

'How to heal people? Tell them a beautiful story. This book is just that.'

PROF. SHAH ALAM KHAN, AIIMS, New Delhi

MEDICAL MALADIES

STORIES OF DISEASE AND CURE
FROM INDIAN LANGUAGES

Edited and Introduced by
HARIS QADEER



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*For
Doctors, medical professionals, and frontline
workers who lost their lives to Covid-19 and its
variants, and for all those who survived*



*'The clinical gaze is a gaze that
burns things to their furthest truth.'*

Michel Foucault
The Birth of the Clinic



This collection of stories is compelling and profound. It deals with medical science not in its idealised form but as it filters to the layman...a collision of faith and perplexity, loss and triumph.

DR SYED SAIF HASAN
School of Medicine, University of Maryland, USA

Through these stories, deftly curated by Dr Qadeer, we learn about medicine in Indian literature as well as healthcare in Indian life. Here literary giants rub shoulders with physician-writers, and *dais* with surgeons. The patient is center-stage, and the doctor often vulnerable. The well-executed English translations help bring the lives and minds of these little-known actors to readers and scholars throughout India and across the globe.

DR KIRAN KUMBHAR
Harvard University, USA

This is an insightful collection of stories on how various maladies have affected us down the years and how we have dealt with them using our knowledge of healing. This book is more than just doctors' accounts, it is about the emotional and social responses to diseases, ailments, and also the system.

DR HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR
Writer and Medical Officer, Government of Jharkhand

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Thank goodness the heat of the summer had subsided with the advent of monsoon; how tedious was it to survive the summer days! Is there at all a cool breeze in this marketplace, albeit it is surrounded by gardens?

I couldn't do much here either despite living for one and a half years. It isn't just about this village, but have I done anything at all in this life of almost 33 years? I have been an itinerant soul; travelling from one place to another, but neither did I manage to consolidate my practice, nor fetch a steady clientele. Bag anchara, Kalaroa, Simultali, Satrajitpur, Bagan Gaon, how many villages should I keep naming? In none of these settings could my trade last for more than three months. When I came here, to Palashpur, my practice was initially good. I thought God had finally showered His grace on me. But heaven knows what happened after that; it has been months since I have brought a penny home.

In retrospect, I feel that I had a really good time when I worked at Kundu babu's depot in Shyambazar. One of my contacts from my village got me that job. I used to keep their books; my employers loved my handwriting. I lasted there for eight or nine months. During that period, I made the most of whatever Kolkata had to offer—the zoological garden, museums, bioscopes, theatres, Pareshnath's garden, the temple in Kalighat! What a marvel Kolkata was!

After I lost that job, I felt nauseated at the prospect of slaving for others. I thought becoming a doctor would grant me the autonomy I craved for. I talked Kundu babu's house physician into making me his apprentice at his dispensary. I bought and read a couple of books in the vernacular as well. I learned the trade in a couple of months. Ever since then, I left home and wandered from one district to another in this far-off

Jashore in search of fortune.

Brahmins did not inhabit this village. There were a handful of lower caste dairymen and oil pressers and the rest were Muslims. There was not a single concrete house in Palashpur; people were mostly poor; most of them lived in straw-thatched huts. This village wasn't that populated either. If you asked me why I came to offer my services as a doctor here, I would cite one of the reasons to be the bi-weekly market for all the nearby villages that was organized in this place. It wasn't really a big deal but quite a lot of people from different villages gathered here on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

At the marketplace square, there were a few straw-thatched huts, one of which was the erstwhile accounts office of the Ganguly of Sobaipur. This accounts office was also a temporary settlement, made of straw and devoid of proper walls. At that time of the year when revenues were to be collected, the zamindar's chief accountant visited this place for a couple of months, accrued the dues, and left. Therefore, nobody really cared about the well being of this hut. It was in a terrible state; there were rat holes all over the floor. The roof wasn't sturdy enough to resist the rain. During storms, one wouldn't be safe in spite of being indoors. I, however, implored their manager to let me stay here.

I lived alone. Like every other village in this part of the world, this village too was full of woods, bamboo groves, and ancient mango plantations. On three sides of the marketplace, there were dense bamboo groves and mango plantations, on the other side there was a jungle, walking through which one would touch the Betrabati river, locally called Betna. Due to the thick forest canopy the marketplace square looked dark even during daytime. As soon as dusk approached, one or two traders, who had shops here, shut their enterprises and went home. Soon the marketplace became gloomy and lonely, fireflies glimmered in the woods, once in a while the rotten stench of the blossoming *ghetkol* flower filled the air, an owl hooted from the branches of the simul tree in the north. I sat alone cooking my rice. At times, I took out my one-stringed instrument and sang to my solitude.

I have not earned a single penny in the past six or seven months. I have advertised extensively in the market that I would charge 25 paise for my service, with an additional paisa per dose of medicine. Yet I couldn't get a patient! To my luck, Mujibur Rahman was a nice man. He had been selling me rice and lentils on credit for months now. That's how I

managed to survive.

Last month a case of pneumonia was detected in Damu Ghosh's household in Gowalpara. Mujibur had an influential presence here; I asked him to recommend me. In spite of that, they finally summoned the quack *kabiraj* (herbalist) Abinash Sekra of Balarampur. They had immense faith in his abilities!

I have had my share of trouble with Subhasini as well. Ever since I married her, I dumped her at her father's place. I haven't managed to gift her a decent saree in all these years. A sum of eight or nine rupees is needed to pay for my son's milk. My mother-in-law sends incessant reminders, but where would I get that money? I barely manage to make a living for myself! She was evidently not satisfied with me; she assumed that I was making a fortune by practicing medicine.

No one would believe but I have been surviving only on rice for five months now. Although this is a village, nothing was produced here. Thus, vegetables were extensive; bitter gourds came at two annas a pound, potatoes cost six paise a kg. The fish wasn't priced at anything below six annas. To avoid public knowledge, I would wake up at the break of dawn and walk to the riverside at times to pick up obscure leaves and roots. This is the season of ripe mangoes; so, may be eat one of those with rice. But there have been days when I've consumed rice with only a pinch of salt.

I might not be a qualified practitioner, but how does that matter? Can't one learn medicine by sitting at home and reading a book or two? I have been at it for about seven or eight years now; am I not rich in the experience? Don't patients die even when they're treated by a qualified doctor? Could Doctor Indu of Dhopakhalī save milkwoman Bidhu's daughter from dying?

Could anyone explain why malicious rumours were spread that Doctor Moni's medicine kills even the liveliest of men? Maybe I was poor, so nobody took my side; nobody, except Mujibur. He had been selling me essentials from his shop on credit for four or five months now. Otherwise, I would have died of hunger. No one had done even an inch of the favours Mujibur had done for me. I could never repay that debt.

These were absolutely rustic places. The nearest railway station was more than 20 miles away. There was not a single sizeable trading centre nearby; people were grossly uneducated. Rather than calling in a doctor when they were sick, they relied on native, unscientific measures. They

preferred to summon an exorcist who claimed they were under the spell of an evil spirit. There was no tradition of seeking proper medical help.

I haven't visited home for one-and-a-half years now. I haven't been home ever since I was in Satrajitpur for a while, before moving to Palashpur. By home, I mean my in-laws' place. It has been a long time since I have had something to reckon as home. To reach my in-laws, I needed to walk 16 miles to the nearest railway station in Navaran. After traveling on a train to Maslandpur, I had to deboard and take a bus to Kholapota. Thereupon, I also had to take a toy train to Hasnabad and finally sail through the Ichhamati river on a boat for six to seven hours to reach my in-laws' place. It cost a sum of three or four rupees. Whenever I managed to earn that much, I sent a money order to Subhasini, although there have hardly been many instances when I have made that much at one go in the past two years. If I didn't transfer money, my wife had to face the caustic wrath of my mother-in-law and widowed sister-in-law.

So, the last time when I was returning from my in-laws, as I finished my meal and was about to take the boat, Subhasini called me to the corner and said, 'Do not keep me here for long. Take me along as soon as you can.'

'Would you be able to manage in those villages?' I asked.

'As if I am living in a metropolis right now! Wherever you live is my city. The endless stream of my sister's humiliating remarks makes me want to hang myself at times, or better, drown myself in the river,' Subhasini replied, sounding frustrated.

'I can understand everything, Subhi. Let me settle in someplace and I would definitely come to take you with me. Do you think I am happy being separated from you? But I am helpless...'

Just as I stepped out of the door, my mother-in-law, as if waiting for her prey, pounced on me and said, 'Don't you dare disappear, son. Our lives are rather pathetic here. I am not well; how can I support so many dependents? I owe a lot of money to the milkman; my daughter spends her days in tattered clothes; how can I bear that sight as a mother? I got her a pair of new sarees; I haven't yet managed to pay for that. You vanish into thin air when you leave, what do I do, what kind of a man does this...?' She went on and on!

After that, I haven't visited my in-laws for more than one-and-a-half years now, although whatever little I earned, I mailed it addressed to Subhasini. But, keeping in mind the cost of living, the amount was less

than meagre. But what am I to do? I can't seek resort in chicanery or dacoity!

Frankly speaking, I did not have the opportunity of living together with Subhasini ever in my life. Initially, I thought that I would be able to make a living and bring her over. But it has been six or seven years that I am married and I never got that chance. How long could one stay with the in-laws? As the son-in-law, if I spend ten days instead of two, it would be a gross overstay of my welcome! Thus, I left their daughter in their custody and went out in search of a job. My mother-in-law had started to demonstrate clear signs of disgust. I read her hints and moved away smartly. After all, one cannot forsake one's honour!

One day I got to know that there was a vacancy of a teacher in a school in Pankhola. I spend a few hours every day at Mujibur Rahman's shop to talk about life's woes and wonders; he suggested that I should apply.

I got back home and thought about it. I have been practicing medicine for seven or eight years now and haven't quite succeeded to make ends meet. But if I manage to get a permanent job, then, whatever paltry the sum might be, I'd have something stable to rely upon.

I asked around and found out that Srinath Das of Makarandapur was the secretary of that school. The next morning, I set out for Makrandapur.

I crossed the river on a boat by 8 in the morning. A kid was accompanying me. After walking for a while in the fields, he pointed at a banyan tree and instructed, 'Take that road, Babu, the road on the left!'

The sun was right above my head. I crossed a canal by foot and reached a mango grove. The groves were quite dense in this part of the world. After painstakingly finding my way through the grove, I ended in front of a mansion. A lot of courtly architectural marvels crossed my path. Most of them were ancient; saplings had grown on their dilapidated walls. I crossed the village and sat under a banyan tree to catch my breath. I felt thirsty. I should have stopped at someone's place and asked for water. I had to walk past vast meadows now and wasn't sure if there would be any human inhabitation.

I resumed walking again. On my way, there were quite a few villages inhabited predominantly by agricultural workers. But I was a brahmin and couldn't stake the honour of my caste by asking for water in these areas!

I walked past Sundarpur, Chatra, Noldi, Mamudpur...

I ended up in another vast field. It was past noon by then. I was

famished, I craved for a meal, at least a gulp of water. Hasn't the district board installed a water pump in any of these villages? Is there not even a pond nearby?

When I finished traversing that long highway and came across a river, it was almost dusk. I discovered that the ferry service office was deserted, the ferry covered in weeds, and absolutely no one around!

What menace! I wondered how to cross the river? I enquired at a peasant village nearby and learnt that the ferry service stopped operating months ago because of the thick outgrowth of weeds. One had to walk for miles downstream to Khalishpur to avail the ferry.

It was too painstaking to walk for miles at this state to board the ferry at Khalishpur. After further enquiry I was told that one could walk for half a mile and reach a simul tree where the river could be crossed by foot.

I walked that half a mile and found the simul tree, but the depth of the water didn't seem any less. I got into the water; its level transcended my ankles and went up to my hips. Gradually up to my chest, eventually I was neck-deep in water. My clothes were wet and soggy. When the water touched my nose, I was tiptoeing my way through. It was dark and desolate around. I was afraid if a crocodile would attack me. There might not be huge crocodiles around, but it wouldn't be surprising to encounter a few fish-eating alligators!

Finally, I managed to reach the other side of the river. There was not a single household around. I couldn't see a trace of light! Two roads diverged in the middle of the field; I wasn't sure which one would take me to Makarandapur. The left one or the right? There was not a single soul around to guide me. Alas, my luck betrayed me. The path I took was the wrong one. I walked half a mile and reached a Bagdi household to learn that I should have taken the other road.

I, thus, returned to that confluence and took the path on the right. That road led me into a jungle. There was a dense outgrowth of mango trees, bamboo plants, and different weeds. I knew this place would be infested with tigers that often preyed on domestic animals. One of my patients once saw the wrath of the paws of such a tiger on his shoulder.

It was getting darker. I was too exhausted to walk. There were ripe mangoes scattered on the path. The mangoes of this region did not fetch much of a price; therefore, nobody bothered to pick them up. I tripped on the mangoes as I walked. At least I didn't step on a snake! My medicinal

practices would have promptly ended at that moment.

Eventually, I reached Makarandapur. It was about 9 pm in the night. I took shelter at Srinath Das's household. However, I didn't get the job. My journey was in vain. The next morning, Srinath told me that they wouldn't be hiring anyone this month, perhaps, recruitment would be in October. The school was poorly funded. The district board sends an allowance of ten rupees and twenty-five paise every month and that's all that they rely on. The student fees didn't exceed a few paise; it was not feasible to hire two teachers. Srinath asked to enquire once again in October.

It was a lost case. What would I live on till October that I could wait to apply for the post of a second teacher? The salary was five rupees. The headmaster was paid nine rupees per month.

I returned to Palashpur the next evening after walking for an entire day. I was exasperated. My feet were almost falling apart. Mujibur asked me, 'What happened Doctor Babu?' I told him everything. Then I got into my dark and dingy hut and lit my broken lantern. I washed my hands and face at the river and spread my mat and laid down. I was starving, but I didn't have the energy to cook. I satiated my hunger with a few mangoes that night.

I kept having so many stray thoughts laying in darkness. I had to live all alone; I didn't have anyone to share my miseries with me. Perhaps, this was the worst of my woes. I felt like bringing my wife over. I haven't seen her for so long. At least she could take care of me! After I would return from a hard day's work, how I wished she would wait for me and hear what I had to say. At least that could have been a source of happiness. But how would that be possible? What shall I feed her?

It was even darker in the marketplace square. There were just a couple of shops, but the shopkeepers had closed them and gone away. I could see the fireflies glimmering in the darkness of the trees. I could hear bats flapping their wings on the branch of a foreign tree.

It was quite late into the night, but I had trouble sleeping. It was so sultry and humid! I could hear the sonata of mangoes falling on the ground in the orchards nearby as I laid alone.

My life was acquiring more boredom as each day passed. I woke up every morning, walked by the river and then returned to the marketplace square. I limited the length of my walks; what if a patient came by and didn't find me? I remained at my dispensary all day hoping for their

arrival.

I open my damned eyes as I sit under the canopy of a majestic tree

I indulge in delusions as I feel I would find your lotus feet

My heart keeps trembling...

Who else could I visit here? There was not a single upper-caste gentleman I could spend my time chatting with in this predominantly agricultural village. My world here was confined to a cycle between my broken shanty of a dispensary and Mujibur Rahman's grocery store. On some evenings I strolled by the lake in Pipilipara and watched how the lower-caste bagdi people caught fish using their clothes from their little boats. I picked up a few herbs and greens for myself on some days. I have been surviving on mangoes and rice since summer. How long could I possibly eat the same thing?

I was not destined for fame. Yesterday, in the other neighbourhood, the oil miller, Bishu's son got bitten by a snake in his mill. I ran as soon as I heard the news. Nobody summoned me; but how could one sit silently upon hearing such a tidings? I bandaged his leg as soon as I reached as I pressed a strip of potassium permanganate on the wound. Meanwhile, their neighbours brought in a quack. The quack came in and ordered to take off the bandage. He performed his usual tricks and the kid was cured. His tricks made no difference; it was my treatment that brought him back to life. But the quack stole the limelight. I don't regret this. I'm honoured that my services managed to save someone's life.

I could put up with hunger. But the boredom of this lonely life was killing me. I sat and dreamt and strived to while away my existential angst.

At times I thought what I might do if I ever hit the jackpot.

I would definitely bring over Subhasini and my child. Mujibur had offered me a piece of land by the river; I would probably raise a straw hut there. There would be a garden full of flowers around that hut. In these summer evenings, I would pick some flowers and bring them over to adorn Subhasini's hair. I would speak to the magistrate in charge of this locality and arrange some land for tilling. Once I began to reap the grains, affluence would come by itself.

On an autumn day as I sat in my dispensary, I saw a little girl looking for something near the marketplace square. Our eyes crossed and she stared at me.

I asked her, 'What are you looking for there, little girl?'

The girl replied rather bashfully, '*Ghetkol* roots.'

'What would you do with that?' I asked, sounding rather curious.

'We eat those roots,' she replied.

I wasn't aware of that. If I knew those roots were edible, I wouldn't have had to worry about my entrees. I was aware that there were a lot of *ghetkol* shrubs around the marketplace square, but I didn't know how they looked like. I did hear its name though.

I asked, 'Oh, show me how it looks like?'

The girl replied, 'See there? It resembles a *kochu* plant. But the leaves have three folds.'

'How do you eat it?' I asked.

'Whichever way one likes. You can stir-fry, make it into a curry... Should I pick a bunch for you?' the girl replied.

I wouldn't deny I showed off a bit. How could I eat some obscure root in spite of being a doctor? Even if I do, I would do it out of pity for that unnamed plant. That's the kind of image I wanted to put up.

I said, 'Who would cook that? Does anyone know the recipe here?'

The girl taught me to stir-fry those roots, even picked up a bunch for me.

Before she left, she observed my kitchen and asked, 'Who else lives here?'

'I do.'

'That's apparent. I was wondering who lived with you. Who does the cooking?' she asked.

'Nobody. I do everything myself.'

Probably she took mercy on me upon hearing that, because after that day, whenever she came to the marketplace square to pick up those roots, she would pick a bunch for me as well.

She came in the mornings, at times in the afternoon. On one such afternoon, as I sat by myself, she came and brought some figs for me and said, 'I plucked some from the trees near the pond earlier today. I got two for you!'

I never asked that girl what her name was. She was pretty, had big, dreamy eyes; probably she was eighteen or nineteen years old. She was remarkably fair, a bit uncanny a complexion in these parts of the world. But I could figure out that she didn't hail from an upper-caste household. The other day, I enquired and found out that she was the daughter of Bidhu, the milkmaid. Her name was probably Premlata; they call her

Pramo. She had been widowed at a tender age, which was not uncommon among the milkmaids here.

The girl stood for a while and asked, 'Haven't you married, sir?'

'Why would I not marry?' I replied.

'Then why don't you bring your wife over? You wouldn't have to take the trouble of cooking then.'

'Yes, you are right. I'm thinking of bringing her over soon.'

'Are your parents still alive?'

'No.'

'Where's your original home?'

'Far away. You wouldn't know.'

This is how we bonded. Pramo used to visit me regularly, either in the morning or in the evening. She brought figs, bulbous plants, occasionally a round-shaped fruit...whatever she picked for herself, she ensured to get some for me to my delight. At times, she used to stand on the porch and engage in long conversations. That simple beautiful girl picked woods, plucked vegetables, and did whatever she could to dispense her mother's misery. In the same vein, she took it upon herself to make sure that this impoverished doctor had food on his plate. I began to admire her. She tied in a string of empathy, and I thought I reciprocated that. I loved the company of a kind woman in the solitude of the marketplace in Palashpara. Therefore, I was happy whenever she dropped by. Slowly, the frequency of her visits increased. She made excuses to come over, at times without rhyme or reason. She talked her heart out for hours whenever she arrived.

One day I noticed that Pramo recently had been making efforts at grooming herself. I felt that when I chanced upon the well-tied bun of her hair for the first time. She had carefully draped her saree too. One day I observed her smile to be flirtatious, yet bashful. I had never seen her smile like that before. She tried to take care of me in several other ways. She plucked herbs for me, chopped vegetables, did whatever she could. Initially, she used to stand and talk. I found her comfortably sitting at the corner of my porch these days. Her gestures seemed prettier by the day!

There are so many other people in Palashpur. So many people frequented the marketplace square. Nobody had ever cared to show sympathy for the lonely life of this wretched doctor before. My belief that a woman makes the best friend for a man was reaffirmed.

Last spring, she skipped her visit consecutively for a few days. I grew

anxious. This had never happened since she had started visiting me. After a couple of days, I was informed that milkmaid Bidhu's daughter had contracted typhoid. I went and inspected. I concluded that it was impossible even for the gods to cure her. But I devoted myself to treat her to the best of my abilities. They lost faith in me after a week and called Doctor Indu. On the very first day, Pramo's face lit up upon seeing me at her bedside. Later on, I heard that she refused to follow Indu doctor's medications. She lost her consciousness six or seven days before her demise.

It has been a few months that I was back to my solitary self. Who would pick herbs and roots and vegetables for me? I was back to my usual diet of mangoes and rice.

Monsoon had set in, and the roads were clogged with water and mud. There were too many mosquitos on the prowl. Clouds gathered above the tallest trees around the marketplace square. It rained for a while and the sky cleared up. Then the clouds gathered again, and it rained more. The drenched roots of the trees looked black as ever!

I sit alone in total silence. It felt as if I had been incarcerated. When it became unbearable, I joined Mujibur at his grocery shop. His store was on the ground level. Kerosine oil, lamp oil, cumin seeds, cheap tobacco, tar, and spoilt mustard oil conjoined to form a weird stench. That stench made me depressed. I felt I was rotting away in this obscure village. Would I ever be liberated from these shackles? I didn't know. Heavens knew what happened to my life. But I felt I would have been able to survive if I had Subhasini and my child by my side.

When I used to live in Kolkata, I remembered once walking through Bhowanipore when I noticed a flock of young ladies coming out of a mansion with books in their hands. They were a mixed-age group of ladies.

I wondered what it was. How come there are so many women here? I thought of investigating.

I later found out that the mansion hosted a women's college.

So many damsels were there in that lot! Their dressing sense was impeccable; some had pretty spectacles on; how amazing they were! On another instance, I was strolling on Debendra Ghosh Road, when I heard a girl singing on the second floor of some rich man's house. I stood by and listened to her. I had never heard such a beautiful rendition. Where would I get the chance anyway? I still remembered the lyrics of her song

Beloved, you did not turn up this morning

The flowers weep; dewdrops gather like tears

Those songs were never meant for rustic folks like us.

After an incessant downpour throughout the day, it stopped raining in the evening. The darkness of the trees blended with the solitude of the marketplace square; it seemed darker than it was. Frogs were croaking in delight. The spot from where Pramo plucked her herbs was inhabited by a choir of chirping crickets. The wind was rustling through the leaves of the huge tree; I could hear fruits fall from the branches in the darkness of the swamp.

I sat alone and pondered in this desolate evening...

Translated from Bengali by Debayudh Chatterjee

The younger woman felt shaken from inside. Only child! That too after so many years of waiting. A precious child. But isn't every child precious? Her own daughter left with her grandmother for better care.

The older woman continued: 'We are strict vegetarians. But when doctors advised a high protein diet for him, we started giving him non-vegetarian food. First, we bought it from hotels but then we were cautioned against the quality and hygienic way of cooking so I started cooking at home. For the sake of the child the religion was cast aside. Now right from eggs to chicken, I cook everything at home. To gain expertise I joined cookery classes. Thank God he relishes the dishes. I have the utmost gratification in looking after him, being at his disposal all the time. And I will keep on serving him as long as God grants me the pleasure of it,' she spoke slowly but with emphasis on every word. Her voice did not betray any emotion though. Her face too remained expressionless. Her grief had reached the height where everything dissolves into nothingness, grief included.

The younger woman did not know how to react. As if unmoved by the misery of such magnitude she kept staring into nothingness. The older woman pointed at two figures coming from the left. 'There they are. Father and son. It is past 12. Our turn should be coming in a while.'

Now the younger woman looked at them, walking. The child did not look sickly except for a yellow tinge in his dark eyes and a shaven head. He was tall for his age and so far hadn't lost his good build. His hair loss could be due to chemotherapy. Women with shaven heads covered with scarves was a common sight here. Another common sight was a mask to protect a body weakened with chemotherapy from any further infection. The younger woman felt a lump in her throat and looked the other way. Just then the mike made a rattling sound. The guard holding it threw a cursory look at the papers in hand and called out, 'Akhil...Akil...oh not Akil, it is Akheel...attendants please come forward, Akheel's attendants...'

The older woman jumped to her feet. 'Come child, your turn has come at last.'

The younger woman too, got up with the same impatience. 'No, he is asking for Aqeel's attendant. Aqeel is my husband going through his chemo. Something must have cropped up, I wonder what.' She sounded alarmed. Not bothering about each other, both women took long strides and surged toward the guard. A bit confused, he looked at the papers again and said, 'One at a time, please. Akhil's attendants should come.'

Controlling the stammer caused by confusion, this time he had tried to pronounce as clearly as he could.

‘Yes, it’s us, my Akhil, we had been waiting since early morning.’ She held the hand of her young son and almost ran toward the door leading to the wing for treatment. The younger woman tried to fall in step. In fact, she wanted to reach first.

Who was it, Akhil Pandey or Aqeel Ahmad? Harassed and tired, the two women looked at the guard. The usual uninterrupted bustle continued in the Day Care section of B.R. Ambedkar Cancer Hospital of All India Institute of Medical Sciences.

Translated from Urdu by the author

The Gift of Vision

Rabindranath Tagore



I heard that a lot of Bengali maidens have to find husbands all by themselves these days. I accomplished that feat as well, albeit with a little help from the gods. I observed a lot of rituals and worshipped Lord Shiva right from my childhood.

I got married as soon as I turned eight. But, because of the sins of my past life, I was deprived of my husband in spite of the holy vow. The three-eyed goddess snatched away my vision. I didn't have the fortune of seeing my husband till my last breath.

My life was in flames ever since I was young. At 14, I gave birth to a stillborn. I was almost dead; but why would the one destined to endure pain die so easily? The lamp meant to burn throughout the night is never low on oil; it achieves nirvana only when the sun rises.

I did survive but due to the weakness of my body, or the sorrow of my mind, or whatever the reason might be, my eyes contracted a disease.

My husband was studying medicine then. He became enthusiastic whenever he got the delight of implementing his newly acquired knowledge. He took my treatment upon himself.

My elder brother was studying towards his law degree at a college then. One day he came over and shunned my husband, 'What have you done! You've almost ruined my little sister's eyes. You must consult a better doctor.'

My husband replied, 'How better would a better doctor be? I know all the medicines needed to treat this.'

My brother was infuriated, 'So you mean to say that there's no difference at all between you and the senior most professor of your college?'

My husband replied, 'You are a law student; how much do you know of medicine? If you ever get into a legal battle over your wife's property after

your marriage, would you be consulting me?’

I thought to myself that whenever kings clash, the pawns are the ones that suffer the most. My husband got into a skirmish with my brother but both sides blamed me. If my brothers gave me away, then why should they be concerned about my well-being? My mirth and agony, my ailment and rejuvenation, pertained to my husband’s desires.

The other day, the bitterness between my husband and my brother regarding the mere event of my eyesight reached new heights. My eyes were secreting water but, on that occasion, their flow increased. Neither my husband, nor my brother could figure out the real reason.

One evening, when my husband was still in college, my brother arrived with a doctor. The doctor diagnosed me, warned that the infection would worsen without proper precaution, and prescribed a few drugs. My brother ordered for their purchase without any delay.

Once the doctor left, I pleaded to my brother, ‘Have mercy on me, dear brother! Do not interfere with the ongoing treatment.’

I dreaded my brother ever since I was a child; I never expected that I would speak back to him. But I did understand that the initiatives my brother took bypassing my husband would bring more distress than good.

Even my brother was surprised by my audacity. He remained silent for a while and said, ‘Fine, I won’t bring a doctor anymore. But do abide by whatever he prescribed.’ My brother taught me to use the medicines once they arrived and went away. Before my husband got back from college, I threw all the vials, cotton, and tablets into the well.

After the skirmish with my brother, my husband’s enthusiasm increased twice over. He changed the dosage almost every day. I put on an eyepatch, subsequently spectacles; I took eyedrops, applied ointments, partook stinking fish oil and almost puked my intestines out; tolerated whatever I was told to do. My husband used to enquire how I felt. I told him it was better than before. It must be getting better, I convinced myself. When the secretion increased, I thought I was getting better. When the secretion stopped, I thought it was a sign of recovery.

But after a few days the pain worsened. My vision got blurry and my sinews started aching. I could hardly hold myself together. Even my husband grew restless. He was looking for an excuse to consider a second opinion.

I advised, ‘What’s wrong in consulting another doctor just to honour

my brother's wish? It saddens me that he is not pleased at the course of affairs. You would be leading the charge; the other doctor would be at your service.'

My husband said, 'You're right.' On that very day, he summoned a British doctor. I am not sure what they talked about but I thought that the doctor admonished my husband. I saw him stand silently with his head bowed down.

When the doctor left, I held my husband's hand and said, 'Heaven knows from where you fetched that white idiot? You should have got an Indian practitioner. How would he know better than you about my eyes?'

My husband hesitated for a while and said, 'There must be a surgery for your eyes.'

I pretended to be angry and said, 'You knew right from the beginning that a surgery was required. But you didn't tell me. Do you think I would be afraid of that?'

My husband got over his embarrassment; he said, 'How many mighty men would not be unnerved at the thought of an eye surgery?'

I jokingly remarked, 'A man might be with his woman.'

My husband turned gloomy and said, 'You're right. A man can only be proud.'

I tried to dispense his gloom and said, 'Do you think you can match up to us in pride? We win on that front as well.'

Meanwhile when my brother visited, I called him aside and said, 'Brother, I was following that doctor's instructions and my eyes were well. But one day I made a mistake and anointed the medicine that was supposed to be orally consumed. Ever since then my eyes deteriorated. My husband suggests I go into surgery.'

My brother replied, 'I thought your husband's treatment was going on. I was disappointed and stopped visiting.'

I said, 'No, I was secretly following that doctor's instructions. I didn't inform my husband because I didn't want to hurt his feelings.'

One has to tell so many lies if one is born a woman! I cannot hurt my brother's sentiments, nor can I disrespect my husband. One has to be a mother and coddle the child; one has to be a wife to take care of the child's father. Women need to deceive so much!

At least the deceit paid off. Before I went blind, I saw my brother and my husband reconcile. My brother thought that the accident happened because of the secret treatment. My husband thought that he should have

listened to my brother right at the onset. Two repentant hearts grew closer in regret. My husband started asking for my brother's advice; my brother began to humbly agree with whatever my husband opined.

Finally, upon their conjugal decision, one day a British doctor arrived and operated on my left eye. My weak eye could not endure that. Whatever bleak vision that was left eventually diminished. Subsequently, the other eye also got engulfed in darkness. The image of the well-dressed sandal-scented young man that graced me on the day of my marriage was soon veiled by a black curtain for good.

One day my husband came to my bedside and said, 'I wouldn't lie to you anymore. It is me who ruined your eyes.'

I could sense that his voice was choked with tears. I held his hands with my right hand and said, 'You don't have to bother. You took what belonged to you. Would I have had any consolation if any other doctor destroyed them? No one would have been able to save my eyes since fate cannot be altered. The only silver lining that I can bask in is that it is you who took them. When Lord Rama fell short of a couple of flowers during his worship, he decided to offer his eyes to the gods instead. I hereby sacrifice my vision to my God—the shine of my full moon, the first rays of my dawn, the azure blue of sky, all the greens of my earth, I hereby dedicate everything to you. Whatever you find worth seeing, describe them to me in words. I shall accept that as your sacred offering.'

I could not articulate all of it; nor are words enough for that. But I have thought about this for many a day. At times when I felt depressed, when the light of my faith flickered, when I thought of myself as nothing more than a hapless, deprived, melancholic creature, I consoled myself with these words and tried to use my devotion and inner peace to rise above my sadness. The other day, I probably managed to convey what I really felt; some of it through words and some, through silence. He said, 'Kumu, the damage caused by my arrogance and stupidity cannot be reversed. But I shall be there with you to dispense the lack of your sight to the best of my ability.'

I said, 'That does not sound like a wise proposition. I shall not tolerate you making this household a hospital for the blind. You must get married again.'

My voiced choked before I could spell out the real reason behind why he should marry again. I coughed; gathered my thoughts and was about to say it, while my husband let his emotions overflow, 'Kumu, I might be

stupid. I might be full of hubris; but I am not a heartless creature. I ruined your eyesight with my own hands. Now, if I forsake you and bring another bride to this household, then let me swear by our household deity Gopinath, may my sins tantamount to that of killing a brahmin and patricide.’

I would not have allowed him to make this vow. I would have stopped him. But I found it hard to suppress the tears that rose from the depth of my heart and clogged my voice and flooded my eyes, and speak. After hearing what he said I was overwhelmed with mirth, hid my face in the pillows and cried. I am blind, but still, he wouldn’t leave me. He would keep me in his heart like the melancholy of a melancholic. I was not used to such great fortune, but I was too selfish to let it go.

Eventually when the first flow of tears passionately went by, I pulled his face close to my heart and said, ‘Why did you have to make such a terrible vow. Did I ask you to marry for your own pleasure? I would have made my fellow-wife do all the things to you that my blindness prevents me from doing.’

My husband said, ‘Even slaves work. Am I to marry a slave girl and put her in the same seat as my goddess?’ He held my face and kissed me on the forehead. That kiss brought my third eye to life; I evolved into a goddess. I said to myself that it happened for the better. Now that I am blind, I cannot be a wife to this household. But I will be a goddess and rise above the family and look out for my husband. No more of telling lies, no further deceit; I hereby disown whatever that’s petty in a wife.

I went through an inner conflict for the rest of the day. The joy that my husband took a vow to never marry again lingered obsessively in my mind. I couldn’t get past it. The goddess that newly emerged within me said, ‘There might come a day when it would be better for him to marry rather than stick to his vow.’ On the other hand, the wife left in me argued, ‘Doesn’t matter. Now that he has vowed, I could always keep him to myself.’ The goddess replied, ‘So what? Which part of it makes you happy?’ The mortal reasoned, ‘Not that I don’t understand. But now that he was vowed...’ And so, it went on. The goddess finally shut up, but sternly raised an eyebrow. A sublime fear that something terrible would happen took over all my senses.

My repentant husband forbade all the servants to come near me and did all my chores by himself. At first, I liked how dependent I was on him for the most trivial of things because that allowed me to have him all to

myself. Since I couldn't see with my eyes, I wanted to compensate by always keeping him at my side. The share of a partner's company that my eyes would have got was distributed among the other senses. When my husband used to be out on work for long, I thought I was suspended in a void, I was unable to grip anything, and everything was lost. Earlier, when my husband was late in returning from the college, I used to open the window facing the street and stare until he came. I used my eyes to tie myself to the world that he roamed in. Now, my body without eyesight craved for his presence. The bridge that connected his world with mine was burnt down. Now, there were miles of blindness between us. Now I had to helplessly wait for him to cross over to my side. Therefore, whenever he left me, even for a minute, my blind body tried to cling on to him and howled for his presence.

But so much of desire and dependence was not healthy. In any case, the burden of a wife on a man was enough; I couldn't let it be amplified by my blindness. It was entirely up to me to carry this enormous world of darkness on my shoulders. I promised to myself in utmost sincerity that I would not tie my husband to the disability of my lack of vision.

Within a short while, I learnt to do my daily chores with the aid of my other senses; hearing, smelling, and touching. In fact, I could accomplish them with finer skills than before. I began to understand that vision distracts more than it helps. The eye sees more than what should be seen. And when eyes take over the job of surveillance, the ears become lazy and do not listen as much they should have. Now, with the absence of my eyes, my other senses took over their job with utmost competence.

Now I did not have to let my husband do my chores and, like earlier times, I started running his errands too.

My husband told me, 'You're depriving me of the honour of atoning for my sins.'

I replied, 'I don't know why you need to atone, but why should I aggravate my sins?'

Whatever he might say, I realized that when I freed him from his compulsions, he breathed a sigh of relief. A man's duty is not to take care of his blind wife forever.

My husband finished his degree in medicine and took me along to the suburbs.

I felt I returned to my mother's lap after going back to the village. I left the village for the city when I was eight. In these ten years, the memories

of that life became as blurry as shadows. When I had eyes, the city life of Kolkata stood in front of me by obscuring my other memories. At the first glance, I realized that Kolkata could dazzle one's eyes, but it never satiated the mind. After losing my eyesight, the memories of my childhood in a village flashed upon my mind's eye like visible stars in the dark night.

In the middle of December, we moved to Hasimpur. A new place; I couldn't see how it looked like, but its smells and touches engulfed my senses in the same way the village of my childhood did. The morning air rising out of dew-splashed ploughed fields, the sweet, enticing fragrance of mustard and golden paddy fields, the songs of the shepherds, even the sound of bullock-carts plying on dirt roads...there was no end to my delight! The memories of my early life with all its sounds and scents made their way from the past and greeted my present; my blind eyes could not resist that joy. I returned to my childhood, but I couldn't see my mother. Of course, I did see her in my mind at times; I saw my grandmother untying her hair, basking in the sunlight, as she laid out lentil balls to dry in the sun, but I couldn't hear her hum, in her old, broken voice, ballads on the carnal amour of Radha and Krishna sung by our village hermit Bhajandas. The festivities of the first reap manifested in a sky drenched in dew. But where did my old coterie of friends who ground the grains in the village mill go? I could hear the moo of cows coming back after sundown; I remembered my mother guiding them to the shed with an evening lamp. The smell of wet fodder and the smoke of burnt hay pervaded my senses as I heard the ringing of prayer bells coming from the house of the pandits beside the pond. Somebody seemed to have extracted the spirit and essence from the vast substance of the life of my first eight years and presented it to me like never before.

I remembered my childhood rituals of picking flowers at dawn and worshipping Lord Shiva. I must admit that, in the discursive rigor of Kolkata, one's sensibility undergoes a change. The innocuous practices of religious faith lose their innocence. I remember that once, after losing my vision, a friend from my old village came to me and said, 'Are you not infuriated, Kumu? If I were you, I would have refused to see my husband's face.' I told her, 'Dear, it's apparent that I can't see his face anymore and I do blame these wretched eyes for that. Why would I be cross with my husband?' Labanya was enraged at my husband for not consulting a doctor on time and tried her best to put me against him as well. I tried to

make her understand that in the whirlpool of family life, a lot of things, pleasant or unpleasant, willingly or unwillingly, happen. But if one can retain their faith in spite of everything, then it is possible to attain bliss and inner peace. Otherwise, one has to spend their entire life in petty clashes, blame-games, and conflicts. It is indeed unfortunate that I have gone blind, but why would I add to my misfortune by fighting with my husband? Labanya was disappointed to hear these antiquated words and left with a shrug. But whatever I might have said, I knew that a few drops of the venom in her words had left their trace in my mind. A few flickers of her rage were left behind in my mind; I extinguished them promptly with my feet. Nonetheless, some scars remained. Which is why, I was saying, Kolkata is a city of arguments and rationalism; one's mind becomes twisted out of inhabiting that space.

After returning to the village, the smell of the fresh shiuli buds with which I worshipped Lord Shiva enlivened my senses as if childhood was reclaimed. The grace of God filled my life and my heart. I submitted myself entirely. I prayed, 'Dear God my eyes might have gone. But you are still mine.'

Alas, I was wrong. It is a dare to claim God as one's own. I only had the right to declare that I am still yours. One day my God would smother me and make me say that. Nothing might last, but I have to stay strong. I might not have power over others, but I do have power over myself.

A few days passed in happiness. My husband's practice consolidated, and we managed to save some money.

But money is not a good thing. It takes control of the mind. When the mind reigns by itself, it can create its own happiness. But when wealth takes charge of that, the mind becomes useless. Consequently, peace of mind is replaced by material luxuries; one can only procure more goods instead of happiness!

I cannot cite anything in particular. But, maybe because a blind woman feels more than she sees, or for some other reason, I could understand my husband's character change with the acquiring of wealth. At the beginning of his youth, my husband was sensitive to ethics and righteousness. Gradually, that was getting diminished. I remember that he used to say, 'It's not simply to provide a living that I have studied medicine; I can put my knowledge to the welfare of the poor.' He despised those practitioners who privileged their fees more than the urgency of treating a poor patient. I could sense that he was no longer the same. I

saw him ignore a hapless woman falling on his feet to save her only son's life. Finally, I had to implore him to go although I realized that it was not what he wished. When we were low on money, I remember what my husband thought of earning money through corrupt means. Now, as we accumulated a lot of wealth in our account, I got to know that he conferred with a rich man's secretary for days in secret. I was not aware of what they talked about, but afterwards he would come to me gleefully and converse about other things, I realized with my special powers that he had fallen from grace.

I could no longer identify the man whom I saw for the final time before losing my sight. The one who kissed me between my eyes and awakened my third eye and hailed me as the goddess; I could do nothing to prevent his fall. Those that are suddenly overwhelmed by desire and fall have a chance of a fervid redemption. But those whose morality gradually decays, those that assassinate their inner goodness bit by bit, I do not know how they could be cured.

It didn't bother me that I couldn't see my husband; but it pained my soul to discover that we were no longer on the same page. I was blind; in the dark caverns of family life, all that I had to show for faith and devotion was the love of my early life. The dew on the flowers that I offered in humility to the god in my temple hadn't dried yet. But my husband had forsaken this shade of youthful amour and has trodden off to some distant, parched desert in search of more money. He seemed to stand far apart and scoff at everything that I believed in, all the tenets that I embraced as my religion, all that mattered more to me than material comfort. But this separation had not existed before. We had started our journey on the same path. He didn't realize when his path diverged from mine. Nor did I. Today I do not hear back when I cry out for him.

At times I thought that these things appeared larger than they should because I was blind. Perhaps, I would have been able to take family as it is if I had eyes.

One day even my husband demonstrated the same. In the morning, an old Muslim man called upon him to cure his granddaughter of cholera. I heard him implore, 'Sir, I am poor. But Allah will bring you good.' My husband replied, 'What Allah would do does not concern me. What you can do counts more.' Upon hearing that I thought why did god not make me deaf as well? The old Muslim sighed and left. Soon enough, I asked my maid to summon him at the back door and said, 'Father, here is a bit

of money for your granddaughter's treatment. Please pray for my husband and call for Doctor Harish of our neighborhood.'

But I couldn't bite a morsel through the rest of the day. My husband woke up from his afternoon siesta and asked, 'Why do you look so depressed?' I thought of answering the way I used to: 'No, nothing happened.' But gone are the days of deceit. I said clearly, 'I have been meaning to say this for a long time, though I am not sure of how to put it. I don't think I would be able to explain properly but I believe you too realize that we have drifted apart.' My husband smiled and replied, 'Change is the rule of life.' I said, 'Yes, one's financial status and external beauty changes, but doesn't the core remain unaltered?' He replied gravely, 'Listen, other women are depressed by real reasons. Either the husbands do not earn well or they have fallen out of love. You create your sadness out of thin air.' At that moment I realized that my blindness had put special lens on my eyes and carried me out of this real world. I was not like other women. My husband would never understand me.

Meanwhile, one of my husband's aunts came to check in on his nephew from a distant village. As soon as we bowed to her and paid our respects, she said, 'Dear daughter, I say, you have lost your eyes by the turn of fate. Now how would our Abinash run a household with a blind wife? You should arrange for another marriage for him.' If my husband had jokingly remarked, 'Why don't you take charge of that, aunty?' then things would have been clear. But he replied with hesitation, 'Ah, aunt! The things that you say!' The aunt replied, 'Am I saying anything wrong? Come on, daughter-in-law, tell me.' I tried to laugh it off and said, 'You're asking for advice from the wrong person, dear aunty. Does the robber take his victim's consent before looting them?' The aunt replied, 'Yes, you are right. Abinash, we must conspire in private. But, dear daughter-in-law, the brahmin husband's repute depends on the number of fellow-wives his wife has. If our Abinash did not study medicine and married instead, he would not have had any shortage of money. These patients die at the hands of doctors. Dead persons never pay fees, do they? But, by the grace of god, a brahmin's wife never dies. Or as long as she lives, the husband profits.'

A couple of days later my husband asked his aunt in front of me, 'Aunty, can you find a girl of a decent household who could look after my wife like one's own? She cannot see. I would be relieved to have a companion by her side.' This would have made sense just after I got blind.

But now I wasn't sure how the lack of my eyesight had hindered my life or any household chore. However, I did not protest and remained silent. The aunt said, 'It wouldn't be difficult. One of my brothers-in-law has a daughter. Her beauty is as impeccable as her decency. That maiden is ripe enough for marriage. They would marry her off as soon as they find a suitable brahmin groom like you.' My husband was taken aback, 'Who's talking about marriage?' The aunt replied, 'Good gracious! How can you expect a girl from a decent family to stay here without marrying?' She had a point. My husband couldn't find an appropriate reply.

I stood alone with the closed doors of my blind eyes and looked up and prayed, 'Dear God, please save my husband.'

A few days later, as soon as I was done with my morning worship and came out, the aunt said, 'Daughter-in-law, the niece that I was referring to, Hemangini, has arrived from the village. Himu, greet your sister.'

Meanwhile, my husband appeared, saw an unknown woman, and was about to turn back, when the aunt said, 'Where you going, Abinash? This is my niece, Hemangini.' My husband was surprised and asked inconsequential details like when was she was escorted here and by whom, and so on.

I said to myself, 'It is not that I don't understand what's going on. But why add a layer of deceit on it? Why tell lies to cover up and play hide-and-seek? If you have to sin, then it is to give in to your temptations. But why am I being dragged into it? What is the need to tell me lies?'

I held Hemangini by her hand and took her to my bedroom. I ran my fingers across her face and body and realized that she was beautiful. She was not younger than 14 or 15.

The girl suddenly laughed loudly and said, 'Are you trying to ward off evil spirits from me?'

That innocent, hearty laughter instantly cleared the clouds that gathered in my heart. I put my arm dearly across her shoulder and said, 'I am inspecting you, dear sister.' Then I ran my fingers again across her soft, delicate face.

'You're inspecting me?' She smiled again, 'Am I an eggplant or a gourd in your garden that you have to touch me and inspect how big I have grown?'

Then I thought that probably she doesn't know of my blindness. I told her, 'Sister, I am blind.' Upon hearing that she was surprised and remained silent for a while. I could very well guess that she was gauging

my sightless eyes and facial expressions with her young, curious eyes. Eventually, she said, 'Oh! Is that why aunt brought me here?'

I told her, 'I did not ask for you. She brought you of her own will.'

The girl laughed again and said, 'Out of mercy? Then I can safely assume that Her Merciful Highness would not be leaving soon. But I wonder why my father sent me here.'

Meanwhile, the aunt entered the room. She was done conversing with my husband. Hemangini promptly said, 'Aunty, when will I return home?'

The aunt replied, 'Good God! How eager you are to leave as soon as you have come. I have never seen an impatient lass like this!'

Hemangini said, 'Aunty, I don't think you would leave anytime soon. But they are your relatives, stay as long as you like. Let me tell you right away that I won't stay here for long.' Then she held my hand and said, 'You know what, sister? You are not that close to me.' I couldn't find an answer to this innocuous question and dragged her close to me. I understood that in spite of her best efforts, aunty couldn't fully control this girl. Aunty hid her anger and tried to appease Hemangini, who did not pay heed to it. The aunt tried to act as if she took it as another innocent joke of a young maiden and decided to leave the room. She paused for a while, thought something, and turned back, 'Himu, it is time for your bath.' Himu came closer to me and said, 'I shall go to the ghat with my sister.' The aunt unwillingly gave up. She knew that Hemangini would win if forced and that would expose their differences in front of me in a rather ugly way.

As we walked towards the ghat through the back door, Hemangini asked me, 'Why didn't you have kids?' I smiled and said, 'How am I to know that? God did not grace us with children.' Hemangini said, 'Then you must have sinned in some way.' I replied, 'That too, God only knows.' Hemangini tried to cite an example, 'Look at aunt. She is such a complicated woman that she cannot be impregnated.' I do not understand these theories of karma and sins; nor did I try to explain this to the girl. I just sighed and said to her in my mind: Perhaps, you are right. Hemangini hugged me right then and smiled, 'My goodness! You sigh at my words. At least someone takes me seriously.'

I noticed that my husband's medical practice had disrupted. He began to avoid calls from far-off places, even if he went nearby, he returned as soon as he could. Earlier, when he stayed at home during leisure, he came into the inner quarters only to take his lunch or a siesta. Now, the aunt

asked for him whenever she wanted to; he too would come to ask after her with or without reason. When the aunt used to shout, 'Himu, bring my case of betel leaves here,' I could feel that my husband was in her room. Initially, Hemangini used to deliver her case of betel leaves, a bowl of oil, her vermilion box, or whatever that was commanded. Soon enough, she did not move whenever she was called; instead, she would send over what the aunt wanted through the maid. The aunt kept calling, 'Hemangini, Himu! Himu...?' She would cling on to me in pity and passion; she was engulfed by fear and melancholy. She would never mention my husband, even mistakenly, in front of me.

One day, my elder brother came to visit us. I knew that my brother was a close observer. It would be difficult to conceal what was going on. My brother had fierce judgments. He did not have the slightest mercy for the unjust. What I feared the most was that my husband would appear as the biggest culprit in front of his eyes. I tried to cover things up with excessive glee. I tried to uphold a festive mood in the household by being garrulous and constantly on my feet. I knew I overdid things and that, probably, aroused his suspicion. But my brother could not stay here for long. My husband showed his displeasure to an extent that it often translated into rudeness. He left. Before leaving, he placed his quivering hand on my head to offer his blessings. I could feel what he blessed. His tears would land on my tear-drenched cheeks.

I remember, on a late spring evening, people were returning home after a day in the village market. Storm and rain were imminent; one could sense the petrichor and humidity all over the air. Detached from their group, the people called out to each other in the dark field. As long as I stayed alone in my bedroom, I did not light the lamp. I feared if my drape would catch fire and cause some accident. In that dark, desolate chamber, I sat on the ground, joined my hands, and prayed to my god, 'My Lord, when I do not feel your mercy, when I do not understand your means, I try to clasp on to the reigns of this orphaned heart; blood often comes out of my mouth; I cannot hold on; how long would you keep testing me? How strong am I?' Tears came to my eyes. I put my face on the pillow and cried. I have to do all kinds of household work throughout the day. Hemangini clings on to me like a shadow. I do not get the leisure to shed the tears even if I need to. I got a chance to purge after a long time today. After a while, the bed moved; I could hear the sound of human presence in the room. Hemangini came to me, hugged me, and wiped my tears

with her drape. I don't know when she came to the room and lay down. She did not ask anything, nor did I tell her what happened. Softly, she caressed my forehead with her delicate hands. Meanwhile, a storm raged outside with the roar of clouds and tumultuous rain. After a long time, a breath of cool air calmed my otherwise parched heart.

On the following day, Hemangini said, 'Aunty, if you do not leave, I will ask for my Kaibarta brother to take me home.' The aunt replied, 'Don't bother. I would be departing tomorrow; we can go together. Look at this, Himu. Our Abinash bought a pearl ring for you.' The aunt handed over the ring to her with pride. Hemangini said, 'Look at this aunt, how amazing my aim is, and tossed the ring through the window into the pond. The aunt was infuriated with grief and anger. She held my hand and requested repeatedly, 'Daughter-in-law, do not tell your husband of this frivolous act. Our Abinash would be disheartened to hear this. Promise?' I replied, 'I give you my word, dear aunt. I will not tell him anything.'

The next day before they left, Hemangini hugged me and said, 'Do remember me, sister.' I ran my fingers across her face and said, 'A blind woman never forgets, dear sister. I do not have sight; all I have is this mind.' I pulled her closer and kissed her forehead. My tears drenched her hair.

My world dried up after Hemangini's departure. All the light, laughter, scent and music that she brought along disappeared; I searched fanatically to find anything worthwhile around me. My husband was particularly delighted. He said, 'Now that they have gone, I can concentrate more on my work.' Curse me. What was the need of deceit? Do I fear the truth? Did I ever fear getting hurt? Does my husband not know that when I gave up my eyes, I embraced a fate of darkness?

Hitherto, there was a veil of darkness between husband and me. Now another obstacle was added to it. My husband never mentioned Hemangini's name in front of me, as if she had completely disappeared from his world of relations, as if she never existed in the first place. But I could totally realize that he wrote letters to ask after her. Just as the stalk of lotus feels a push whenever the flood water enters the pond, I could sense something had happened whenever he appeared more gleeful than usual. I was not aware of the days when he heard back about her or not, but I could not ask him anything. I was eager to know and talk about the bright, young and shimmering star that appeared in the darkness of my

heart for a while. But I did not have the right to ask my husband about her. A wall of silence defined by speech and sadness emerged between us and stood strong.

On a mid-summer afternoon, the maid came to me and asked, 'Mother, I saw a lot of boats being arranged at the ghat today. Is the master going somewhere?' I could sense that some initiative was being taken. In the sky of my fate, there has long been the lull before the storm. Now the clouds of doom have appeared. The Destroyer Lord had orchestrated all his power at the wave of his finger right on me. I could feel that. I told the maid, 'Really? I have not been told anything.' The maid did not dare to ask me any more questions, sighed and left.

Long into that night, my husband came to me and said, 'I have been summoned from a far-off place. I have to leave tomorrow right at dawn. It might take me two or three days more than usual.'

I got up from my bed and said, 'Why are you telling me lies?'

My husband's voice quivered as he managed to say, 'Why would I lie?'

I told him, 'You're going to marry her.'

He remained silent. I stood motionless as well. There was not even a whisper in the room. At last, I said, 'I demand an answer. Admit that you're going to get married.'

His reply was almost an echo, 'Yes, I am going to get married.'

I said, 'No, you cannot do that. I must save you from this grave sin. If I fail then what kind of a wife am I? Why did I worship Lord Shiva for so long?'

There was again a bout of silence in the room. I fell on his feet and said, 'How have I harmed you? Where did I go wrong? Why do you need another wife? Swear on me. Tell me the truth.'

Then my husband replied slowly, 'Truth be told, I am intimidated by you. Your blindness has cloaked you from this reality. It is a world that I cannot enter. You are my goddess; you are my nemesis. I cannot run this household with you. I need a simple girl whom I can scold, fight with, buy her jewelry and make love to.'

'Look within me. I am a simple girl. My mind is nothing else but that of the young girl you once married. I want to learn how to trust, depend and worship you. Do not humiliate yourself by making me larger than what I am with your guilt. Keep me under your feet in all circumstances.'

I don't remember exactly what I said that night. Can the enraged ocean hear its own roar? Although I remember saying, 'If my devotion is true

then let God be witness. You cannot break your vow. Before you commit that grave sin, may I be widowed or may Hemangini die.' I fainted soon after that.

When I came back to my senses, my husband had already left and the morning birds were yet to chirp.

I shut myself up in the prayer room and began my penance. I did not leave the room throughout the day. In the evening, a dreadful storm rocked the house. I did not pray, 'God! My husband is on the water, save his life' but asked, 'God. May whatever that is in my fate happen. But save my husband from committing that grave sin.' The entire night passed. I did not leave that room the next day as well. I do not know who provided me strength in spite of fasting and staying awake. I sat in front of the stone idol like a stone idol myself.

In the evening, people started knocking on the door. When they broke in, they found that I had fainted.

When I got back to my senses, I heard, 'Sister!.' I found myself lying on Hemangini's lap. As she moved her lips, her new bridal dress rustled. God, you did not listen to my prayers. My husband has therefore sinned!

Hemangini bowed her head and said slowly, 'Sister, I have come to seek your blessings.'

I remained stiff like a log for a while before gathering myself, 'Why would I not bless dear sister? It is not your fault.'

Hemangini broke into laughter with her sweet voice. 'Fault? If you getting married is not a fault, then why would my marriage be?'

I hugged Hemangini and tried to smile. I wondered if my prayers were ultimate in this world. Ultimately, His wishes would reign supreme. Whatever blows I must take I will; but I shall not let them destroy the faith in religion that still persists within the depths of my heart. I shall remain as I was.

Hemangini fell on my feet and bowed. I said, 'May you be forever happy; may fate be with you.'

Hemangini said, 'Not simply should your blessings work. You must embrace me and your brother-in-law with your pure, chaste hands. You must not be embarrassed. Now, if you allow, let me bring him inside.'

'Go on,' I permitted.

After a while I heard new footsteps in the room. I heard an affectionate question, 'Are you feeling better now, Kumu?'

I got up from my bed with haste and bowed down, 'Brother!

Hemangini said, 'What brother! He is your brother-in-law now!'

I could understand the entire narrative now. I knew my brother had decided never to marry. My mother tried her best but could not succeed. Now I seem to be the reason behind his marriage. Tears overflowed through my eyes. I could not hold them back. My brother ran his fingers through my hair. Hemangini kept smiling as she hugged me tightly.

I could not sleep that night. I was waiting eagerly for my husband to return. I was not sure of how he would deal with his shame and disappointment.

The door to my bedroom opened late at night. I sat up with alacrity. It was my husband's footsteps. I could hear my heart pounding.

He came to my bed, held my hand, and said, 'Your brother saved me from sinning. I was momentarily dazzled by lust. God alone knows the burden I carried inside me when I got on that boat. When the storm rocked our boat. I feared for my life. I also thought that I would be saved if I drowned. After reaching Mathurgunj, I learnt that your brother married Hemangini the day before. I cannot put in words with what delight and embarrassment I returned home. Over the past few days, I have realized that there is no happiness without you. You are my goddess.'

I smiled and said, 'No, I don't wish to be your goddess. I am your wife. I am a simple woman.'

My husband said, 'You must also keep my request. Do not unsettle me by gracing me as your god.'

On the following day, the neighbourhood came alive with the sounds of celebration. Hemangini pulled my husband's leg incessantly during dinner and repose, day or night. There was no end to her torture! But nobody breathed a word where he had gone off to or what had truly transpired.

Translated from Bengali by Debayudh Chatterjee

Notes on the Translators

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