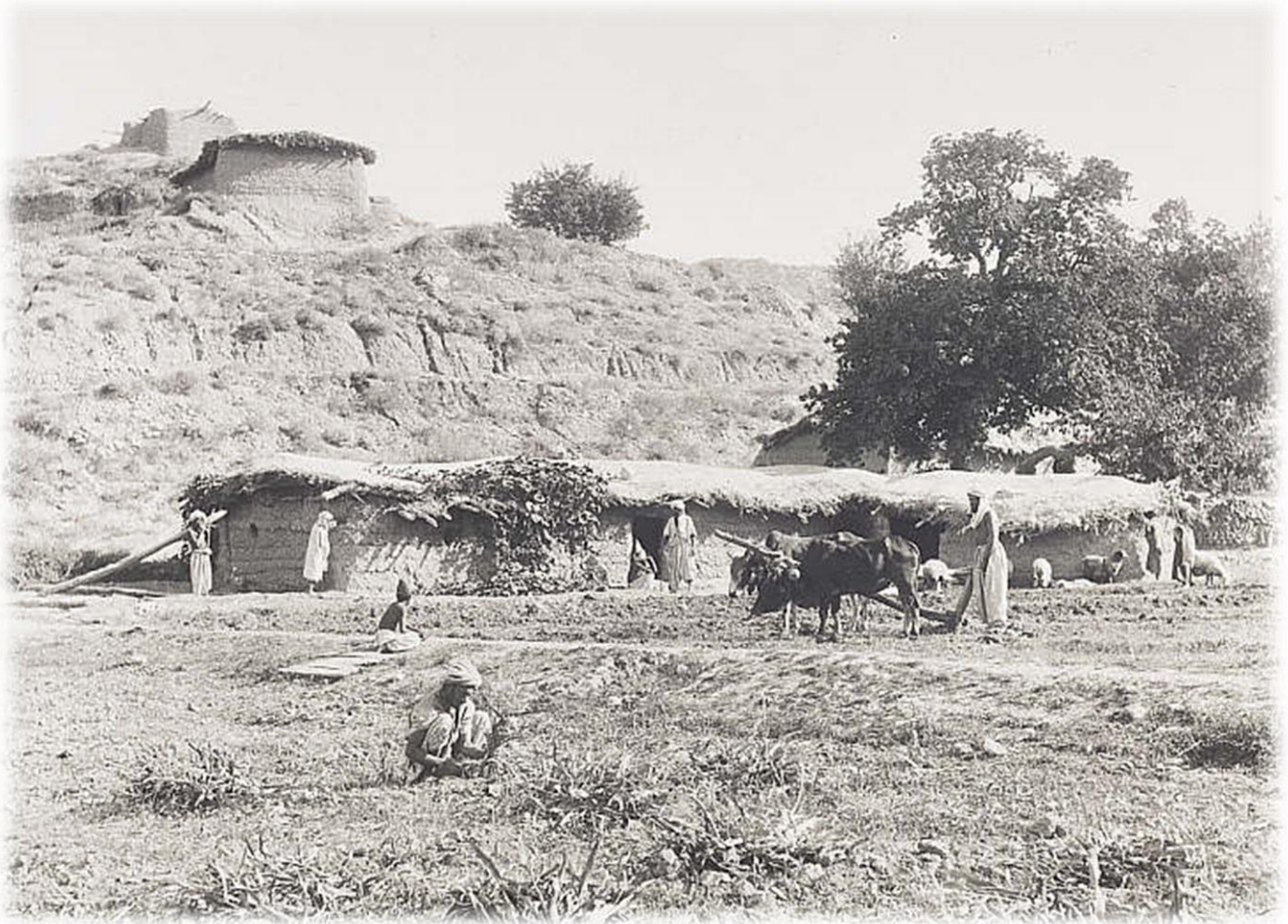


Punishment

Rabindranath Tagore (1893)

Translated by William Radice



I

When the brothers Dukhiram Rui and Chidam Rui went out in the morning with their heavy farm-knives, to work in the fields, their wives would quarrel and shout. But the people nearby were as used to the uproar as they were to other customary, natural sounds. When they heard the shrill screams of the women, they would say, — “They’re at it again” — that is, what was happening was only to be expected: it was not a violation of Nature’s rules. When the sun rises at dawn, no one asks why; and whenever the two wives in this *kuricaste*¹ household let fly at each other, no one was at all curious to investigate the cause.

Of course this wrangling and disturbance affected the husbands more than the neighbors, but they did not count it a major nuisance. It was as if they were riding together along life’s road in a cart whose rattling, clattering, unsprung wheels were inseparable from the journey. Indeed, days when there was no noise, when everything was uncannily silent, carried a greater threat of unpredictable doom. The day on which our story begins was like this. When the brothers returned home at dusk, exhausted by their work, they found the house eerily quiet. Outside, too, it was extremely sultry. There had been a sharp shower in the afternoon, and clouds were still massing. There was not a breath of wind. Weeds and scrub round the house had shot up after the rain: the heavy scent of damp vegetation, from these and from the water-logged jute-fields, formed a solid wall all around. Frogs croaked from the milkman’s pond behind the house, and the buzz of crickets filled the leaden sky.

Not far off the swollen Padma² looked flat and sinister under the mounting clouds. It had flooded most of the grain-fields, and had come close to the houses. Here and there, roots of mango and jackfruit trees on the slipping bank stuck up out of the water, like helpless hands clawing at the air a last fingerhold.

That day, Dukhiram and Chidam had been working near the zamindar’s³ office. On a sandbank opposite, paddy⁴ had ripened. The paddy needed to be cut before the sandbank was washed away, but the village people were busy either in their own fields or in cutting jute. So a messenger came from the office and forcibly engaged the two brothers. As the office roof was leaking in places, they also had to mend that and make some new wickerwork panels; it had taken them all day. They couldn’t come home for lunch; they just had a snack from the office. At times they were soaked by the rain; they were not paid normal laborers’ wages; indeed, they were paid mainly in insults and sneers.

When the two brothers returned at dusk, wading through mud and water, they found the younger wife, Chandara, stretched on the ground with her sari⁵ spread out. Like the sky, she had wept buckets in the afternoon, but had now given way to sultry exhaustion. The elder wife, Radha, sat on the verandah sullenly; her eighteen-month son had been crying, but when the brothers came in they saw him lying naked in a corner of the yard, asleep. Dukhiram, famished, said gruffly, “Give me my food.”

Like a spark on a sack of gunpowder, the elder wife exploded, shrieking out, “Where is there food? Did you give me anything to cook? Must I earn money myself to buy it?” After a whole day of toil and humiliation, to return — raging with hunger — to a dark, joyless, foodless house, to be met by Radha’s sarcasm, especially her final jibe, was suddenly unendurable. “What?” he roared, like a furious tiger, and then, without thinking, plunged his knife into her head. Radha collapsed into her sister-in-law’s lap, and in minutes she was dead.

¹ In Bengal, a low caste originally of bird catchers, but by the 19th century, general laborers.

² A major river in what is now Bangladesh

³ A landowner who leases his land to tenant farmers.

⁴ The rice crop.

⁵ A long strip of cloth draped around the body; Indian women’s traditional clothing.

“What have you done?” screamed Chandara, her clothes soaked with blood. Chidam pressed his hand over her mouth. Dukhiram, throwing aside the knife, fell to his knees with his head in his hands, stunned. The little boy woke up and started to wail in terror.

Outside there was complete quiet. The herd-boys were returning with the cattle. Those who had been cutting paddy on the far sandbanks were crossing back in groups in a small boat, with a couple of bundles of paddy on their heads as payment. Everyone was heading for home.

Ramlochan Chakravarti, pillar of the village, had been to the post office with a letter, and was now back in his house, placidly smoking. Suddenly he remembered that his subtenant Dukhiram was very behind with his rent; he had promised to pay some today. Deciding that the brothers must be home by now, he threw his chadar⁶ over his shoulders, took his umbrella, and stepped out.

As he entered the Ruis’ house, he felt uneasy. There was no lamp alight. On the dark verandah, the dim shapes of three or four people could be seen. In a corner of the verandah there were fitful, muffled sobs: the little boy was trying to cry for his mother, but was stopped each time by Chidam.

“Dukhi,” said Ramlochan nervously, “are you there?”

Dukhiram had been sitting like a statue for a long time; now, on hearing his name, he burst into tears like a helpless child.

Chidam quickly came down from the verandah into the yard, to meet Ramlochan. “Have the women been quarrelling again?” Ramlochan asked. “I heard them yelling all day.” Chidam, all this time, had been unable to think what to do. Various impossible stories occurred to him. All he had decided was that later that night he would move the body somewhere. He had never expected Ramlochan to come. He could think of no swift reply. “Yes,” he stumbled, “today they were quarrelling terribly.”

“But why is Dukhi crying so?” asked Ramlochan, stepping towards the verandah.

Seeing no way out now, Chidam blurted, “In their quarrel, *Chotobau* struck at *Barobau’s* head with a farm-knife.”

When immediate danger threatens, it is hard to think of other dangers. Chidam’s only thought was to escape from the terrible truth — he forgot that a lie can be even more terrible. A reply to Ramlochan’s question had come instantly to mind, and he had blurted it out.

“Good grief,” said Ramlochan in horror. “What are you saying? Is she dead?”

“She’s dead,” said Chidam, clasping Ramlochan’s feet.

Ramlochan was trapped. “*Rām, Rām,*”⁸ he thought, “what a mess I’ve got into this evening. What if I have to be a witness in court?” Chidam was still clinging to his feet, saying, “*Thākur,*”⁹ how can I save my wife?”

Ramlochan was the village’s chief source of advice on legal matters. Reflecting further he said, “I think I know a way. Run to the police station: say that your brother Dukhi returned in the evening wanting his food, and because it wasn’t ready he struck his wife on the head with his knife. I’m sure that if you say that, she’ll get off.”

Chidam felt a sickening dryness in his throat. He stood up and said, “*Thākur,* if I lose my wife I can get another, but if my brother is hanged, how can I replace him?” In laying the blame on his wife, he had not

⁶ In Bengal, a sheet of cloth draped around the shoulders, usually worn by men but sometimes by women.

⁷ “Elder Daughter-in-Law”; members of a family address each other by kinship terms. *Chotobau*: “Younger Daughter-in-Law.”

⁸ God’s name, repeated to express great emotion.

⁹ “Master” or “lord,” a term of address for gods and upper-class (Brahmin) men. *Tagore* is an anglicized form of *Thāku*.

seen it that way. He had spoken without thought; now, imperceptibly, logic and awareness were returning to his mind.

Ramlochan appreciated his logic. “Then say what actually happened,” he said. “You can’t protect yourself on all sides.” He had soon, after leaving, spread it round the village that Chandara Rui had, in a quarrel with her sister-in-law, split her head open with a farm-knife. Police charged into the village like a river in flood. Both the guilty and the innocent were equally afraid.

II

Chidam decided he would have to stick to the path he had chalked out for himself. The story he had given to Ramlochan Chakravarti had gone all round the village; who knew what would happen if another story was circulated? But he realized that if he kept to the story he would have to wrap it in even more stories if his wife was to be saved.

Chidam asked Chandara to take the blame on to herself. She was dumbfounded. He reassured her: “Don’t worry – if you do what I tell you, you’ll be quite safe.” But whatever his words, his throat was dry and his face was pale.

Chandara was not more than seventeen or eighteen. She was buxom, well-rounded, compact and sturdy—so trim in her movements that in walking, turning, bending or climbing there was no awkwardness at all. She was like a brand-new boat: neat and shapely, gliding with ease, not a loose joint anywhere. Everything amused and intrigued her; she loved to gossip; her bright, restless, deep black eyes missed nothing as she walked to the ghāt,¹⁰ pitcher on her hip, parting her veil slightly with her finger.

The elder wife had been her exact opposite; unkempt, sloppy and slovenly. She was utterly disorganized in her dress, housework, and the care of her child. She never had any proper work in hand, yet never seemed to have time for anything. The younger wife usually refrained from comment, for at the mildest barb Radha would rage and stamp and let fly at her, disturbing everyone around.

Each wife was matched by her husband to an extraordinary degree. Dukhiram was a huge man – his bones were immense, his nose was squat, in his eyes and expression he seemed not to understand the world very well, yet he never questioned it either. He was innocent yet fearsome, a rare combination of power and helplessness. Chidam, however, seemed to have been carefully carved from shiny black rock. There was not an inch of excess fat on him, not a wrinkle or dimple anywhere. Each limb was a perfect blend of strength and finesse. Whether jumping from a river-bank, or punting a boat, or climbing up bamboo-shoots for sticks, he showed complete dexterity, effortless grace. His long black hair was combed with oil back from his brow and down to his shoulders – he took great care over his dress and appearance. Although he was not unresponsive to the beauty of other women in the village, and was keen to make himself charming in their eyes, his real love was for his young wife. They quarreled sometimes, but there was mutual respect too; neither could defeat the other. There was a further reason why the bond between them was firm: Chidam felt that a wife as nimble and sharp as Chandara could not be wholly trusted, and Chandara felt that all eyes were on her husband – that if she didn’t bind him tightly to her she might one day lose him.

A little before the events in this story, however, they had a major row. Chandara had noticed that when her husband’s work took him away for two days or more, he brought no extra earnings home. Finding this

¹⁰ Steps leading down to a pond or river; a meeting place, especially for women, who go there to get water or to wash clothes.

ominous, she also began to overstep the mark. She would hang around by the ghāt, or wander about talking rather too much about Kashi Majumdar's middle son.

Something now seemed to poison Chidam's life. He could not settle his attention on his work. One day his sister-in-law rounded on him; she shook her finger and said in the name of her dead father, "That girl runs before the storm. How can I restrain her? Who knows what ruin she will bring?"

Chandara came out of the next room and said sweetly, "What's the matter, Didi?"¹¹ and a fierce quarrel broke out between them.

Chidam glared at his wife and said, "If I ever hear that you've been to the ghāt on your own, I'll break every bone in your body."

"The bones will mend again," said Chandara, starting to leave. Chidam sprang at her, grabbed her by the hair, dragged her back to the room and locked her in.

When he returned from work that evening he found that the room was empty. Chandara had fled three villages away, to her maternal uncle's house. With great difficulty Chidam persuaded her to return, but he had to surrender to her. It was as hard to restrain his wife as to hold a handful of mercury; she always slipped through his fingers. He did not have to use force any more, but there was no peace in the house. Ever-fearful love for his elusive young wife wracked him with intense pain. He even once or twice wondered if it would be better if she were dead; at least he would get some peace then. Human beings can hate each other more than death.

It was at this time that the crisis hit the house.

When her husband asked her to admit to the murder, Chandara stared at him, stunned; her black eyes burnt him like fire. Then she shrank back, as if to escape his devilish clutches. She turned her heart and soul away from him. "You've nothing to fear," said Chidam. He taught her repeatedly what she should say to the police and the magistrate. Chandara paid no attention – sat like a wooden statue whenever he spoke.

Dukhiram relied on Chidam for everything. When he told him to lay the blame on Chandara, Dukhiram said, "But what will happen to her?" "I'll save her," said Chidam. His burly brother was content with that.

III

This was what he instructed his wife to say: "The elder wife was about to attack me with the vegetable-slicer. I picked up a farm-knife to stop her, and it somehow cut into her." This was all Ramlochan's invention. He had generously supplied Chidam with the proofs and embroidery that the story would require.

The police came to investigate. The villagers were sure now that Chandara had murdered her sister-in-law, and all the witnesses confirmed this. When the police questioned Chandara, she said, "Yes, I killed her."

"Why did you kill her?"

"I couldn't stand her any more."

"Was there a brawl between you?"

"No."

"Did she attack you first?"

¹¹ "Elder Sister," respectful form of address for Bengali women.

“No.”

“Did she ill-treat you?”

“No.”

Everyone was amazed at these replies, and Chidam was completely thrown off balance. “She’s not telling the truth,” he said. “The elder wife first –“

The inspector silenced him sharply. He continued according to the rules of cross-examination and repeatedly received the same reply: Chandara would not accept that she had been attacked in any way by her sister-in-law. Such an obstinate girl was never seen! She seemed absolutely bent on going to the gallows; nothing would stop her. Such fierce, passionate pride! In her thoughts, Chandara was saying to her husband, “I shall give my youth to the gallows instead of to you. My final ties in this life will be with them.”

Chandara was arrested, and left her home forever, by the paths she knew so well, past the festival carriage, the marketplace, the ghāt, the Majumdars’ house, the post office, the school – an ordinary, harmless, flirtatious, fun-loving village wife; leaving a shameful impression on all the people she knew. A bevy of boys followed her, and the women of the village, her friends and companions—some of them peering through their veils, some from their doorsteps, some from behind trees—watched the police leading her away and shuddered with embarrassment, fear and contempt.

To the Deputy Magistrate, Chandara again confessed her guilt, claiming no ill-treatment from her sister-in-law at the time of the murder. But when Chidam was called to the witness-box he broke down completely, weeping, clasping his hands and saying, “I swear to you, sir, my wife is innocent.” The magistrate sternly told him to control himself, and began to question him. Bit by bit the true story came out.

The magistrate did not believe him, because the chief, most trustworthy, most educated witness – Ramlochan Chakravarti – said: “I appeared on the scene a little after the murder. Chidam confessed everything to me and clung to my feet saying, ‘Tell me how I can save my wife.’ I did not say anything one way or the other. Then Chidam said, ‘If I say that my elder brother killed his wife in a fit of fury because his food wasn’t ready, then she’ll get off.’ I said, ‘Be careful, you rogue; don’t say a single false word in court – there’s no worse offence than that.’” Ramlochan had previously prepared lots of stories that would save Chandara, but when he found that she herself was bending her neck to receive the noose, he decided, “Why take the risk of giving false evidence now? I’d better say what little I know.” So Ramlochan said what he knew – or rather said a little more than he knew.

The Deputy Magistrate committed the case to a sessions trial.¹² Meanwhile in fields, houses, markets and bazaars, the sad or happy affairs of the world carried on; and just as in previous years, torrential monsoon rains fell on to the new rice crop.

Police, defendant and witnesses were all in court. In the civil court opposite hordes of people were waiting for their cases. A Calcutta lawyer had come on a suit about the sharing of a pond behind a kitchen; the plaintiff had thirty-nine witnesses. Hundreds of people were anxiously waiting for hair-splitting judgments, certain that nothing, at present, was more important. Chidam stared out of the window at the constant throng, and it seemed like a dream. A koel-bird¹³ was hooting from a huge banyan tree in the compound; no courts or cases in his world!

Chandara said to the judge, “Sir, how many times must I go on saying the same thing?”

The judge explained, “Do you know the penalty for the crime you have confessed?”

¹² A trial that is settled through a special court session in one continuous sitting.

¹³ Common Indian songbird.

“No,” said Chandara.

“It is death by the hanging.”

“Then please give it to me, Sir,” said Chandara. “Do what you like – I can’t take any more.”

When her husband was called to the court, she turned away. “Look at the witness,” said the judge, “and say who he is.”

He is my husband,” said Chandara, covering her face with her hands.

“Does he not love you?”

“He loves me greatly.”

“Do you not love him?”

“I love him greatly.”

When Chidam was questioned, he said, “I killed her. – I wanted my food and my sister -in -law didn’t give it to me.” When Dukhiram came to give evidence, he fainted. When he had come round again, he answered, “Sir, I killed her.”

“Why?”

“I wanted a meal and she didn’t give it to me.”

After extensive cross-examination of various other witnesses, the judge concluded that the brothers had confessed to the crime in order to save the younger wife from the shame of the noose. But Chandara had, from the police investigation right through to the sessions trial, said the same thing repeatedly – she had not budged an inch from her story. Two barristers did their utmost to save her from the death-sentence, but in the end were defeated by her.

Who, on that auspicious night when, at a very young age, a dusky, diminutive, round -faced girl had left her childhood dolls in her father’s house and come to her in-laws’ house, could have imagined these events? Her father, on his deathbed, had happily reflected that at least he had made proper arrangements for his daughter’s future.

In jail, just before the hanging, a kindly Civil Surgeon asked Chandara, “Do you want to see anyone?”

“I’d like to see my mother,” she replied.

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

“To hell with him,”¹⁴ said Chandara.

¹⁴ A literal translation: “Death to him.” It’s an expression usually uttered in jest, but here is an expression of her anger.