Punishment

by Rabindranath Tagore

Translated by Shawkat Hussain
When the two brothers, Dukhiram Rui and Chidam Rui set out in the morning with axes in their hands to work as day labourers, their two wives were hurling insults and abuses at each other. But like other natural noises, the neighbours had become used to this shouting. As soon as they heard them, they would say to one another, “There they go again”. There was nothing unexpected about their quarrelling every day; this was just their normal, undeviating behaviour. Just as nobody questions the rising of the sun in the east, nobody in the neighbourhood was curious about why the two sisters-in-law started quarrelling in the morning each day.

There is no doubt that the discord between the two wives affected the two husbands much more than it did their neighbours, but even the two brothers did not consider it to be a serious problem. The two brothers considered domestic life as a long journey on a bullock cart, and the ceaseless creaking noises and jerking movements of springless wheels, only a natural, necessary part of this journey.

In fact, on days when their home was quiet and a heavy silence hung over it, they were afraid that some unnatural, unforeseen danger was about to happen – they did not know what to expect.

On the day when our story begins, the two brothers returned home just before evening, tired from their labours. The house was utterly still. The heat outside was stifling. In the evening there was a slight shower and heavy clouds still hung overhead; there was not a breath of wind in the air. The jungle around the house and the weeds had grown luxuriantly during the monsoon, and the thick, heavy smell of rotting vegetation from the water-logged jute fields stood like motionless walls around the house. A frog was croaking from the swamp behind the cowshed and the still evening sky was full with the sounds of crickets.

In the distance, the Padma, swollen with monsoon rains and overhung with new clouds, looked ominous. Nearby, the paddy fields were already flooded and the water lapped close to human habitations. The force of the sweeping waters had uprooted a few mango and jackfruit trees whose roots clawed the empty air like fingers desperately outspread to clutch something firm.

On that day, Dukhiram and Chidam had gone to work on a landlord’s main building. The paddy on the sandbank on the other side had ripened. All the poor peasants were busy harvesting the rice from their own fields or were working in the rice-fields of other farmers before the monsoon rain completely inundated the sandbanks. Only the two brothers were forced by the landlord’s thugs to work on his house. All day they worked, trying to patch up the leaking roof of the drawing-room, and weaving thin shafts of bamboo to cover up the leaking areas. They could not come home for lunch.
but had a few mouthfuls of rice in the landlord’s house. Several times during the day, they got soaked in the rain; they were probably not paid for their labours and the abuses that were hurled at them throughout the day were more than what they deserved.

When the two brothers returned home in the evening, walking through mud and water, they saw Chandara, the wife of the younger brother, quietly lying down on the floor on the aanchal of her own sari. She had cried all afternoon, and towards evening had stopped and become still.

Radha, the wife of the older brother, was sitting on the threshold with a scowl on her face. Her one-and-a-half-year-old son was crying nearby. When the two entered, they saw a naked baby sleeping on its back in the courtyard.

Dukhiram was famished; as soon as he entered the courtyard he said, “Give me rice.”

The elder wife exploded like a keg of gunpowder lit by a flame. In a voice that reached the heavens, she shouted, “There is no rice! Where is the rice that I will cook for you? Did you bring any rice? Do I have to go out and earn money myself?”

Entering the dark, pleasureless room, with hunger gnawing inside his stomach, and after a day of hard labour and humiliation, the harsh words of his wife, particularly the ugly insinuation of her last remark, seemed unbearable to Dukhiram. Like an angry tiger, he roared, “What did you say?” And unthinkingly he picked up his axe and brought it down upon his wife’s head. Radha fell down near Chandara’s lap and died almost instantaneously.

Chandara, her sari spattered with blood, screamed, “My God, what have you done?” Chidam held his hand over her mouth. Dumbfounded, Dukhiram dropped the axe and sat down on the floor holding his face in his hands. The sleeping child woke up and began to cry hysterically.

Outside, it was very peaceful. The shepherds were returning home with their herds. The peasants who had gone to the sandbank on the other side to harvest the newly-ripened paddy, were returning home in groups of seven or eight, sitting in small boats with sheaves of paddy on their heads as payment for their labour.

Ramlochon from the Chatterjee household was calmly smoking a hookah after having mailed a letter at the village post office. He suddenly remembered that Dukhi, his tenant, owed him a lot of back rent. He had promised to pay a part of it today. Having decided that Dukhi must have returned home now, Ramlochon threw his shawl over his shoulder, picked up his umbrella, and walked outside.

As soon as he entered the house of the brothers, a shiver ran down his spine. The lamp had not been lit, and in the dark a few shadowy figures
could be seen sitting huddled on the threshold. A muffled cry could be heard, “Ma, Ma.” And the more the child cried, the harder Chidam pressed his hand over his mouth.

Ramlochon a little frightened by the scene, inquired, “Dukhi, are you there?”

Dukhi, who was sitting motionless like a statue, suddenly burst out crying like a child when he heard his name being called.

Chidam quickly stepped into the courtyard to meet Ramlochon, who asked, “I suppose the women are taking a break from their quarrelling. I heard them shouting all day today.”

Chidam had been completely stunned and unable to think anything; many improbable explanations had risen up in his mind. For the time being he had resolved to get rid of the body when the night deepened, but he was not prepared for Ramlochon’s sudden arrival. He had no ready answer and he blurted out, “Yes, they had a terrible fight today.”

Ramlochon started walking towards the door and asked, “But why is Dukhi crying?”

Chidam felt that there was no way out and suddenly said, “The younger one has hit the older one on the head with an axe.”

It is often easy to forget that future danger can be even greater than the one at present. Chidam’s immediate thought was to protect himself from the terrible truth of the moment; he was hardly conscious that lying about the truth could be even more dangerous. When he heard Ramlochon’s question, an immediate response came to his mind, and he blurted it out without thinking.

Ramlochon was taken aback: “What! What do you say? Not dead, is she?”

Chidam said, “She is dead,” and fell down at Ramlochon’s feet, his arms around the latter’s legs.

Ramlochon could not escape from this situation. He thought, “God, oh God, what a situation I have put myself in. I am finished if I have to be a witness in the court.” Chidam just would not let go of his legs, “Tell me, please, how can I save my wife now?”

When it came to giving advice on legal matters, Ramlochon was known to be “Prime Minister” of the village. He thought a little and said, “Listen there is a way out. Rush to the Police Station now and report to them that your brother Dukhi, on returning home from work, had asked for rice and when he found that rice was not ready, hit his wife on the head with his axe. I am positive that if you say this, your wife will be saved.”

Chidam’s throat became dry. He said, “If I lose my wife, I can always get another one, but if my brother hangs I cannot get another brother.” But he had not thought of this when he put the blame on his wife earlier. He
had said something in the confusion of the moment and now his mind was unconsciously marshalling arguments in its own defense.

Ramlochon found his words reasonable. He said, “Then just report what happened. It is impossible to defend all sides.”

Ramlochon left immediately afterwards and soon the rumour spread in the whole village that Chandara, in a fit of anger, had brought down an axe upon her elder sister-in-law’s head and killed her.

Like a gush of water from a burst dam, a contingent of policemen descended upon the village. Both the innocent as well as the guilty became terribly anxious.

Part Two

Chidam thought that he must proceed along the path he had already chosen for himself. He had himself given Ramlochon an account of what happened and the entire village now knew about it. He just did not know what would happen if he now broadcast a different story. He thought he might still be able to save his wife if he held on to his earlier version and garnished it with some additional information.

Chidam requested his wife Chandara to take the blame for sister-in-law’s death. Chandara was thunderstruck! Chidam reassured her by saying, “Do as I say – there is no fear. We will save you.” It is true that he reassured her, but his own throat became dry and his face pale.

Chandara was no more than seventeen or eighteen. Her face was soft and round, her stature not very tall. There was such a lilt in her petite, lithe limbs that every movement seemed fluid and rhythmic. Like a newly-built boat, small and graceful, she moved with unhampered ease and speed. She was curious about everything in the world and had a sense of humour. She loved visiting her neighbours for a chat; on her way to the bathing ghat, she took in all that was worth noticing with her restless, bright, black eyes by parting slightly the aanchal, end of her sari with two fingers.

Her elder sister-in-law was just her opposite: clumsy, lackadaisical and disorderly. She could hardly control the aanchal of her sari covering her head, or the baby in her lap, or finish her various household chores in time. She never seemed to find any leisure even when there was no work to be done. Her younger sister-in-law would not say much. She spoke in a mild voice but her words stung sharply, and the elder wife would erupt immediately in hysterical shouts and screams that would arouse the whole neighbourhood.
There was an astonishing similarity between the husbands and the wives in this household. Dukhiram was a large man with big bones and a thick nose. He looked at the world with eyes that did not seem to comprehend anything; yet he never questioned what he saw. Harmless yet terrifying, strong yet helpless, Dukhiram was indeed a rare specimen of humanity.

Chidam, on the other hand, seemed like a person lovingly carved out of a shining, black stone, free from the slightest excess and not a dimple anywhere. Every limb radiated strength and shone with a rare fullness. Whether he jumped from the high bank of a river, or punt ed a boat with his pole, or climbed a bamboo pole to cut a thin shoot, every action expressed an economy of movement and a natural grace. His long black hair, oiled and carefully combed, rippled onto his shoulders: it was obvious that he took good care of his looks and clothes.

Chidam did not cast indifferent glances at other pretty village belles. He wanted to look handsome in their eyes, yet there is no doubt that he had a special love for his young wife. They quarrelled and they made up, but they completely vanquished one another. But there was another reason why their bond was so strong. Chidam thought that a bright, restless woman like Chandara could never be fully trusted; and Chandara thought that her husband whose gaze fell everywhere must be tied down firmly or he would slip through her fingers.

For some time before the present tragedy occurred, there had been a trouble between the two. Chandara noticed that her husband would say that he was going away to work and would not come home for a few days; and then when he returned, he had no money with him. She became suspicious and began to behave a little irresponsibly herself. She frequented the ghat, toured the neighbouring houses and came back with elaborate stories of Kashi Majumder’s second son.

Chidam’s days and nights seemed to have become poisoned. There was no peace at work. One day, when his sister-in-law walked into his room, he rebuked her sharply, and she, gesticulating with her hands, addressed her dead and absent father: “This girl outstrips a storm. I must restrain her or she will do something disastrous.”

Chandara slipped in from her own hut and said quietly, “Sister, what are you so scared about?” That was it – and the two sisters-in-law immediately began to fight.

Chidam’s eyes blazed as he said, “I will break every bone in your body if I hear that you have been to the ghat again.”

Chandara said, “Oh, that would be great!” And she immediately got ready to go out again.
Chidam jumped at her, grabbed her hair and pulled her into the room. Then he shut the door from the outside.

When he returned from work in the evening, he found the door ajar and nobody in. Chandara had walked across five villages and appeared at her uncle’s house.

Chidam brought her back from her uncle’s house after much persuasion, but he finally accepted defeat. He realised that it was impossible to fully possess this small wife of his, just as it was impossible to hold a drop of mercury within his fist. She slipped through all his ten fingers.

He did not try to use force again, but passed his days in great misery. His ever-anxious love for his restless young wife gradually turned into an ache. Sometimes he even thought that he could only regain peace of mind if she was dead. Men’s envy of other men is greater than their fear of death. And then the tragedy struck the family.

When her husband asked her to accept the responsibility for the murder, Chandara stared at him in dumbfounded shock; her two black eyes burned through her husband like black fire. Her entire body and soul began to shrink as she sought to escape from the clutches of her monster-husband. Every fibre of her being rose in rebellion against him.

Chidam reassured her. “You have nothing to fear,” he said. He started to coach her, repeatedly telling her what to tell the police and the magistrate. Like a wooden statue, Chandara sat still, not listening to his long-winded words.

Dukhi depended on Chidam for almost everything. When Chidam told him to place the blame on Chandara, Dukhi said, “But what will happen to her?”

Chidam replied, “I will save her.” Dukhiram was reassured.

**Part Three**

Chidam had taught his wife to say that her sister-in-law was trying to kill her with a kitchen-knife, and she was trying to protect herself with an axe when it accidentally struck her sister-in-law in the head. The original idea was Ramlochon’s. He had taught Chidam to garnish his story and be ready to produce necessary evidence.

Soon the police began its investigation. All the villagers had become convinced that it was Chandara who murdered her sister-in-law. The witnesses also provided testimony to prove this. When the police interrogated her, Chandara said, “Yes, I have committed the murder.”
“Why did you kill her?”
“I couldn’t stand her.”
“Was there a quarrel?”
“No.”
“Did she try to kill you first?”
“No.”
“Did she treat you badly?”
“No.”

Everybody was surprised at these answers. Chidam became extremely anxious. He cried out, “She is not telling the truth. Her elder sister-in-law first …” The police inspector stopped him from speaking further. Repeated interrogation yielded the same answer from Chandara. Nothing could force Chandara to admit that her sister-in-law had attacked her first.

Her stubbornness was remarkable; she seemed determined to get herself hanged. Nobody could save her from that. What an immense sulk was this! In her own mind she was telling her husband: “I am leaving you and embracing the scaffold with all my youthful ardour. My final bond in this world is with the gallows.”

Chandara, an innocent, ordinary, lively, curious village wife, now bound up as a prisoner, took permanent leave of her own home as she walked along the eternally familiar village path, through the village market, along the ghat, in front of the house of the Majumdares, beside the post office and the school building and in front of the gaze of so many familiar people. A group of small boys trailed her and women from the village – some of whom were her childhood companions – looked at her through their parted veils, from behind doors, and the cover of trees. As Chandara walked away, escorted by the police, they looked upon her with hatred and shame; they stared at her with something akin to fear.

Chandara admitted guilt before the Deputy Magistrate as well. And it also not stated that her sister-in-law had attacked her at the time of murder.

But when Chidam took the witness stand that day, he broke into tears and with his hands joined together in a gesture of pleading, he cried, “My wife has done nothing wrong.” The lawyer admonished him, told him to control himself, and began to question him. Gradually, the truth began to emerge.

But the lawyer did not believe him because the principal witness, Ramlochon said: “I arrived at the place of occurrence soon after the incident. Witness Chidam admitted everything to me. He held on to my legs and begged me, ‘Please tell me, how can I save my wife?’ I gave him no advice, good or bad. Then the witness asked me, ‘If I say that my brother hit his wife in a fit of anger when he found that the rice was not ready, will that
save my wife?’ I said, “Be careful, you scoundrel. You cannot utter a single lie before the Court – there is no crime greater than that!” And he went on.

At first, Ramlochon had made up a number of stories in defense of Chandara, but when he realized that Chandara herself had become quite adamant, he thought, “Oh my God, I don’t want to be held guilty for giving false witness. I might as well reveal all that I know.” And he narrated all that he thought he knew; in fact, he added in a few decorative touches of his own.

The Deputy Magistrate issued his summons. In the meantime the various activities of the world went on as usual: people laughed and cried, cultivated their crops and went to the market. And as in previous years, the incessant Sraban rain poured down on new shoots of rice.

The police appeared in the Court with the accused and other witnesses. In front of the Munsif Court, groups of people hung around, waiting for their own cases to come up. A lawyer from Calcutta had come to argue a case involving the division of a piece of swamp land behind somebody’s kitchen, and thirty-nine witnesses for the plaintiff were present in the Court. Hundreds were awaiting the settlement of hair-splitting divisions of paternal property, and nothing seemed more important. Chidam looked at this busy, everyday Court scene in a daze – everything seemed to him to be happening in a dream. From the huge banyan tree in the compound, a cuckoo could be heard; there was no Court of Law for the birds.

When Chandara stood before the judge, she said, “Your Honour, how many times do I have to say the same thing again and again?”

The Judge explained to her, “Do you know what punishment you will receive if you admit to the charge of murder?”

Chandara said, “No.”

The judge said, “You will be hanged.”

Chandara said, “Your Honour, I beg you, please do that. Do anything you want. I can’t bear it anymore.”

When Chidam was brought in the courtroom, Chandara looked away. The judge said, “Look at the witness. Tell me, how are you related to him?”

Chandara hid her face in the palms of her hands and said, “He is my husband.”

Question: Does he love you?
Answer: Yes, very much.

Question: Do you love him?
Answer: I love him very much.

When Chidam was interrogated, he said, “I have committed the murder.”

Question: Why?
Chidam: I had asked for some rice and it wasn’t ready.
When Dukhiram was called into the witness stand, he fainted. When he recovered, he said, “Your Honour, I have committed the murder.”

“Why?”

“She didn’t give me rice when I asked for it.”

After lengthy interrogation and after listening to the depositions of several witnesses, it was clear to the judge that the confession of the two brothers was an attempt to protect the woman from the shame of hanging. But Chandara stuck to the same story from the beginning to the end. There was not the slightest deviation in what she said. Two lawyers, on their own initiative, tried very hard to save her from getting capital punishment, but in the end they had to admit defeat.

On her wedding night, when the small, dark girl with a round face left her dolls behind in her father’s house to go to the house of her new father-in-law, could anyone have imagined that a day like this would come to pass! When her father died, he at least had the comfort of knowing that his daughter was in good hands.

Just before the hanging, the kind-hearted Civil Surgeon asked Chandara, “Do you want to see anybody?”

Chandara said, “I want to see my mother once.”

The doctor said, “Your husband wants to see you. Shall I call him?”

“Ah Death!” she said, and said no more.
Shawkat Hussain

Shawkat Hussain is a former Professor and Chairman of the Department of English, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. After teaching at the University of Dhaka for forty years, he joined the University of Asia Pacific as the Head of English. After graduating from the University of Dhaka with a First Class both in his BA Honours and MA, Shawkat Hussain was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to study in Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. He earned a MA and PhD in English Literature in 1976 and 1980. He taught in USA (Montgomery College) and was a Senior Fulbright Fellow at Indiana University, Bloomington, and post-doctoral fellow at the University of Queensland, Australia. Shawkat Hussain frequently translates from Bengali to English (poetry and fiction) and is an occasional translator of Rabindranath Tagore. He is currently putting together a collection of Tagore short stories that he translated.