?' he asked out of sympathy.

The girl slowly shifted her gaze towards the man and whispered in a soft tone-

'Hello Sir. My name is Rupa and I live in the nearby village. I have lost my way and need your help. Can you please drop me?'