

The Drought [Mahesh]

by

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The village was called Kashipur. It was a small village, but its *zemindar* smaller still. Yet his tenants dared not stand up to him. He was so ruthless.

It was the birthday of his youngest son. It was noon. Tarkaratna, the priest, was on his way home from the landlord's house, where he had been offering prayers. It was nearing the middle of May, but not a patch of cloud could be seen in the sky. The rainless firmament poured fire.

The field in front, stretching out to the horizon, had broken up into tens of thousands of fissures in the burning blaze, and it looked as though the life-blood of Mother Earth was unceasingly flowing out through them as smoke. If one gazed long at its rising, flame-like sinuous movement, it left him, as it were, dazed with drunkenness.

As the end of the field, beside the road, there stood the house of Gafur, the weaver. Now that the mud walls were in ruins, the courtyard touched the public highway, and the inner privacy was thrown on the mercy of the passers-by.

‘Hey! Gafur! Is anybody in?’ called out Tarkaratna, standing in the shade of a tree by the roadside.

‘What do you want? Father is down with fever,’ answered Gafur’s little daughter, aged ten, appearing at the door.

‘Fever! Call the scoundrel!’

The noise brought Gafur out, shivering with fever. A bull was tied to the old acacia that leaned against the broken wall.

‘What do I see there?’ demanded Tarkaratna, indicating the bull. ‘Do you realize that this is a Hindu village and the landlord himself a Brahmin?’ His face was crimson with indignation and the heat of the sun. It was to be expected that his words should be hot and harsh. But Gafur simply looked at him, unable to follow the import of his words.

‘Well,’ said Tarkaratna, ‘I saw it tied there in the morning and it’s still there. If the bull dies, your master will flay you alive! He is no ordinary Brahmin.’

‘What shall I do, Father? I’m helpless. I have had fever for the last few days. I can’t take him out to graze. I feel so ill.’

‘Can’t you let him graze by himself?’

‘Where shall I let him go, Father? People haven’t threshed all their paddy yet. It’s still lying in the fields. The straw hasn’t been gathered. Everything is burnt to cinders—there isn’t a blade of grass anywhere. How can I let him loose, Father? He might start poking his nose into somebody’s paddy or eating somebody’s straw.’

Tarkaratna softened a little. ‘But you can at least tie him in the shade somewhere and given him a bundle of straw or two to munch. Hasn’t your daughter cooked rice? Why not give him a tub of boiled rice water? Let him drink it.’

Gafur made no reply. He looked helplessly at Tarkaratna, and a deep sigh escaped him.

‘I see, you haven’t even got that much? What have you done with your share of straw? I suppose you have gone and sold it to satisfy your belly? Not saved even one bundle for the bull! How callous you are!’

As this cruel accusation Gafur seemed to lose the power of speech. ‘This year I was to have received my share of straw,’ said Gafur slowly after a moment’s hesitation, ‘but the master kept it all on account of my last year’s rent. “Sir, you are our lord and master,” I implored, falling at his feet. “Where am I to go if I leave your domain? Let me have at least a little straw. There’s no straw on my roof, and we have only one hut in which we two-father and daughter-live. We’ll patch the roof with palm leaves and manage this rainy weather, somehow, but what will happen to our Mahesh without food”.’

‘Indeed! So you’re fond enough of the bull to call him Mahesh!’* This is a joke.’

But his sarcasm did not reach Gafur. ‘But the master took no pity on me,’ he went on. ‘He gave me paddy to last only two months. My share of straw was added to his own stock-Mahesh didn’t have even a wisp of it.’

* Another name for the great God Siva himself.

‘Well, don’t you owe him money?’ said Tarkaratna, unmoved. ‘Why shouldn’t you have to pay? Do you expect the landlord to support you?’

‘But what am I to pay him with? We till four *bighas* of land for him, but the paddy has dried up in the fields during the droughts in the last two years. My daughter and I have not even enough to eat. Look at the hut! When it rains, I spend the night with my daughter huddled in one corner—we can’t even stretch our legs. Look at Mahesh! You can count his ribs. Do lend me a bit of hay for him so that he can have something to eat for a day or two.’ And Gafur sank down to the ground at the Brahmin’s feet.

‘No, no! Move aside! Let me go home, it’s getting late.’ Tarkaratna made a movement as though to depart, smiling. ‘Good God! He seems to brandish his horns at me! Will he hurt?’ he cried out with fright and anger, stepping hurriedly back from the bull.

Gafur staggered to his feet. ‘He wants to eat a handful,’ he said, indicating the wet bundle of rice and fruit in Tarkaratna’s hand.

‘Wants to eat? Indeed! Like master, like animal. Hasn’t even a bit of straw to eat and must have fruit and rice. Take him away and tie him somewhere else! What horns! He will gore somebody to death one of these days.’ Edging away, the priest made a quick exit.

Looking away from him, Gafur silently watch Mahesh, whose two deep, brown eyes were full of pain and hunger. ‘Didn’t even give a handful,’ he muttered, patting the bull’s neck and back. ‘You are my son, Mahesh,’ he whispered to him. ‘You have grown old and served us for eight years. I can’t even give you enough to eat—but you know how much I love you, don’t you?’

Mahesh only stretched out his neck and closed his eyes with pleasure.

‘Tell me,’ went on Gafur, ‘how can I keep you alive in this dreadful year? If I let you loose, you will start eating other people’s paddy or munching their banana leaves. What can I do with you? You have no strength left in your body-nobody wants you. They ask me to sell you at the cattle market....’ At the very idea his eyes filled with tears again. Wiping his tears on the back of his hand and looking this way and that, he fetched a tiny bunch of discolored old straw from behind the hut. ‘Eat it quickly, my child, otherwise . . . ,’ he said softly, placing it before Mahesh.

‘Father....’

‘What is it?’

‘Come and eat,’ answered Gafur’s daughter looking out of the door. ‘Why, have you again given Mahesh straw from the roof?’

He had feared as much. ‘It’s old straw-it was rotting away,’ he answered, ashamed.

‘I heard you pulling it, father.’

‘No, darling, it wasn’t exactly....’

‘But, you know, father, the wall will crumble....’

Gafur was silent. He had nothing left but this hut. Who knew better than he that unless he was careful it would not last another rainy season. And yet what good was it really?

‘Wash your hands and come and eat. I have served your food,’ said the little girl.

‘Give me the rice water’ let me feed him.’

‘There is none, father-it has dried up in the pot.’

Nearly a week had passed. Gafur was sitting in the yard, sick of body and anxious. Mahesh had not returned since the day before.

He himself was helpless. Amina had been looking for the bull everywhere from early morning. The evening shadows were already falling when she came home. ‘Have you heard, father? Manik Ghose has send Mahesh to the police pen,’ she said.

‘Nonsense!’

‘Yes, father, it’s true. His servant said to me, “tell your father to look for the bull at Dariapur....”’

‘What did he do?’

‘He entered their garden, father.’

Gafur made no answer.

‘At the end of three days, they say, the police will sell him at the cattle market.’

Amina did not know what the ‘cattle market’ meant. She had often noticed her father grow restless whenever it was mentioned in connection with Mahesh, but today he went out without saying another word.

Under the cover of night, Gafur secretly came round to Banshi’s shop.

‘Uncle, you’ll have to lend me a rupee,’ he said, putting down a brass plate under the seat. Banshi was well acquainted with this object. In the last two years he had lent a rupee at least five times on this security. He made no objection today either.

The next morning Mahesh was seen at his usual place again. An elderly Mohammedan was examining him with very sharp eyes. Not far away, on one side, Gafur sat on the ground, all hunched up. The examination over, the old man untied a ten-rupee note from a corner of his shawl, and, smoothing it again and again, said: ‘Here, take this. I shan’t take anything off. I’m paying the full price.’

Stretching his hand, Gafur took the money, but remained silent. As the two men who came with the old man were about to take the rope round the animal’s neck, he suddenly stood bolt upright. ‘Don’t touch that rope, I tell you. Be careful, I warn you! he cried out hoarsely.

They were taken aback. ‘Why?’ asked the old man in surprise.

‘There’s no why to it. He’s my property-I shall not sell him; it’s my pleasure,’ he answered in the same tone, and threw the note away.

‘But you accepted the deposit yesterday,’ all three said in a chorus.

‘Take this back,’ he answered, flinging the two rupees across to them.

Gafur begged for rice water from the neighbors and fed Mahesh. Patting him on the head and horns, he whispered vague sounds of endearment to him. It was about the middle of June. Nobody who has not looked at an Indian summer sky will realize how terrible, how unrelenting, the heat can be. Not a trace of mercy anywhere! Today even the thought that some day this aspect of the sky would change, that it would become overcast with soft, moisture-laden clouds was impossible. It seemed as though the whole blazing sky would go on burning day after day endlessly, to the end of time.

Gafur returned home at noon. He was not used to working as a hired laborer, and it was only four or five days since his temperature had gone down. His body was still weak and tired. He had gone out to seek work, but in vain. He had had no success. Hungry, thirsty, tired, everything was dark before his eyes. 'Is the food ready, Amina dear?' he called out from the courtyard.

Without answering, his daughter quietly came out and stood leaning against the wall.

'Is the food ready?' Gafur repeated without receiving an answer.

'What do you say! No? Why?'

'There's no rice, father.'

'No rice? Why didn't you tell me in the morning?'

'Why, I told you last night.'

'I told you last night,' mimicked Gafur. 'How am I to remember what you told me last night?' His anger grew more and more violent at the sound of his own voice. 'Of course, there's no rice!' he growled, with his face more distorted than

ever. 'What does it matter whether your father eats or not? But the young lady must have her three meals! In the future I shall lock up the rice when I go out. Give me some water to drink-I'm dying of thirst....So you haven't any water, either!'

Amina remained standing with bowed head as before. Realizing that there was not even a drop of water in the house, he lost all self-control. Rushing at her, he slapped her face noisily. 'Wretched girl! What do you do all day? So many people die-why don't you?'

The girl did not utter a word. She took the empty earthen pitcher and went out into the afternoon sun, quietly wiping her silent tears.

The moment she was out of sight, her father was over-whelmed with remorse. He alone knew how he had brought up that motherless girl. He knew that this affectionate, dutiful, quiet daughter of his was not to blame. They had never had enough to eat even while their little store of rice lasted. It was impossible to eat three times a day. Nor was he unaware of the reason for the absence of water. The two or three tanks in the village had all dried up. The little water that there was still in the private tank of Shibu Babu was not for the public. A few holes had been dug at the bottom of the other tanks, but there was such crowding and jostling for a little water that this chit of a girl could not even approach them. She stood for hours on end and, after much begging if somebody took pity on her, she returned home with a little water. He knew all this. Perhaps there was no water today or nobody had found time to take pity on her. Something of the sort must have happened, he thought, and his own eyes, too, filled with tears.

‘Gafur! Are you in?’ somebody cried out from the yard. The landlord’s messenger had arrived.

‘Yes, I’m in. Why?’ answered Gafur bitterly.

‘Master has sent for you. Come!’

‘I haven’t had any food yet. I will come later,’ said Gafur.

Such impudence seemed intolerable to the messenger. ‘It’s master’s order to drag you to him and give you a good thrashing,’ he roared, calling the man ugly names.

Gafur lost self-control for the second time. ‘We are nobody’s slave,’ he replied, returning similar compliments. ‘We pay rent to live here. I will not go.’

But in this world it is not only futile for the small to appeal to authority, it is dangerous as well. Fortunately, the tiny voice seldom reaches big ears or who knows what might happen? When Gafur returned home from the landlord’s and quietly lay down, his face and eyes were swollen. The chief cause of so much suffering was Mahesh. When Gafur left home that morning, Mahesh broke loose from his tether, and, entering the grounds of the landlord, had eaten up flowers and upset the corn drying in the sun. When finally they tried to catch him, he had hurt the landlord’s youngest daughter and had escaped. This was not the first time this had happened, but Gafur was forgiven because he was poor. If he had come round and as on other occasions, begged for the landlord’s forgiveness, he would probably have been forgiven, but instead he had claimed that he paid rent, and that he was nobody’s slave. This was too much for Shibu Babu, the *zemindar*, to swallow. Gafur had borne the beatings and torture without protest. At home, too,

he lay in a corner without a word. Hunger and thirst he had forgotten, but his heart was burning within him like the sun outside. He kept no count of how time passed.

He was suddenly shaken out of his listlessness by a shriek of a girl. She was prostrate on the ground. The pitcher which she had been carrying tumbled over, and Mahesh was sucking up the water as it flowed on the earth. Gafur was completely out of his mind. Without waiting another moment he seized his plough-head he had left yesterday for repair, and with both hands struck it violently on the bent head of Mahesh. Once only Mahesh attempted to raise his head, but immediately his starving, lean body staggered to the ground. A few drops of blood from his ears rolled down. His whole body shook once or twice and then, stretching the fore and hind legs as far as they would reach, Mahesh fell dead.

‘What have you done, father? Our Mahesh is dead.’ Amina burst out weeping.

Gafur did not move nor answer her. He remained staring without blinking at a pair of motionless, beady, black eyes.

Before two hours were out, the tanners living at the end of the village came crowding in and carried off Mahesh on a bamboo pole. Shuddering at the sight of the shining knives in their hands, Gafur closed his eyes but did not speak.

The neighbors informed him that the landlord had sent for Tarkaratna to ask for his advice. How would Gafur pay for the penance which the killing of a sacred animal demanded?

Gafur made no reply to these remarks, but remained squatting with his chin resting on his knees.

‘Amina, dear, come, let’s go,’ said Gafur, rousing his daughter at the dead of night.

She had fallen asleep in the yard. ‘Where, father?’ she asked, rubbing her eyes.

‘To work at the jute mill at Fulberé,’ said the father.

The girl looked at him incredulously. Through all his misery he had declined to go to Fulberé. ‘No religion, no respect, no privacy for womenfolk there,’ she had often heard him say.

‘Hurry up, my child; we have a long way to go,’ said Gafur.

Amina was going to collect the drinking bowl and her father’s brass plate. ‘Leave them alone, darling. They’ll pay for the penance for Mahesh,’ said Gafur.

In the dead of night Gafur set out, holding his daughter by the hand. He had nobody to call his own in the village. He had nothing to say to anybody. Crossing the yard, when he reached the acacia, he stopped stock-still and burst out crying loudly. ‘Allah’ he said, raising his face towards the black star-spangled sky, ‘punish me as much as you like-Mahesh died with thirst on his lips. Nobody left the tiniest bit of land for him to feed on. Pray never forgive those their guilt who never let him eat the grass nor drink the water you have given.’

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