



Punishment

Rabindranath Tagore was born on May 8, 1861. Last year, his 125th birth anniversary was celebrated. We present here a story he wrote in 1907

BY the time Dukhi and Chadami Kori left for work that morning shouldering their sickles, their wives were already in the throes of a battle royal. This domestic conflict and the racket it created were as familiar at the neighbours as the other varied voices of nature. As soon as the loud shrieking and screaming, the sounds

of women abusing and cursing began, people would say to one another: "There you are, it's started", meaning that no change had occurred in the natural laws. Just as no one asks why the sun rises in the east, so also, no one in the neighbourhood showed the slightest curiosity regarding the reasons for the

arguments and abusive quarrels between the two women in the household of the Koris.

This turmoil was more of a nuisance to the two husbands than to the neighbours, yet they were not particularly perturbed by it. It was as if the two brothers had set out on a long journey



through the world in an *ekka*, and the continuing creak and rumble of the two springless wheels of the *ekka* were an inevitable part of their life's journey. In fact, when the house was quiet, there was greater cause for anxiety—no one could tell when the storm would break.

Our story begins one evening, when the two brothers returned home tired from the day's labour and found the house overcast by a pregnant silence.

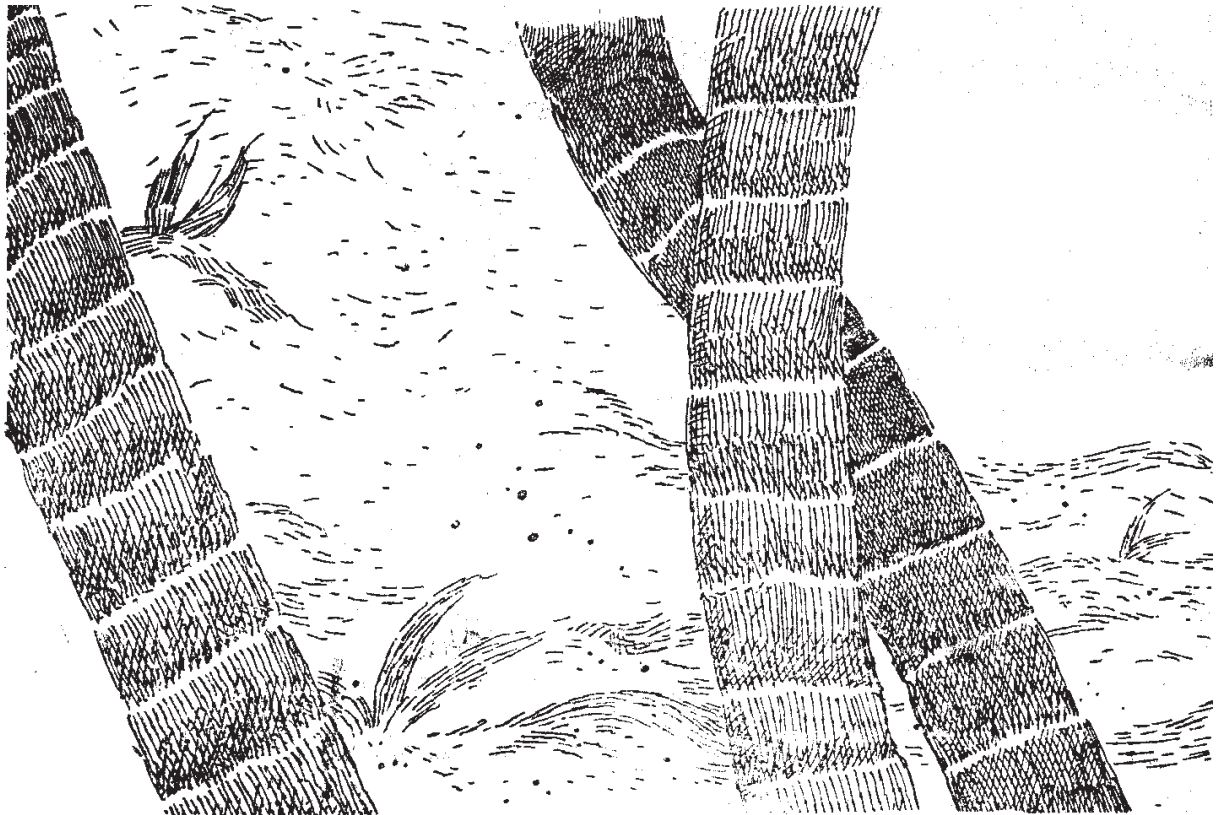
Humidity hung in the air. It had rained heavily in the afternoon and the clouds were still rumbling. Not a breath stirring. A wall of heavy odorous vapour rose from the plants and grass around the house and from the submerged jute fields. Frogs croaked in the small pond nearby, and the still evening sky echoed to the hum of crickets.

Shadowed by new clouds, the swollen Padma flowed, its aspect still but threatening. It had destroyed most of the fields and was now coming close to the residential area. So close that it had already overthrown a couple of mango trees

whose roots could be seen above the water, like hands raised towards the sky, seeking succour.

That day, Dukhi and Chadami had been summoned to work for the landlord. The rice on the other side of the river had ripened. All the poor peasants and labourers were busy harvesting the rice and the jute lest they be swallowed by the monsoon floods. But these two brothers had been compelled to go and repair the baking roof of the landlord's granary and to construct some lavatories. They toiled all day and were not even allowed to come home and eat at midday. All they were given to eat was a little gram from the granary. They got soaked in the rain several times. To top it all, they were not given the due wage; instead, the scoldings and abuses showered on them were far more than their due.

Wading through the slush and muddy water, the brothers finally reached home. The younger wife, Chanda, was lying on her stomach on the floor. Like the cloudy day, she too had shed many



wars that afternoon and, towards evening, had fallen silent, a heavy stillness within her. The older wife, Radha., sat sulking on the doorstep. Her one and a half year old child, stark naked, lay asleep in the courtyard.

“Up with you”, said the hungry Dukhi came in, “Serve the food.”

The words were like a match to gunpowder. His wife rowled back : “And where is the food supposed to come from? Did you give me any rice before you left? Or was I to go out and work for it?”

The day’s exhaustion and beratings, the dark joyless, grainless house, the burning fire of hunger — coming in addition to all these, his wife’s words, particularly the concealed contemptuous sarcasm of her last sentence, suddenly became intolerable to Dukhi, “What did you say?” he growled like an enraged tiger and, lifting his sickle, brought it down on his wife’s head.

Radha went and fell near her sister in-law and, as she fell, she died.

Blood splashed over Chanda and soaked her clothes. “O my mother”, she cried aloud “What has happened? Chadami came up and pressed his hands over her mouth. Dukhi threw down the sickle and sank to the ground, resting his cheek on his hand, as if stunned. The child woke up and began to scream in terror. Outside, all was quiet. The Ahir boys were returning to the village with their herds of cows and buffaloes. Most of the people who had crossed the river for the harvesting had reached home by now, returning in groups of five or seven, in small boats, each carrying the day’s wages, a bundle of grain.

Ramlochan Chacha of the Chakravarti family had returned home after posting a letter and was having a peaceful smoke. All of a sudden, he remembered that his sharecropper, Dukhi, had to pay his rent. He had promised to pay today. Thinking that he must have come home by now, Ramlochan threw on his shawl, picked up his umbrella, and set out.

As he entered Dukhi and Chadami’s house, a shudder ran through him. The



lamp had not been lit. In the dark courtyard, a few black figures were dimly visible. Someone was crying softly in a corner of the verandah, and as the child tried to cry and call out “Amma, Amma”, Chadami kept stopping his mouth. Somewhat frightened, Ramlochan asked: “Is Dukhi here?”

Dukhi had been sitting quiet, like a stone statue. As soon as his name was called, he began to sob and cry like a small child, Chadami immediately came down from the verandah and walked up to Ramlochan Chacha in the courtyard. “So the women have quietened down, have they?” said Ramlochan. “They’ve been yelling their heads off all day,”

Chadami had not yet been able to collect his thoughts. All kinds of wild ideas had been passing through his mind. But he had decided that he would quietly get rid of the corpse at the dead of night. Now Chakravarti had turned up. He had not anticipated this. No suitable answer occurred to him so he blurted out : “Yes, today there was a big quarrel.”

“But why is Dukhi crying over it?” asked Chaudhuri, advancing towards the verandah.

Chadami saw that all was lost, and suddenly he said : “In the heat of the argument, the younger wife hit the older

wife over the head with a sickle.”

Present disaster looms large—so large that one is not easily able to foresee yet other disasters approaching. Chadami was trying to think of a way to escape a dangerous truth. He did not realise that a lie could bring even greater danger in its wake. Ramlochan asked a question, and he gave the first answer that occurred to him.

“What?” exclaimed Ramlochan, “What’s that you say? She didn’t die, did she?”

“She’s dead”, Chadami said, and immediately fell at his feet.

The Chaudhuri was in a fix. “A fine mess I’ve gotten into this evening”, he thought to himself. “Now I’ll have to spend the rest of my life giving evidence in court.”

Chadami would not let go of his feet. ‘Chaudhuri Chacha, what shall I do to save my wife?’ he asked.

Ramlochan was renowned in the village for giving advice about courts and cases. After a moment’s thought, he said: “Look, do it this way. Go running straight to the police station, and say : ‘My brother Dukhi came home in the evening and asked for food. The food was not ready. So he hit his wife over the head with a sickle.’ Believe me, that’s the way to save

your wife.'

Chadami's throat turned dry. Rising to his feet, he said : "Chaudhuri Chacha, if one wife goes another comes, but if my brother is hanged, I won't find another brother." But he had not thought of this when he had laid the blame on his wife. Now his mind began aimlessly to seek reasons and justifications for what had escaped his lips from sheer perplexity.

Chacha agreed with his logic and said : "Then, you had best tell the truth. One can't expect to save everyone." And, so saying, Ramlochan left. Within minutes, the news had spread like wild fire through the village that Chanda of the Kori family, while fighting with her sister-in-law, had hit her on the head with a sickle.

Like the flood that follows the bursting of a dam, the police descended on the village. The guilty and the innocent—all were terrified.

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Chadami decided that it was best to continue on the path he had chosen. Everyone in the village now knew what he had told Ramlochan. Who knew what might happen if something else were now to be said ! His head swam at the thought, he decided that the only way out was to stand by what he had said, but add on a few things so as to save his wife, if possible.

Chadami asked his wife Chanda to take the blame on herself. It was as if she had been struck by lightning. Chadami consoled her : "There is no reason to be afraid at what I am saying. We will save you." But while offering this consolation, his throat turned dry and his face pale.

Chanda was not more than 17 or 18 years of age. Her face was round and chubby, her body strong, firm and supple, and every part of her so well moulded that no movement of hers ever appeared clumpy. She was small and sturdy like a newly made boat; she moved with ease, every muscle well toned. She was full of interest and curiosity regarding everything in the world. She liked to visit neighbouring homes for a chat, and, as she went with her waterpot to the well,

she would part her veil a crack with her fingers and see everything worth seeing with those mischievous black eyes.

The older wife was exactly the opposite— lazy, unkempt and disorganised. The veil on her head, the child in her arms, the work in the house—all of it seemed too hard for her to manage. Though she didn't seem to work hard, she never seemed to be at leisure either. The younger wife didn't argue much with her. She would sweetly throw a couple of sharp taunts her way and that would keep her yelling and cursing for hours, enough to drive the whole neighbourhood to the wall.

There was a strange affinity of temperaments between the two husbands and their wives. Dukhi was tall and well built, with a broad ugly nose and eyes that looked as if they barely understood the world and had no desire to ask any questions of it. A rare specimen he was— this simple but dangerous, strong but helpless man.

And Chadami looked like a statue carved with great care from a shiny black stone. Not an extra ounce of flesh or a wrinkle anywhere. Strength and suppleness were fused in every part of his body. He did everything well and with great ease, whether it was leaping from the high bank of the river, rowing through the shallows with a bamboo, or climbing into bamboo thickets to cut tender shoots.

He was in the habit of oiling his long black locks, combing them carefully and letting them curl over his shoulders; he also enjoyed dressing up.

Although not indifferent to the beauty of other village women, and also desirous of appearing attractive in their eyes, he loved his young wife a great deal. There was conflict between them and unison as well. Neither could defeat the other. Another reason for the close ties between them was that Chadami thought a volatile, vivacious woman like Chanda should not be trusted too far, while Chanda thought that since her husband had a roving eye, he might slip out of her hands if she did not keep a firm grasp on him.

There were serious tensions between them much before this unfortunate event. Chanda found that her husband sometimes took long trips on the pretext of work, even staying away for a day or two, yet returned without having earned anything. Disapproving of this behaviour, she too began to play up. She started going to the well at odd hours, roaming around the neighbourhood and returning home to wax eloquent about Kashi Majumdar's second son.

Chadami felt as if his days and nights had been poisoned. He had not a moment's peace when at work. One day, he turned on his sister-in-law and gave her a good scolding.

His sister-in-law, with much, gesticulation and calling of his dead father to witness, said : "You, expect me to look after that woman. She's like a hurricane. All I know is, she will disgrace the family one day."

Chanda was sitting in the next room. She came out and said softly ; "Sister, why are you so afraid ?"

That set them both off at once.

Glaring at her. Chadami said : "Listen, if I ever hear again that you went to the well alone, I will break your bones"

"That will set my heart at rest", said Chanda, and made as if to go out there and then.

Chadami sprang on her, dragged her by the hair, threw her into the room and locked the door.

When Chadami returned that evening, he found the room lying open and no one inside, Chanda had gone straight to her maternal grandparents' house, three villages away.

Chadami had a hard time persuading her to come back, and, after this, he admitted defeat. He realised that it was as impossible to keep a grip on this woman as to keep a drop of mercury locked in a clenched fist. Like mercury, she too found ways to slip through the grasp of the ten fingers.

He stopped putting any kind of pressure on her, but he was extremely uneasy. His ever suspicious love for this

volatile young woman troubled him like an intense pain. Sometimes, he even went so far as to think that if she died, he would be freed from care and be able to live in peace. Man is perhaps more jealous of man than he is even of death.

And, in the meanwhile, this event occurred.

When Chanda's husband told her to confess to the murder, she was too stunned to say a word. Her black eyes burnt into her husband like two silent fires. Body and soul, she seemed to shrink away from this demon of a husband, looking for a way to escape his clutches. Her whole being turned away from her husband and rose up in revolt against him.

Chadami tried his best to reassure her saying she need fear nothing. Then he repeated over and over what she would have to say at the police station and before the magistrate in court. He taught her the whole lesson to his satisfaction. But Chanda did not hear his long speeches. She sat silently like a wooden statue.

Dukhi relied on Chadami in everything. When Chadami told him to put all the blame on Chanda, he said : "But then what will happen to her ?"

"I will save her", Chadami said.

His brother's words freed the big strong Dukhi of any need for anxiety.

Chadami had instructed his wife to say : "My sister-in-law came to hit me with a sickle so I too picked up a sickle and tried to stop her, and I don't know how it happened that I hit her." The entire argument; was devised by Ramlochan. He

explained to Chadami in great detail the descriptions and evidence that would be required to support this story, .

The police came and began intensive interrogations. Practically all the villagers were by now convinced that Chanda had murdered her sister-in-law. And this supposition was upheld by the testimony of most of the villagers.

When the police questioned Chanda, she said ; "Yes, I murdered her."

"Why did you murder her ?"

"I didn't like her."

"Had you quarrelled?"

"No."

"Did she try to hit you first ?"

"No,"

"Did she maltreat you in any way ?"

"No."

These answers amazed everyone.

Chadami panicked and spoke up : "She's not telling it properly. First, the older wife..."

The police officer reprimanded him sharply and shut him up. Repeated questioning elicited the same responses. Chanda simply refused to accept that the older wife had attacked her in any way.

So obstinate a woman would be hard to find anywhere. With all her will power, she was single mindedly bent on reaching the scaffold. Nothing could stop her. How dangerous was this displeasure of hers ! Perhaps, in her own way, she was saying : "I will leave you and take my youth at the scaffold, it will embrace the noose. My ultimate bond in this life is with that noose."

After her arrest, Chanda, an innocent,

little, vivacious, inquisitive rural wife, went down the familiar village road, past the crossroads where the Jagannath chariot stands, though the marketplace, along the *ghat* past the Majumdars' house, the post office and the school, and, wearing a badge of shame before all those she knew, left her home for ever. A crowd of boys followed behind, while the village women, her friends, some peeping through their veils, some standing at their doors, some behind trees, shuddered with shame, revulsion and fear, seeing Chanda depart, surrounded by policemen.

Before the deputy magistrate too, Chanda confessed her guilt, and refused to let any words escape her lips to the effect that the older wife had done her any wrong or injustice.

But, that day, Chadami, as soon as he entered the witness box, burst into tears, and, folding his hands, said : "Have mercy, *huzoor*. My wife is innocent."

The judge ordered him to control himself, and began to question him. He related everything that had occurred, from first to last.

But the judge did not believe him. Because the main witness, a decent and reliable man, Ramlochan, said : "I reached the site shortly after the murder. The witness, Chadami confessed all that had happened, fell at my feet and said : 'Tell me some way to save my wife; I didn't say anything. The witness then asked me : 'If I say that my elder brother asked her for food, and when she didn't give it, he got angry and killed his wife, will my wife be saved. Then I said "You rascal, you





bastard, don't you utter a word of untruth in court, no crime could be greater," and so on and so forth.

Ramlochan had spun all kinds of yarns to save Chanda, but when he saw that Chanda was deliberately entangling herself, he thought: "This is a tricky affair. It may well end in my being prosecuted for bearing false witness, I had best say what I know." So he said what he knew, and in fact did not scruple to say somewhat more than he knew.

The deputy magistrate referred the matter to the sessions court.

All this time, the field and the market, laughter and tears, all the ways of the world continued as usual. As before, the rain fell on the green paddy fields.

The police appealed in the sessions court with the accused and the witnesses. Many people were waiting for their cases to be heard. One case was to do with the Division of a small dirty pond behind a kitchen. Lawyers had come all the way from Calcutta to argue this case, and 39 witnesses were to appear on behalf of the petitioners. All had come determined to extract a decision that should give them their share down to the last ounce and little. They were firmly convinced that for the moment, nothing felt in the world was of as great importance to them.

Chadami stood at the window, his eyes fixed on this busy, restless everyday world. Everything appeared like a dream to him. From a tree in the yard, a cuckoo called in its world there were no laws and no courts.

Irritated, Chanda said to the judge: "*Huzoor saheb*, how many times must I repeat the same thing?"

Pacifying her, the judge asked: "Do you know what the punishment is for the crime to which you are confessing?"

"No", replied Chanda.

"The punishment is hanging, death", said the judge.

Chanda said: "*Huzoor Saheb*, I fall at your feet—give me that punishment. Do what you will, but spare me this. I can bear it no longer."

When Chadami was presented in court, Chanda turned her face away from him.

The judge said; "Listen, look at the witness, and say what he is to you."

Chanda covered her face with both hands and said: "He is my husband "

The judge said: "Does he love you?"

Chanda replied: "Oh! He loves me very much indeed!"

The judge asked "Don't you love him?"

Chanda replied; "I love him very much

indeed!"

When Chadami was questioned, he said: "I committed the murder."

"Why?" asked the judge.

Chadami said: "I asked for the food and she didn't give me any."

When Dukhi came to the witness box, he fainted. When he recovered, he said: "*Huzoor saheb*, I committed the murder."

"Why?"

"I asked for food and she didn't give me any."

After much questioning and after listening to the other witnesses, it was clear to the judge that the two brothers wished to confess to the crime so as to save the woman of the house from a dishonourable death on the scaffold.

But Chanda had made exactly the same statement from the police station to the sessions court. There was no change at all in her statement.

Both the lawyers had spontaneously tried hard to save her from the noose but finally they had to give up.

On the day when a very young, small, plump, dark, chubby faced girl, left her dolls, left her parents home, and went to her-in-laws' house, could anyone, as the auspicious wedding night approached have dreamt that this day too would dawn? When he was dying, her father had heaved a sigh of relief and said: "Well at least my daughter is well settled and provided for."

In the prison, before the execution, the kindly civil surgeon asked Chanda: "Is there anyone you want to see?"

Chands said: "I want to see my mother."

The doctor said: "Your husband wants to see you. Shall we call him?"

"I'd rather die."*

(translated into English by Ruth Vanita primarily from the Hindi translation by Dhanyakumar Jain)

*In the original Bengali this sentence reads: "Chanda kahilo 'Maron' ", that it, "Chanda said: 'Death' ". The exclamation "Death" is colloquially used to indicate extreme disgust and contempt but carries here the connotation that death is preferable to such a meeting.