

Taalnabami¹: Torrential Rain

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Translated by Joyjit Ghosh²

It was the month of Bhadra³. For fifteen days together it had been raining, without rest, without any break. And the food stocks in the household of Khudiram Bhattacharya were running very low for the last two days.

Khudiram was a family-man of poor means. He used to scratch a living by a meager income from his landed property, and by paying visits to the houses of his disciples and jajmans⁴. In that awful rain, so many family-men in the village were suffering starvation along with their children; and Khudiram's case was in no way uncommon. The little amount of paddy offered by the jajmans had been exhausted. He expected a little more when the peasants would again store aush⁵ paddy in the granary at the end of Bhadra. The kiddies then could eat to their fill.

Khudiram had two sons: Nepal and Gopal. Nepal was twelve years old and Gopal was ten. The two brothers had become disgusted with their household as they were forced to curtail their meal for days together.

Nepal asked: "Gopal, don't you feel hungry?"

While smoothing out his fish-hook Gopal answered, "Yes, Dada!"

"Go and tell Ma, I'm also starving."

"Ma scolds. Better you go!"

"Let her scold. Won't you be able to tell Ma on my part?"

At that point of time, Chuni, the son of Shibu Banerjee, was coming that way. Nepal shouted, "Hello, Chuni, will you listen?"

¹ Taalnabami: the ninth day of the waxing moon in the month of Bhadra; the ceremony in order to celebrate the day.

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³ the fifth month of the Bengali calendar (from the middle of August to the middle of September)

⁴ Jajmans: one on whose behalf a Brahmin worships.

⁵ Aush: a kind of paddy ripening in the rainy season or in autumn.

Chuni was senior to Nepal in age. He was a child of a well-to-do family. And he was bonny. At the call of Nepal he came near the fence of their courtyard and asked, “What?”

“Come in.”

“No, I won’t. It’s late. I’m now going to the house of Joti Pisima⁶. Ma is there and I’m going to call her back.”

“Why is she there at this hour?”

“Ma has gone there to crush the pulses. Taalnabami is ahead – on coming Tuesday. People will be invited.”

“Is it true?”

“Don’t you know? They’ll invite all of us. Possibly the whole village.”

“Will they invite us?”

“They won’t certainly leave you out as they’re inviting all.”

When Chuni was off Nepal asked his younger brother, “What’s the day today? What’s your idea? I think it’s Friday. And the invitation is on Tuesday.”

Gopal shouted, “Hurrah ! What a fun !”

“Stop it. You’ve no idea. Do you know they prepare tal-boda⁷ on the occasion of Taalnabami?”

Gopal did not know that ! But he got elated when he came to know of it from his elder brother. If that be the fact, the promise of having that mouth-watering sweet-meat was close at hand. He was not sure what the day was. But Tuesday certainly was not far off.

The house of Joti Pisima was on the way home. Nepal said, “Stop here. Let me go inside and ask them whether they’ll buy taal for I know they’ll need it.”

The village had no taal tree. A big lake surrounded by taal trees was over there in the field. Nepal used to pick fruits there and sell them in the village.

⁶ Pisima :father’s sister; but no such relation in the present story

⁷ Tal-boda:a chop-like sweetmeat prepared out of the juice of the Palmyra-fruit.

Joti Pisima was standing before him. She was the wife of Sri Natabar Mukherjee of that village. Her name was Harimoti. But the whole village called her Joti Pisima.

Pisima asked, “What, child?”

“Will you like to have taal, Pisima?”

“Certainly ! We’ll need them Tuesday.”

Right then Gopal came and stood behind his elder brother. JotiPisima asked, “Who’s there behind you? Gopal? Where did you two go out this evening?”

Nepal blushed while answering, “To catch fish.”

“Got any?”

“Nothing of the big sort ... let me be off, Pisima.”

“Okay, then. It’s not safe to walk in rains when evening settles.”

JotiPisima did not show further interest in the taal-business nor did she even utter a word to invite them at the ceremony of Taalnabami. But both of them had a keen expectation that they would be invited. Nepal neared the door and asked again, “Will you surely buy them?”

“Well, yes. How much?”

“Two for a paisa⁸. But you can have three.”

“Can you assure me, they’ll be big and black? Actually we need the choicest ones for our ceremony.”

“For sure you’ll get those which are pitch-black.”

Gopal came out and at once asked his elder brother, “When will you deliver them?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Please Dada, don’t take a paisa from them.”

Nepal asked in surprise, “Why so?”

“You see, they’ll then invite us.”

“Stop it ! It can’t be that I’d pick the fruits with toil and won’t take my dues.”

⁸ Paisa: a monetary unit equal to one-hundredth of a rupee (in India, Pakistan, and Nepal).

It started raining during the night. And with that, damp wind began to blow. The panel of the eastern window was fastened with strings. The gust snapped them. The loose threads continued to beat against the window all night. Gopal could not sleep. He seemed to shudder with anxiety. He was brooding if his elder brother meant to sell the fruits, they won't invite them — never.

Gopal woke up very early in the morning. All were in bed then. The night's awful rain was over. It was only drizzling. He ran frantically and in the blink of an eye reached that lake lying by the side of the village. There was knee-deep water and the field was all muddy. At that early hour Ganesh Kaora of Uttarpara was going to the field with a plow on his shoulder. On seeing Gopal he asked, "Where are you going so early, Khoka Thakur?"⁹

"To pick taals by the lake."

"Listen KhokaThakur, don't go there all alone in rains. It's a snake-infested area."

Gopal got scared. But with caution he entered the wood and started rummaging around for the fruits. There was only one, huge and dark, lying close to the water. He picked it up and on the way back he collected three more which were small. Being a child how could he carry them all? He chose only two of them and ran straight to the house of JotiPisima.

Joti Pisima was then cleaning the main entrance to her house with water. She was surprised to see Gopal so early and asked, "You, child?"

Gopal heartily smiled back and told her, "I've brought you taals, Pisima."

"They are so good !How much?"

"You won't have to pay a paisa, Pisima."

Joti Pisima uttered nothing. She just took the fruits and went inside.

Gopal felt like asking her about Taalnabami. But he did not find courage. Throughout the day he tended to lapse in forgetfulness amid his sports. When it started pouring in the noon, he looked upwards – he watched that water was rolling from the top of the coconut tree down the leaves, the bamboo trees were bowing in the gusty wind, and the frogs were croaking from time to time in the pool under a bakul tree¹⁰.

⁹ Khoka Thakur :a Brahmin's son deserving respect or reverence from the non-Brahmins

¹⁰ Bakul tree:a large ever-green flower-tree.

Gopal asked, “Ma, why don’t the frogs these days croak the way they used to?”

His mother replied, “They love to croak in new water. They’ve little fun in the old one.”

“What’s the day today, Ma?”

“It’s Monday. But what’s your concern?”

“Isn’t the Taalnabami this Tuesday?”

“Maybe. Who cares? When my kitchen is empty, why should I be bothered with Taalnabami?”

The whole day passed. In the afternoon Nepal asked, “Did you give taals to JotiPisima this morning? Where have you got them? When I went to deliver, she told me, ‘Gopal has already given me taals but he has not taken anything.’ Why have you done this? We could have a few titbits if you managed a paisa.”

“They’ll invite us for sure, you’d see Dada. Tomorrow is Taalnabami !”

“You’re a blessed fool ! They may invite us even when we charge them for the things.”

“Tomorrow is Tuesday. Isn’t it?”

“Right.”

Out of excitement Gopal could not sleep that night. The fireflies set the whole bakul tree on flame. He looked through the window and thought : When will the night end ! ...

While fondly feeding him JotiPisima asked Gopal, “Child, will you take the melon-curry a little more? Mix your stuff with pulses duly.” Labanya Di, the eldest daughter of JotiPisima, then came forward. She placed before him a dish of fried til-pituli¹¹ and smilingly offered , “How many would you like?” and within a moment she emptied the whole dish upon his plate. Then JotiPisima brought the payes¹² and the tal-bodas. She assured him, “The payes is prepared out of the taals you picked up ! ... Eat plenty, honey – today is Taalnabami !” The air was heavy with the smell of a thousand delicacies. The payes spread the fragrance of date molasses ! The joy of Gopal knew no bounds. He was endlessly eating his portions ! ... All had finished but he continued ! ... Labanya Di was prettily asking, “More til-pituli?”

¹¹ Tilpituli :a sweetmeat made of sesame

¹² Payes :a sweet dish prepared by boiling rice in milk with sugar and other ingredients; in the present context the main ingredient is the juice of Palmyra-fruit.

“Gopal?”

Gopal opened his eyes all on a sudden. He saw that shrubs and bushes by the side of his window had all got soaked with rain. He could see the custard-apple tree as well. And he was lying in his own place. The slumber was shattered by his mother’s mild touch. Standing by his side she was saying, “Rise, it’s already late ! You don’t understand as the sky is overcast.”

He was staring at his mother’s face with a dazed look. “What’s the day today, Ma?”

“Tuesday.”

Surely. Today is Taalnabami. What nonsense he had been absorbed in his dream ! The day advanced. Due to heavy clouds in the sky nobody could guess what was the hour. Gopal was sitting on a wooden log near the door with a fixed look. There was no rain, only the sky was amazingly cloudy. One could feel the shivers as the moistened wind blew. All day long Gopal sat there expectantly but none came to invite them from JotiPisima’s house.

At a later hour, their familiar Sri JagabandhuChakraborty, accompanied by his children, was going somewhere. Rakhil Roy and his son Sanu went at their back. And they were followed by Panchu, the eldest son of Kalibar Banerjee and Haren ...

Gopal became curious, where were they going? After the departure of that group the old Nabin Bhattacharya and his younger brother Dinu were going, accompanied by a pack of kids.

Kuroram, the son of Dinu Bhattacharya, eyed him and inquired, “Why sitting here? Won’t you go?” Gopal asked, “Where are you going?”

“To take part in Taalnabami at the place of JotiPisima. Haven’t they invited you? You see, they’ve invited the select few, not all.”

Gopal suddenly got furious. He stood up and shouted back, “Why won’t they invite us? We’ll go later...”

Kuroram was baffled as he failed to understand what angered Gopal. He plainly asked, “Why are you so irate? What has happened?”

No sooner had they passed than tears rushed to Gopal’s eyes — perhaps on seeing the injustice of the world. He had been vividly waiting for so many days! What a fruitless waiting it was!

Haru, Hiten, Deben, Gutke along with their parents and seniors went to the house of JotiPisima one by one in front of his vision, dim with tears...