

I

The village was named Kashipur. An insignificant village, with an even more insignificant zamindar, but such was his authority that you could not hear a peep out of his subjects.

It was the birthday of the zamindar's youngest son. Having performed the holy rituals, Tarkaratna the priest was on his way home in the afternoon. The month of Boishakh was drawing to a close, but there was not even a trace of clouds anywhere, the searing sky seemingly pouring fire on everything below. The field stretching to the horizon before him was parched and cracked, with the blood in the veins of the earth escaping constantly through the crevices in the form of vapour. Gazing at it coiling upwards like flames made the head reel with drunkenness.

Gafoor Jolha lived on the edge of this field. The earthen wall of his house had collapsed, merging his yard with the road. The privacy of the inner chambers had all but surrendered itself to the mercy of the passer-by.

Pausing in the shade of a white teak tree, Tarkaratna called out loudly, 'Are you home, Gafra?'

Gafoor's ten-year-old daughter came to the door to tell him, 'What do you need Baba for? He's got a fever.'

'Fever! Call the swine! Monster! Godless creature!'

The screaming and shouting brought Gafoor mian to the door, shivering with fever. An ancient acacia stood next to the broken wall, with a bull tethered to it. Pointing to it, Tarkaratna said, 'What's all this? Have you forgotten this is a Hindu village with a Brahmin zamindar?' Red with rage and the heat, he could only be fiery with his words, but Gafoor stared at him, unable to understand the reason for the outburst.

'When I passed this way in the morning it was tethered there,' said Tarkaratna, 'and now on my way back it's still tethered the same way. Karta will bury you alive if you kill a bull. He's a devout Brahmin.'

'What can I do, Baba thakur, I have no choice. I've had this fever for several days now. I collapse every time I try to take him to graze.'

'Then turn it loose, it'll find food on its own.'

‘Where can I turn him loose, Baba thakur? The winnowing isn’t done, the grain is still lying in the fields. The hay hasn’t been sorted, the earth is burning, there’s not a blade of grass anywhere. What if he eats someone’s grains or hay—how can I turn him loose Baba thakur?’

Softening, Tarkaratna said, ‘If you can’t let it loose at least give it some straw. Hasn’t your daughter made any rice? Give it a bowl of starch and water.’

Gafoor did not answer, only looked at Tarkaratna helplessly and sighed.

Tarkaratna said, ‘No rice either? What did you do with the hay? Did you sell your entire share without keeping anything for your beast? You butcher!’

Gafoor seemed to lose his power of speech at this cruel accusation. A little later he said haltingly, ‘I did get some hay this year, but Karta moshai took it away to pay for taxes left over from last year. I fell at his feet, I said, “Babu moshai, you’re the supreme authority, where will I go if I leave your kingdom, give me at least a little hay. There’s no straw for the roof, we have just the one room for father and daughter, we can still manage with palm leaves this monsoon, but my Mahesh will die of starvation.”’

With a mocking smile, Tarkaratna said, ‘Really! What a loving name, Mahesh. I’ll die laughing.’

Paying no attention to the taunt, Gafoor continued, ‘But the lord had no mercy on me. He allowed me some rice to feed us for two months, but all my hay was confiscated and the poor thing got nothing at all.’ His voice grew moist with tears. But this evoked no compassion in Tarkaratna, who said, ‘What a man you are. You’ve eaten up everything but don’t want to pay your dues. Do you expect the zamindar to feed you? You people live in the perfect kingdom, still you bad-mouth him, you’re such wretches.’

An embarrassed Gafoor said, ‘Why should we bad-mouth him Baba thakur, we don’t do that. But how do I pay my taxes? I sharecrop four bighas, but there’s been a famine two years in a row—the grains have all dried up. My daughter and I don’t even get two meals a day. Look at the house, when it rains we spend the night in a corner, there’s not even enough space to stretch our legs. Look at Mahesh, Thakur moshai, you can count his ribs. Lend me a little hay, Thakur moshai, let the creature feed to his heart’s content for a few days.’ Still speaking, he planted himself on the ground near the Brahmin’s feet. Leaping backward hastily, Tarkaratna exclaimed, ‘My god, are you going to touch me?’

‘No Baba thakur, I’m not going to touch you or anything. But give me some hay. I saw your four huge haystacks the other day, you won’t even know if a little of it is gone. I don’t care if we starve to death, but this poor creature cannot talk, he only stares and weeps.’

Tarkaratna said, ‘And how do you propose to return the loan?’

A hopeful Gafoor said, ‘I’ll find a way to return it somehow Baba thakur, I won’t cheat you.’

Snorting, Tarkaratna mimicked Gafoor, ‘I won’t cheat you! I’ll find a way to return it somehow! What a comedian! Get out of my way. I should be getting home, it’s late.’ Chuckling, he took a step forward only to retreat several steps back in fear. Angrily he said, ‘Oh god, it’s waving its horns, is it going to gore me now?’

Gafoor rose to his feet. Pointing to the bundle of fruit and moistened rice in the priest’s hand, he said, ‘He’s smelt food, he wants to eat....’

‘Wants to eat? Of course. Both master and bull are well-matched. Can’t get hay to eat, and now you want fruits. Get it out of my way. Those horns, someone will be killed on them.’ Tarkaratna hurried away.

Gafoor turned towards Mahesh, gazing at him in silence for a few moments. There was suffering and hunger in the bull’s deep black eyes. Gafoor said, ‘He wouldn’t give you any, would he. They have so much, but still they won’t. Never mind.’ He choked, and tears began to roll from his eyes. Going up to the animal, he stroked his back and neck, whispering, ‘You are my son, Mahesh, you’ve grown old looking after us for eight years, I can’t even give you enough to eat, but you know how I love you.’

Mahesh responded by stretching his neck and closing his eyes in pleasure. Wiping his tears off the bull’s back, Gafoor murmured, ‘The zamindar took away your food, leased out the grazing ground near the crematorium just for money. How will I save your life in this year of starvation? If I turn you loose you’ll eat other people’s hay, you’ll spoil their trees—what do I do with you! You have no strength left, people tell me to sell you off.’ No sooner had Gafoor said this in his head than his tears began to roll again. Wiping them with his hand, he looked around surreptitiously before fetching some discoloured straw from behind his dilapidated house and placing them near Mahesh’s mouth, saying, ‘Eat up quickly, if not there’ll be....’

‘Baba?’

‘Yes, Ma?’

‘Come and eat,’ said Amina, appearing at the door. After a glance she said, ‘You’re giving Mahesh straw from the roof again, Baba?’

This was just what he was afraid of. Reddening, he said, ‘Old rotten straw Ma, it was falling off anyway...’

‘I heard you pulling it out, Baba.’

‘No Ma, not exactly pulling it out...’

‘But the wall will collapse Baba...’

Gafoor was silent. The house was all they had left, and no one knew better than him that if he continued this way it wouldn’t survive the next monsoon. But how long could they go on?

His daughter said, ‘Wash your hands and come, Baba, I’ve served the food.’

Gafoor said, ‘Bring the starch out Ma, let me feed Mahesh first.’

‘No starch left today Baba, it dried in the pot.’

No starch? Gafoor stood in silence. His ten-year-old daughter knew that when the times were bad even this could not be wasted. He washed his hands and went in. His daughter served him rice and vegetables on a brass plate, taking some for herself on an earthen plate. Gafoor said softly, ‘I’m feeling cold again Amina, is it safe to eat with a fever?’

Amina asked anxiously, ‘But didn’t you say you were hungry?’

‘Maybe I didn’t have a fever then, Ma.’

‘Then let me put it away, you can have it in the evening.’

Shaking his head, Gafoor said, ‘Eating cold food will make things worse.’

‘What should I do then,’ asked Amina.

Gafoor pretended to think before solving the problem. He said, 'Why don't you give it to Mahesh, Ma? You can make me some fresh rice at night, can't you?' Amina looked at him in silence for a few moments before lowering her eyes, nodding, and saying, 'Yes, Baba I can.'

Gafoor reddened. Besides the two actors, only someone up there observed this little charade between father and daughter.

II

Five or six days later, Gafoor was seated outside his front door with an anxious expression on his face. Mahesh had not been home since yesterday morning. He himself was too weak to move, so his daughter Amina had searched high and low for the bull. Returning home in the late afternoon, she said, 'Have you heard, Baba, Manik Ghosh's family has taken our Mahesh to the police station.'

'What nonsense,' said Gafoor.

'It's true, Baba. Their servant said, "Tell your father to look for him in the Dariapur pen".'

'What did he do?'

'He got into their garden and destroyed their trees, Baba.'

Gafoor sat in silence. He had imagined all manner of mishaps that might have befallen Mahesh, but had not anticipated this. He was as harmless as he was poor, which was why he had no apprehensions of being punished so severely by any of his neighbours—Manik Ghosh in particular, for his respect for cows was legendary.

His daughter said, 'It's getting late, Baba, aren't you going to bring Mahesh home?'

'No,' answered Gafoor.

'But they said the police will sell him in the cattle market after three days.'

'Let them sell him,' said Gafoor.

Amina did not know what exactly a cattle market was, but she had repeatedly noticed her father becoming agitated whenever it was mentioned with reference to Mahesh. But today she left without another word.

Under cover of the night Gafoor went to Bansi's shop, saying, 'Khuro, I need a rupee, and deposited his brass plate beneath the raised platform on which Bansi sat. Bansi was familiar with the exact weight and other details of this object. He had been pawned it some five times in the past two years, for a rupee each time. So, he did not object this time either.

Mahesh was seen in his usual place the next day. Beneath the same tree, tethered to the same stake with the same rope, the same empty bowl with no food in front of him, the same questioning look in the moist, hungry, black eyes. An elderly Muslim man was examining him closely. Gafoor mian sat nearby, his knees drawn up to his chin. When the examination was over, the man extracted a ten-rupee note from the knot in his dhoti and, smoothening it repeatedly, went up to Gafoor, saying, 'I don't need change, take the whole thing—here.'

Holding his hand out for the money, Gafoor remained sitting in silence. But just as the old Muslim's companions were about to untie the bull, he suddenly jumped to his feet, saying belligerently, 'Don't you dare touch that rope, I'm warning you.'

They were startled. The old man said in surprise, 'Why not?'

Still furious, Gafoor said, 'What do you mean why not? It's mine to sell or not. And I'm not selling.' He threw the ten-rupee note on the ground.

They said, 'But you took an advance yesterday.'

'Here's your advance.' Retrieving two rupees from the knot in his dhoti, he flung the coins at them, and they fell with a clatter. Realizing that a quarrel was imminent, the old man said gently with a smile, 'You're putting pressure on us for two rupees more, aren't you? Go on, give his daughter two rupees more. That's what you wanted, isn't it?'

'No.'

'Are you aware that no one will give you a better price?'

'No,' said Gafoor, shaking his head vehemently.

The old man said in annoyance, 'What do you think? Only the skin is worth selling. There's nothing else in there.'

'Tauba! Tauba!' A terrible expletive suddenly escaped Gafoor's lips, and the very next moment he ran into his house threatening to have them thrashed within an inch of their lives by the zamindar's guards unless they left the village at once.

The possibility of trouble made them leave, but soon Gafoor received a summons from the zamindar's court. He realized that word had reached the landowner.

There were people both refined and unrefined in court. Glaring at Gafoor, Shibu babu said, 'I don't know how to punish you, Gafoor. Do you know where you live?'

Bowing, Gafoor said, 'I do. We're starving, or else I would have paid whatever fine you think fit.'

Everyone present was astonished. They had always considered him an obstinate and bad-tempered man. And here he was on the verge of tears, saying, 'I'll never do it again, karta.' He proceeded to box his own ears, rubbed his nose into the ground from one end of the court to the other, and then stood up.

Shibu babu said indulgently, 'All right, enough. Don't do all this again.'

Everyone was shocked when they heard the details. They were certain that only the grace of the zamindar and the fear of punishment had prevented the abject sinner from committing worse transgressions. Tarkaratna was present, and provided the scriptural analysis of the word 'go' for cow, enlightening everyone as to why it was forbidden to allow this godless race of heathens to live within village limits.

Gafoor did not respond to any of this, humbly accepting all the humiliation and vilification and returning home cheerfully. Borrowing the starch from the rice pots of neighbours, he gave it to Mahesh to eat, murmuring many endearments as he stroked the bull's back and horns.

III

The month of Joishtho was drawing to a close. The sun was still harsh and severe in the sky. There was no trace of mercy anywhere. People were afraid to even hope for change, that the skies could again be moist and pleasurable with the weight of rain-bearing clouds. It seemed that

there would be no cessation to the flames burning constantly across the entire, fiery earth—that they would not die down till they had consumed everything.

Gafoor returned home on such an afternoon. He was not used to working as a labourer on someone else's fields, and it had been only four or five days since the fever had subsided. He was as weak as he was exhausted. Still he had gone out in search of work, but all he had got was the unforgiving heat and sun overhead. He could barely see for hunger and thirst. Standing at the door, he called out, 'Amina, is the food ready?'

His daughter emerged slowly and stood grasping the post without an answer.

Gafoor shouted, 'Not ready? Why not?'

'No rice at home, Baba.'

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

'But I told you last night.'

Contorting his face and mocking her, Gafoor said, 'Told you last night! How can anyone remember if you tell them at night?' His harsh tone doubled his anger. Contorting his face even further, he said, 'How will there be any rice? Whether the sick father gets any or not, the grown-up daughter will eat five times a day. I'm going to lock the rice up from now on. Give me some water, I'm dying of thirst. Now tell me we have no water either.'

Amina remained standing with her eyes downcast. When Gafoor realized after waiting a few moments that there was not even any water to drink at home, he could control himself no longer. Striding up to his daughter, he slapped her resoundingly, saying, 'Haramjaadi, what do you do all day? Why can't you die?'

Without a word his daughter picked up the empty pitcher and went out in the heat, wiping her eyes. But Gafoor felt heartbroken as soon as she went out of his sight. He alone knew how he had brought up his daughter after her mother's death. He remembered that it was not the dutiful and affectionate girl's fault. Ever since they had run out of the paltry amount of rice from the fields that he had received, they had not had two meals a day. On some days, just one—or not even that. That Amina could eat five times a day was as impossible as it was untrue. Nor was he unaware of the reasons for the lack of water to drink. The two or three tanks in the village were all dry. The little water there was in the pond behind Shibcharan babu's house was not available

to ordinary people. The water that could be collected by digging a hole or two in the middle of the tanks was fought over by a crowd of people.

Being a Muslim, the young girl was not even allowed near that water. She had to wait for hours, requesting for some water, and only if someone took pity on her and poured her a little could she bring it home. He knew all this. Perhaps there had been no water that day, or no one had had the time to take pity on his daughter during the battle. Realizing that something like this must have taken place, Gafoor found his own eyes filling with tears. At that moment the zamindar's footman appeared like a messenger of death, screaming, 'Gafra, are you home?'

Gafoor answered bitterly, 'I am. Why?'

'Babu moshai has sent for you. Come along.'

Gafoor said, 'I haven't eaten yet. I'll go later.'

Unable to tolerate such audacity, the footman uttered an expletive and said, 'The Babu has ordered me to flog you and force you to come.'

Gafoor forgot himself a second time, uttering an unprintable word in retaliation and saying, 'No one is a slave in the kingdom of the empress. I pay my taxes, I shan't go.'

But for such a small man to give such a big reason was not just futile but also dangerous. Fortunately, such an insignificant voice would not reach the ears of the important man it was meant for—or else he would have lost both his home and his livelihood. There is no need for an elaborate account of what ensued, but when he returned from the zamindar's court an hour later and lay down in silence, his face and eyes were swollen. The primary cause of such severe punishment was Mahesh. After Gafoor had gone out, Mahesh had broken free from the post, entered the zamindar's yard, eaten his flowers, spoilt the paddy put out in the sun, and, when about to be caught, had made his escape after knocking the zamindar's youngest daughter to the ground. This was not the first time it had happened, but Gafoor had been pardoned earlier on grounds of being poor. He might have been pardoned this time too had he begged and pleaded as in the past, but what he had said—that he paid his taxes and was no one's servant—was the kind of arrogance from a subject that Shibcharan babu, being a zamindar, could never tolerate. He had not protested in the slightest against the thrashing and the humiliation, bearing it all in silence. Back home, too, he sat coiled up in silence. He had no awareness of hunger or thirst, but his heart was burning just like the noonday sky outside. However, when he heard his daughter's stricken cry from the yard, he leapt to his feet and ran outside to find Amina lying on the ground and Mahesh lapping up the water trickling out of the shattered pitcher. Gafoor lost his mind in an

instant. Picking up the plough-head he had brought home yesterday to repair, he smashed it down repeatedly on Mahesh's head.

Mahesh tried to lift his head just once, but his starving, withered body slumped to the ground. A few teardrops rolled out of his eyes, along with a few drops of blood from his ears. His entire body trembled once or twice, after which, stretching his front and hind legs out, Mahesh died.

Amina sobbed, 'What have you done Baba, our Mahesh is dead.'

Gafoor had turned to stone, neither moving nor speaking, only staring at a pair of unblinking, bottomless dark eyes.

Within an hour or two, a group of cobblers from one end of the village arrived, slinging Mahesh up on a pole and taking him to the dumping ground. Gafoor trembled when he saw their shining knives, but closing his eyes, he didn't say a word.

The neighbours said that the zamindar had sent someone to Tarkaratna to find out what should be done next, 'You may have to sell your house as penance.'

Gafoor did not reply to any of this, burying his face in his knees and not moving.

Late that night he woke his daughter up, saying, 'Amina, we must go.'

She had fallen asleep outside the front door. Rubbing her eyes and sitting up, she said, 'Where will we go, Baba?'

Gafoor said, 'To work at the jute mill in Phulbere.'

His daughter looked at him in astonishment. Despite all their troubles her father had never been willing to work at the jute mill. She had often heard him say that it was impossible to maintain one's faith there, that women had neither honour nor protection.

Gafoor said, 'Hurry up, Ma, we have to walk a long way.'

Amina was about to take the tumbler and the brass plate her father ate out of, but Gafoor stopped her. 'Leave them here, Ma, they will pay for my penance for Mahesh.'

He left in the dead of night, holding his daughter's hand. He had no family in this village, no one to inform. Crossing the yard, he stopped abruptly beneath the familiar tree and suddenly burst into tears. Raising his eyes to the star-studded black sky, he said, 'Allah! Punish me as you will, but my Mahesh died with a thirst. There was no land he could graze on. Do not forgive the sin of whoever it was who did not let him eat the grass you gave us, or quench his thirst with the water you gave us.'