

RUMA CHAKRAVARTI
THE
MYSTERY THAT IS WOMAN
Ashapura Devi through her stories

Sacrilege
(Awnachaar)

The whole world disapproved of Subhas Kakima. It could not imagine that a woman could be so stony hearted.

But why just a woman, was it possible for anyone to do what she had done? When a woman commits the sort of cruelty that people think impossible of humankind without any qualms, why should people not call her names?

What can they say that will be censure enough?

My mother and my aunt came home and sat in the courtyard in a way that made me think they were trying to recover from the shock to their systems.

Subhas Kakima was not related to us and therefore there was no question of the usual restrictions imposed during a period of mourning for a death in her family. Besides, married women are apparently not

meant to bathe immediately after coming from a house where there has been a death; so the two women had merely changed out of the saris they had worn outside. My father's older sister, however, had taken a quick dip in the pond before coming back.

She stood in the courtyard wringing out the end of her saree over her feet to wash them clean. She then climbed up the stairs and said in her unmistakable straightforward manner, 'Thank God! Gireenkuro is finally at peace. He has had to deal with sorrow all his life. The only reason his sickly body lingered on was because it was not his time yet; he was dead in every other way.'

She took a silk saree from the clothes rack and began drying her head with it as she sat down near my mother.

Mother let out a sigh and said, 'I have never heard such terrible things in my entire life, sister-in-law!'

'You are a slip of a girl who got married just the other day; it is not a huge surprise that you have not heard of such things. Is there anyone in the world who has heard of such things before?'

My uncle's wife said, 'I am only trying to understand how she could do this? How did her heart not break? Not just a day or two but six whole months! To hide such news and remain calm, I cannot even think of it!'

'A heart of stone,' observed my mother.

My aunt said, 'It is only when the time is right that we finally find out what people are made of. When Subhas was here, their love for each other was something to behold. Afterwards, who knows why he even

went away? My mind says, he must have sensed the evil in his wife and left her in disgust.'

I knew that the fires of such criticism would not burn out easily. They would summon every word known to them to indict the woman. They would probably only stop when they needed to do their household chores.

AFTER resting for a bit longer, I got up and left the house, undecided about what I would do.

It was a Sunday. I was meant to return to Kolkata by the night train. But I did not feel like going. I think I was more tired than usual because I had been listening to people maligning Subhas Kakima all through the day.

The monotony of rural life is such that people do not hesitate to make utmost use of any topic worth discussing. This was quite an extraordinary incident. Who knew what rites of repentance would be forced upon her afterwards.

On the way back I saw a few people discussing the death on the high platform before Dinesh Ray's house. There were three or four hurricane lanterns on the steps that had been turned down. In the darkness I could not recognise any of the people that I saw. No one needs to burn kerosene on the nights of the bright quarter of the moon; it is enough to carry a stick to tap on the road with. But that night was different. There had been a death in the village today and it was thought best to carry a light around in the dark.

Rural folk must be able to see really well in the darkness. On seeing me, Dinesh Ray immediately called out saying, 'Who goes there? Is that Monotosh?'

I was forced to walk towards them.

He said, 'Why haven't you got a lantern with you today, my son?'

I answered, 'I have been out since the afternoon.'

'Well, sit down for a little while then. Suren will go past your house on his way back, you two can walk together; he will show you a light.'

'I won't need it', I said and made to leave but I was unable to.

Dinesh Ray said magnanimously, 'You might not need it, but I need to ensure that you do have a light. I cannot let you go in the dark. Come, sit down. I suppose you are not returning tonight then?'

'No, I will go back tomorrow.'

'Do you have a day off then on the morrow?'

'No, why should it be a holiday?'

'Then how come you stayed here tonight?'

I knew that these people would not stop questioning me even though it was clear that I did not wish to answer their queries. This was one of their characteristics.

I said, 'I didn't go because I did not feel like it.'

Dinesh Ray now smiled loftily and said, 'Yes, how can you feel any other way? You must be astounded with all the events. Have you heard what Subhas's wife has been up to?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Now I ask you: you stay in the city where you must see many new-fangled things, have you ever heard of such a thing there?'

I said politely, 'No, I have not.'

Suren Sarker cleared his throat and said, 'Did you hear her excuse? She claims it was because the old man would feel pain. She was overflowing with compassion for her father-in-law! Who is she trying to fool? I ask, how did you do it, you wretch!'

'Enough of the ways of loose women, Suren. There is nothing they cannot do. After all, if the old man did get to know of it, that would have been the end of her eating fish and dolling up. Agreed?'

I felt a sudden angry pounding inside my head.

I said, 'Well uncle, I will be off then.'

'Are you leaving in the dark?'

'Yes', and I started walking.

Dinesh Ray shouted out, 'I hope you have your sacred thread on you? Or have you sent it off to be laundered like the modern people in Kolkata? You are going to walk under trees; you will obviously not listen to reason. Do you know that the spirit of the dead do not leave their place for three days and three nights?'

As I was about to walk past the path that led under the trees I had to turn and walk in the opposite direction to my house.

IF a spirit did not stop wandering the earth for three days and nights, Gireen's ghost must have been hanging around the place. He was probably even listening to all the discussions going on.

What was happening to the spirit? Was he pleased? Did he want to shower angry curses like these village elders? Who knew what it wanted.

I had never noticed any great affection on his part for Subhas Kakima. Besides, after his son Subhas Kaka left the village for Bombay with his head filled with dreams of films, he became impossibly cantankerous and misbehaved with his daughter-in-law. Not that he was to be blamed for that.

Subhas was the one surviving son out of his six children. How was his father supposed to forgive his daughter-in-law after that son vanished? How could he not blame her for being unable to stop her husband from leaving home? How could he be pleased with her?

Their family had consisted of the old father-in-law and the young daughter-in-law. Even when he threw a heavy metal bowl full of sago and barley at her in anger, there was no one else to help or say anything.

Apparently Subhas Kaka was very regular with his letters in the early days and even sent money a few times. But there had been no news from him for the past six or seven months.

He sent neither money nor letters. The household existed in abject poverty. She sold the little gold that she had with the help of the local women.

No one had any doubts about how Subhas Kaka must have fallen into the clutches of a temptress in Bombay.

No one ever offered any real assistance or paused to think about how they put food on the table. But their household fortunes provided a topic for discussion for people at the drop of a hat.

That a helpless woman could survive on her own, that she would not fall apart despite knowing that her husband no longer loved her, that she could talk to people with a smile on her face, all these things were hard to bear. But people still put up with all of that. But it was impossible for them to put up with what had been revealed today.

While her father-in-law's corpse still lay in the house and relatives milled about the place, Subhas Kakima had presented an envelope containing a letter to all the elders of the village. She said softly, 'Please read this. Then tell me what I am to do. Tell me if I have to perform any ceremonies as penance as well.'

I stood at one side watching as all this unfolded.

The elders picked up the letter with ill-disguised curiosity, hoping that it would offer clues to wealth that had been hidden away by the dead man.

People had barely paid heed to her words, so keen were they to read the letter.

The envelope had been opened a long time ago and everybody crowded together to read the words it contained. But what did it mean? Was this a letter or an unbearably hot coal!

The expression on the faces of the elders made those who had not yet read the letter ask them eagerly, 'What is it? What is wrong?'

Satish Kundu managed to produce a smile that was both apologetic and sarcastic at the same time as he folded the letter and placed it back in the envelope saying, 'As everyone is here anyway, I might as well come clean about this. It seems that Subhas actually died seven months ago. A friend of his informed his wife as soon as it happened but she kept this vital piece of news to herself all this time!'

The effect of this statement was like a thunderclap in the room.

Keeping the news of a death secret was nothing new. People do this sometimes, depending on the situation. But why would a wife keep her husband's death a secret? What was her reason for doing so?

A murmur broke out among the people who had gathered there.

The older women opened their eyes wide and their mouths wider as they stared in disbelief. Subhas Kakima went on gathering old medicine bottles, drinking glasses, spittoons, bed sheets and clothes that her father-in-law had used during his illness with a bland expression on her face.

Then one of the women said, 'Satish, what will this woman have to do?'

Satish Kundu said, 'That is for you all to say. I have never heard of such a thing in my sixty years on this planet – and especially knowingly. As they say, unknowingly even a snake's venom does no harm.'

Satya Pishi said, 'I can take care of the marital signs such as the bangles and the vermilion, but I feel there is a need for some rites to

show repentance. Such things are unheard of ! Dear child, who told you to do this?’

Subhas Kakima looked up and there was a hint of a smile as she said, ‘Who would give me this sort of advice? Perhaps it was my misfortune that did it.’

‘Well that may be, but why do such a thing? If you thought the letter was false, at least you should have verified it with the elders.’

‘But I did not think it was false.’

‘What?’

This time she paused in what she was doing and said quietly, ‘I thought that Father was an old man who had suffered much in life. I wished to spare him the news of his son’s passing in his final years!’

Satya Pishi ground out, ‘What kind of simple-minded talk is that, child? People come with their fate already etched into their lives, how do they escape that? Did you do him any favours by pretending to have all the rights of a married woman while widowed for the past six months? Will his soul not be punished for this? Anyway, call the priest and see what he says about this business. Dear Lord! Narayan! Narayan!’

The priest Bhattacharya arrived, invoking Narayan as well. He had already heard of everything that had happened.

He proposed that as the old man was her father-in-law, it would not be right for her to wear her widow’s weeds as soon as his last rites were performed. He felt it would be better to perform her husband’s last rites before his father’s.

She asked, 'Will any of you come with me? Will it be alright if I go by myself?'

Satya Pishi said solemnly, 'I can already see that you are not the type that needs anyone for assistance. But, I have certain responsibilities. I have gone grey doing this for so many since when I was eighteen. Come, let us go. No, you will not need a towel or any change of clothes. Dinesh, you people must get things organised here while we are gone.'

I suppose Satya Pishi was furious with the widow for not allowing her the opportunity to express suitable grief at such a momentous incident.

All this happened in the morning. I was there only because it was a Sunday. I found that my walk away from the discussions had taken me to the dead man's house by some strange coincidence. I only noticed that night had fallen when I saw the door.

I was about to turn back after some hesitation when Poncha Kolu's young daughter came outside and asked, 'Why are you returning without coming in? Kakima sent me to ask you what it was that you wanted.'

I said, 'No I just came by. Are you staying here tonight?'

'Yes, my mother sent me. She wondered, "How will this poor woman fare on her own now that the old man is dead? Nondi, go and sleep over there tonight."'

'None of her neighbours offered to do this?'

'I do not think so.'

As we spoke, Subhas Kakima came outside. Mercifully the dim moonlight hid any changes in her appearance.

She was not much older than me or even my aunt in the real sense. I had never paid my respects to her and now I stood there feeling rather sheepish.

She asked, 'Are you not Monotosh? Why have you come at this hour?'

'I thought of coming by to check how you were doing.'

'You did well to do so, my brother.'

She smiled and said, 'Do not mind that I call you brother. I am not in the habit of using endearments such as child and so on. There is something I could not say to anyone of the village that I want to ask you – there were no funeral rites for your uncle, how does all that take place after all this time, the things must be done – can you find out from one of the priests of Kalighat in Calcutta?'

'Alright.'

'Also, what kind of penance should I be doing?'

I said angrily, 'Why? Why must you do penance?'

'But I have sinned so terribly for all this time. I have behaved like a married woman knowing full well that I had been widowed. Can my Hindu faith bear such sacrilege?'

I said solemnly, 'Do you feel that you sinned?'

'Of course! I am a Hindu woman after all. But I admit that my desire to do some good was overwhelming. I thought that I would save the old man from further grief. I was the only one who could shield him

from the pain of losing a son. It was so tempting to play God. That was why I hid the arrow meant for me, just like Ravan.'

I was still furious and asked, 'Then why produce the arrow today? Have you not done enough penance, given all the insults that were flung at you today?'

She was quiet for a moment. She then said, 'You know, I am not sure. I think I should be punished; harshly. Some kind of terrible retribution for spending the past months in the garb of a wedded woman while I knew everything. One cannot be blamed for drinking snake venom but what of it when the venom is digested with full awareness? Is there not a severe punishment for that in the Scriptures?'

I had no answers for her. Suddenly the twelve-year-old Nondi spoke up, 'Brother, go home now. The villagers are not a nice bunch. Someone will see you here and spread rumours. It is getting late.'

Her words were bitter but true.

Even though I had turned bright red with shame, I could not bring myself to end the conversation so abruptly. I said, 'I have only one question; no one was unaware of how your father-in-law treated you, then why?'

She smiled this time, 'Is that even a question? Just because he threatened to crack my skull with his stick whenever he felt like, it does not mean that I would have done the same given the chance.'

'But what did people make of this?'

'What people make of things is not where a story has to end.'

'Fine. Then one more question – a bewilderment which I just cannot shake off: I am thinking, just how did you do this?'

She took some time to answer this question as well.

'I do not fully understand that either Monotosh. Where did I find the strength to do all this?'