

RAMLUBHAVAN

It was a clear, full moon night. The reflection of the milky white moonlight in the pond and the surrounding marshes resembled some crazy crayon work of a toddler. All was quiet in the village: the houses, the school, the streets, the pond. Everything seemed to be in perfect harmony with the silent symphony of the night except for one spot.

Completely oblivious of the tranquil atmosphere, the village temple was abuzz with activity. There was a throb of drums and cymbals, the beats ascending to a crescendo. The air was thick with smoke and saturated with a pungent smell of incense and burnt offerings in the sacrificial fire. Men and women, young and old, rich and poor alike thronged the temple grounds. All eyes were trained on the sacrificial fire, the flickering flames arousing excitement and anticipation in the motley crowd.

This ritual was conducted every full moon night in the temple. Childless couples anxious for a progeny, anxious

parents looking for a suitable match for their children, families eager to avert an 'evil eye', others looking for revenge by fixing an 'evil eye', 'possessed' individuals: all flocked for a divine remedy. The remedy was pronounced by the Goddess through a medium.

The chosen medium of the Goddess was the priest, Ramlubhavan. He was a dark, short, portly man with a mass of matted hair. The matted hair was the most important part of his personage. Before he became a priest, he was a daily wage labourer and he toiled hard all day. In the night, he was eager to eat some grub and sleep. In the process, his personal hygiene took a beating and his hair started matting. One of the village elders noticed a strand of matted hair and proclaimed that the matted hair was a divine sign and he was vested with special powers. The villagers took him to the temple and the priests verified the elder's proclamation. He no longer had to toil hard; he was the medium of the goddess now.

All he had to do now was to maintain his hairstyle; other things fell in place naturally. The blaring drums, chanting of mantras and other paraphernalia of the vitiated atmosphere spontaneously transmitted him to a trance. He was informed that his voice would change, his body would

tremble and the Goddess would make divine pronunciations through him. The pronunciations were always what the affected parties wanted to hear. The power of the subconscious mind would do all the work without any conscious effort.

This was a small price to pay for the privileges. He was venerated by the residents of all nearby villages and he was the medium through which offerings were made to the deity. If their wishes were fulfilled, the faithful would make offerings out of gratitude; if their wishes were not fulfilled, they would make larger offerings realising that earlier ones were inadequate to appease the deity. For his services as the medium, he enjoyed a large part of the offerings. This ensured a comfortable, respectable life: a far cry from his labourer days. But today, he was going to pay a much larger price...

The crowd today was larger than usual today. A palpable thrill hung in the atmosphere. Two young girls of the village were raped and then brutally murdered three days ago. Although the girls belonged to the weaker community, a wave of sympathy had swept the nearby villages. But sympathy was all it was, there was neither outrage nor any attempt to bring the guilty to book.

The identity of the guilty was public knowledge, but everyone feigned ignorance. The guilty were strongmen of the village and everyone feared them. They carried on with the pretense and decided that they would ask the deity about the gruesome incident this full moon. If the deity pronounced them guilty, perhaps justice would follow.

Now as the drumbeats were at their loudest and at peak crescendo, Ramlubhavan appeared. His breathing was becoming shallower and quicker, his eyes were reddening, he was trembling with excitement. He was the cynosure of all eyes. As the other priests started chanting mantras and propitiating the sacred fire with offerings, Ramlubhavan suddenly shrieked in a hoarse voice, "I know what you want to know."

A hush spread through the crowd. The dead girl's father stood up. Visibly overcome with emotions, he asked in a shaky voice, "Oh Almighty, if you know what we want to know, let us hear it."

Ramlubhavan opened his bloodshot eyes and glared at the applicant for a moment. Time froze. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. You could hear your heartbeat, you could see the flame swirling, the ghee dripping into the flames, the skin of the drums trembling.

"Luchcha Singh and his Bhediya gang are the culprits. They raped and killed the girls. Punish them."

The crowd shuddered. Everyone knew about it but nobody talked about it openly. Now the oracle had created a platform for discussion. The gathering was abuzz, and as the crowd dispersed in threes and fours, the chat was focused on whether the criminals would be punished. Will the police be able to look the other way anymore? What was their duty now? If the police did not act should they ensure justice? The mood swung from sympathy to outrage and vengeance.

Back in the temple, Ramlubhavan was feeling spent. He could not pin point why, but he was feeling very uneasy. Like always, he did not remember the proceedings of the oracle.

Early next morning he readied himself to go for his morning ablutions to the forest armed with his *lota*. While walking through a thickly wooded area, he was accosted by a couple of masked men and pulled behind the thicket. One of them was wearing a green mask and the other was wearing a black mask.

"So we brutally raped and killed those girls?" hissed the black mask. He clearly seemed to be the man in-charge.

His physical appearance was the exact opposite of Ramlubhavan. He was tall and muscular with cropped hair and walked with a swagger. Prominently displayed on his person was a sheath which held a knife.

"Did you see us doing it? How dare you openly accuse us?" screeched the green mask.

"Now you will see a crime being committed but no one will believe you anymore," said the men as they removed their masks and pulled out a sharp razor. The blade of the razor shone in the morning light. A shiver ran down the spine of Ramlubhavan, he could feel his hair rising on end, his mouth ran dry and his *lota* slipped from his hands. Luchcha Singh himself was there. As he advanced menacingly, Ramlubhavan turned to flee but was prevented from doing so by Luchcha Singh's side-kick.

In a moment Ramlubhavan's entire life flashed through his mind. He remembered his days of back breaking labour and his elevation to the exalted position of 'medium'. He recollected the numerous grim faces seeking favours from the deity and receiving blessings from his hands. He thought all this would end today, he would die...

"Please don't kill me! It wasn't me. It was the deity," Ramlubhavan pleaded.

"Oh! Was it so? And what makes it you its medium? What makes you special? This dirty hair? How many innocent people have you fooled? People who came with hope, people in desperation. You took advantage of their misery and have filled your coffers, you swine! You can fool these dumb villagers, but not vile creatures like me."

"No, I will not kill you; I have a better idea ..." Luchcha Singh smiled wickedly.

In an instant, the razor was making its way through the scalp of Ramlubhavan, stopping and starting in jerks, gritting through and leaving a mass of unruly hair in its wake.

After struggling for a while Ramlubhavan gave up, and after what seemed like an eternity to him, he was relieved of his matted hair and all the privileges that came with it.

After a few days, he was seen in the mental hospital in Japur...