

**KERENG KOTHOMA:
A MODERN RE-TELLING
OF THE FOLK TALES OF
TRIPURA**

—

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INTRODUCTION

While translating a book, an essay or any literary piece a strong sense of accountability must keep the translator on her/his toes. She or he has to be accountable for understanding the essence of the culture she or he is tapping into. The core of a translation often involves an encounter which proceeds from a sense of engagement and closeness. However close one is to the culture, the traditions and beliefs of the source, a confrontation always seems to be on the cards. ‘The translator is engaged not only with mere words but with the context in which those words appear’ (Bassnett 2012: 77–85). And words can be deceiving. They are a culmination of a range of emotions, truths, chances and bereavements; and sometimes it is difficult to strip them layer by layer.

Kereng Kothoma has been a personal project. I have grown up in Tripura, where culture as a whole is a blend of various ethno-linguistic

groups, the dominant ethnic groups being Bengali and Tripuri (Some of the prominent clans of Tripuris are Debbarma, Tripura, Jamatia, Reang, Noatia, Kalai, Murasing, Chakma and Mogh). Although it has a well-documented history of cultural exchange with the Bengali community, it was after Partition that this relationship flourished and blossomed into a unique position. Tripura welcomed thousands of Bengali immigrants who were homeless, deprived of their land, possessions and identity with open arms. It is kind of poetic that this ancient hilly state served as their new location for culture. It is the ethos of this place, which puts its trust on harmonious, cohesive existence, that sort of stimulated me to take up this project.

Kereng means ‘folk’, and *Kothoma* means ‘tales.’ The stories in this book circle around the lives of the Tripuris, that is, the indigenous, working class people of Tripura and their numerous adventures and misadventures. Originally in *Kokborok* language, these predominantly nap-time stories for children have been transmitted orally through generations since time immemorial and were on the verge of extinction because of a dearth of carriers. These carriers are basically aged men and women belonging to the indigenous community who witnessed the cultural transition. These narratives were collected from these carriers, translated into Bangla and published as a book titled *Kereng Kothoma*; this was possible only because of Kumud Kunduchowdhury, whose unrelenting efforts in fetching these folk tales from various culturally rich, indigenous pockets of Tripura immensely helped in establishing these stories in folklore. It is these folk tales that preserve the minutest details of the evolution and growth of a community, its people and their culture. I was extremely fascinated by the scope and grandeur of imagination in the stories—the blending of the real with the abstract, the unique style of storytelling that aimed at reinforcing cultural values or highlighting important traditions, the intermingling of the rich cultural history and politics of Tripura and the triumph of good over evil (which was at par with other popular Indian folk tales like *Panchatantra* and *Thakurmar Jhuli*).

Out of the 14 stories in the book, I have translated four as a part of this project because I had to follow a word limit. The first story, *Jamichholong*, was collected from Jamini Debbarma; the second, *The Story of the Hen and the Cat* from Shashirani Debbarma; the third, *Tetnai* from Baduchandra Debbarma; and the final story, *A Fox or a Faux!* from Shashirani Debbarma.

Writing for children is a subtle art, which not only involves the ability to express complicated ideas with clarity and precision, but also to authenticate them with relatable facts. But, when it is a children's book on folk tales, the onus is on the appropriation of those tales to the present context. What appealed to me the most about *Kereng Kothoma* was that even though these tales were full of mystery and adventure in a land with lonely mountain roads and isolated farms, humble cottages and dreadful forests, with strange happenings and wondrous deeds of kings and thieves, there was a sense of simplicity in the contours of the chaos that gave imagination a chance to flourish. In the translated version, I have not only tried to retain this sense of simplicity and coherence but also imagined the stories in the most original and also present-day formats.

While visualising the stories I also had to deal with some shortcomings that the book has. While re-reading the stories I found that the handling of gender issues whether consciously or unconsciously is quite problematic. This book does not explore or contradict gender biases that exist in society. They follow similar tropes of patriarchy—projecting male stereotypes, dividing sexes into 'masculine' and 'feminine' and assigning typical gender-specific roles, describing males as adventurers, independent, strong and capable while females in their passive roles tend to be naive, sweet, dependent and conforming. Females are sometimes constructed as the *monstrous feminine*. The horror arises from the fact that a woman breaks away from her gender-specific (feminine) roles of mother, a damsel in distress, caretaker, and a character that merely supports the male figure. This issue of representation of gender in children's literature should be handled with utmost care and alertness because

it impacts children's attitudes and perceptions of gender-appropriate behaviour in society. Sexism in literature can be so insidious that it quietly conditions boys and girls to accept the way they 'see and read the world' (Fox 1993: 84–88) thus reinforcing gender images. This reinforcement predisposes children not to question existing social relationships. 'At the same time, however, books containing images that conflict with gender stereotypes provide children the opportunity to re-examine their gender beliefs and assumptions' (Singh 1998: 1–3).

In the first three stories—*Jamichholong: The Braveheart, The Story of the Hen and the Cat* and *Tetnai*—I have taken the liberty to provide a neutral gaze that refrains from objectifying any particular gender or race, which demystifies the stereotypical gender constructs. I've tried to establish characters and plots so that they can provide children with alternative role models and also motivate them to embrace a more egalitarian gender perspective. I have also made a conscious effort to keep the stories grounded and the characters relatable. I have modified the storylines, created sub-plots and offered a context for a character's motivations to suit modern times, but, simultaneously, I've also attempted to retain the spirit of the original by preserving the irreplaceable core of the stories, retaining the unmistakable signature of the *Kokborok* language (the linguistic flavour, the humour, the lyricism) and ensuring that the meaning does not get lost in translation.

On this creative journey I sometimes felt entitled to take certain liberties with the original text which François Mathieu (1997) considers a 'kind of colonization of the text'. The translator should not be a mere *un passeur* of the language but also a carrier whose translation should be 'both faithful to the original without complete self-identification and liberated' (Lise, Claire, and Malarte-Feldman 1999: 184–198). To address this issue and to provide details about the necessity of assessing these stories from a separate vantage point I decided to do a faithful translation of the fourth story, *A Fox or a Faux!* At the end of the story I have added a translator's note pointing out why the story needs to be re-imagined and how this can be achieved, thus throwing light on my process of translation.

Finally, the project's purpose has not only been to escort all those narratives to the forefront only to provide them with a wide readership, but also to extend the longevity of the stories and the culture and tradition associated with them, so that these valuable memories don't get lost in this age of chaos, consumerism and instant gratification. Furthermore I, with all sincerity, hope that my work prompts curiosity among the children of other parts of India and the world – allowing them to know and reflect more clearly on the aesthetic value, the historical significance and the cultural plurality that is so conscientiously practiced in the state of Tripura.

1. JAMICHHOLONG: THE BRAVEHEART

‘Mother! Tell me a story,’ pleaded little Jhimiri. Her beady eyes, deep as the ocean were focussed perhaps waiting to hold the whole world within.

Her mother smiled and said, ‘You have to wake up early tomorrow, you know that right? We have so much work to do.’

‘Yes Mommy, we have to collect the seedlings from the nursery, carefully carry them in the bamboo basket that father has made; the roots must be intact in a wet soil ball; we have to hold it cautiously, and then we have to put it straight with the roots in the pit and plant the collars out. Then...’ Jhimiri enthusiastically repeated the steps her father had taught her, while at the same time trying to imitate his voice.

‘So, you know all about planting a tree!’ her mother said tenderly while tucking her in bed.

‘Yes Mommy. Father has told me everything. Now can you please tell me a story? I promise to be a good girl tomorrow.’

‘Jhimiri, I have a lot of work. Let me call your father. He’ll tell you one. You hear from me every day.’

‘No no. Please! You tell me. His stories are boring.’

‘What! Why?’

‘I once told him to tell me a story, and he said that one day, not very long ago, the sky was very clear, cloudless, bright, the sun shining, birds chirping. Suddenly dark clouds appeared from nowhere, and there was a thunderstorm and rain which continued for five years. End of story. When I asked him what happened next, he said nobody could go out of their houses, so nothing happened. Everybody slept. Now you sleep too. Boorinnnggg!’

Her mother couldn’t help but chuckle at the daughter’s antics. She replied, ‘Okay, but only one story! So, there was this lion and a rabbit who lived together in a jungle...’ Jhimiri immediately interrupted, ‘No mommy, not this one, I’ve heard this story a hundred times.’

‘Then what do you want to hear?’

‘A new one. Please!’

The mother looked up at Jhimiri. She thought to herself, ‘Isn’t it a gift that children bring? To show us a spark of innocence in the hope that ours is still able to shine back at them?’

She started the story, a new one, and Jhimiri listened intently.

‘Once upon a time, in the hilly state of Tripura, there lived a man called Jamichholong. He was brave and mighty, so stories of his indomitable spirit spread to every terrain and beyond. Such was his bravery that people believed he could tame courage and move mountains. Tales of his valour passed around as bedtime stories. Legend has it that he could cut 1,000 bamboo trees in one strike and effortlessly carry them on his shoulders to build a house with them. It might sound unreal, but it was believed that he felt no pain. He could also eat a lot, so much so that he used to devour an entire pig by himself for dinner! When he went hunting, the animals and birds fled creating a rumble in the forest, announcing his arrival.’

‘Well he is a bad person,’ Jhimiri interrupted. ‘May I know why?’ the mother asked. ‘Well for starters, he kills animals. And also, he eats an entire pig! So gross Mommy. Seems like he is very foolish.’ The mother couldn’t resist laughing, ‘Well this story is not just about

Jamichholong, my girl.' Jhimiri seemed genuinely relieved. So her mother continued.

'One day Jamichholong thought, "What if I travel the whole world and discover new places? Everyone in Tripura praises me and calls me fearless, but what about other places, the distant realms? What if there is a braver, stronger human who can challenge me?" One fine day, he packed his bags and embarked on a journey to the unknown in search of other gifted people like himself. He hiked across the moors, trudged up rocky hills, trekked through strange forests and radiant shrubberies and ambled along colourful springs and rivers. After several days of walking and wandering, he came to a valley where he saw a man at a distance ripping up something with his bare hands. He was intrigued. What was this person doing in a quiet place like this? Slowly he advanced towards him. When he came close, Jamichholong was shocked to see that the person was pulling apart the guts of small mountain flies and was searching for something inside.

"What are you doing?" asked Jamichholong.

"I am tearing apart Iyongkha flies'¹ bellies to see what's in there," the man stated.

"Wow! These flies! We can barely see them with our naked eyes and you are ripping their guts out! You are a strange fellow!" Jamichholong exclaimed in surprise.

"Why do they bite so much? I came here to hunt, and these idiots are constantly bothering me. That's why I am examining their stomachs to find out why their bites sting so much!" replied the man.

"What are you saying? Wow! You're really a braveheart."

'Hearing this, the man laughed and said, "Are you kidding me? I am no braveheart. There's only one braveheart, and he is none other than Jamichholong. Wish I could meet him once."

'Hearing the man speak about him in such a manner, Jamichholong decided to play along, "So, where does this person of yours live? Can you tell me? I would surely like to meet him myself."

“Listen to me. You see that hill up there, behind that hill there’s another hill, and then another, beyond that lives Jami. Do you know that he eats an entire pig by himself?” the man asked.

“Is that so? Listening to this my stomach’s aching!” said Jamichholong. “Oh god! And his doesn’t? Okay. Let’s go and find this person. I could definitely use company. Would you like to join me?” he asked the man.

“Of course! I have always wanted to meet him. I am all in,” said the man and jumped up in delight.

‘They began their journey through the wilderness, Jamichholong keeping his identity secret all along. After some time, they reached a place under a hill. “Now where?” asked the man. Jamichholong insisted on climbing the mountain. Reaching the top, they saw a river far away in the distance, which curved gently through the greenery, distinctly visible. Its silver-coloured water glinted as the sun’s rays kissed its surface. They both began walking towards it.

‘On reaching the river bank, they were astonished to find that a man was trying to stop the flow of the water of the hilly river by putting his body on the line. They had never encountered such a powerful person before.

“Hey friend, you’re such a strong person; you have created a dam with your body! This is insane,” Jamichholong said.

“Me? No no! I am nothing compared to Jami. He can fatally injure a mad elephant with his bare hands,” the man replied.

“Well, we are looking for him. Do you want to join us?” added the man accompanying Jamichholong.

“Not a bad idea. I too have never met him. Let’s find him and see for ourselves how powerful he really is.” Saying this, the man too joined the two on their journey.

‘Now there were three of them. They walked on endless grey old paths with scattered pale leaves and broken twigs. Everything was silent compared to the other places they had travelled. There was no chirping of birds or howling of the wind. Everything seemed quiet and

organised. While walking through the rough hilly terrain, suddenly they came across a beautiful little cottage. They were surprised. They started wondering who had built this cottage so deep in the forest. They entered the cottage. It was a small little house. The interiors were neatly done, the surface clean, the furniture and other accessories well maintained, as if somebody lived there. But they couldn't find anybody in the vicinity. Strange! they thought.

'Anyway, they were all tired and hungry because of the strenuous journey, so Jamichholong suggested that he shuffle across the house, arrange a fire, crockery and other cooking ingredients, while the other two scurried over to the forest and brought a couple of wild roosters, so that he could cook some *tawhaan*² for themselves. The other two obliged and went hunting in the forest.

'After they had left, Jamichholong kept himself busy in the kitchen. He had to start the fire, cut vegetables and other ingredients, which he handpicked from the garden beside the house. While doing all this, he kept thinking, "Whose place is this? Such a beautiful house in such a secluded place, and no one staying here! It's a little odd." In reality, this place belonged to a mysterious being. Some believed that it was a sacred being who protected the forest and the animals. She was actually a woman, and her name was Maya.

'In those days, there was a steady increase in in Tripura's population. Humans were destroying forests and stripping the earth of its resources to accommodate this increasing population. Trees were cut and land cleared allowing the exposed earth to wither and die along with the destruction of the habitat of innumerable species, with no food or shelter. Maya meditated every night to attain spiritual affirmation to end this madness, thinking about all the animals and wildlife that the humans had destroyed. She apologised for their sins and promised to clean their habitat and rebuild what had been crushed and poisoned. In her there was this precarious balance between the forces of good and evil.

'Whenever somebody entered the jungle for hunting innocent animals or cutting trees for wood, she lured them craftily to her house,

took good care of them and when the time was right, incapacitated them and sent them to the forbidden part of the forest, which was like a maze with numberless dangers from which there was no escape.

‘On that day, Maya had gone out in search of food as part of her daily routine. After seeing the three of them entering her house from a distance and later two of them entering the jungle, she raced back home. She didn’t trust them.

‘On returning, Maya saw that they had not only entered the house but were also using her things, and she noticed that someone was trying to light the oven in her kitchen. She was very angry. She took a heavy staff and struck Jamichholong at the back of his head. Yes, the violence was unnecessary. She could have just asked. But she was under stress for a lot of reasons, so she acted impulsively. But Jamichholong was unperturbed. He was busy doing his work. Maya was stunned. She had struck with such great force and still this man had not even flinched! How was this even possible? She struck again with all her strength, but nothing happened. Jamichholong thought that some insect had climbed over his back, so he scratched his head once. It never occurred to him that someone was hitting the back of his head with a club. Maya screamed loudly and it was only then that Jamichholong turned around. He was surprised to see an unkempt female, of his size with a spark in her eyes attacking him with all her strength. The curiosity in his eyes could show that he was first amazed and also impressed by her superior physical form and then struck by the sudden realisation that the person was trying to kill him. So he asked in a deep voice, “Who are you? Why are you trying to kill me? What has happened to you?” Maya got more enraged by his questions. “Who am I? I am the spirit of this jungle! I am Maya,” she retorted. She thought to herself, “I have debilitated so many arrogant little twats like him and sent them to exile. Who does he think he is?”

‘She continued, “You savages! You come to the forest, you take everything from her and in return you give her a slow, painful death. You slash the trees, burn the leaves, murder the animals and pollute the rivers. I will teach you a lesson today!”

“Look, I don’t want to fight you. Clearly there has been a mistake. I am not one of them. Believe me, I am as protective of the forest as you are,” Jamichholong replied in an affectionate but bold voice.

“Don’t try to deceive me boy. It will not work. I have seen many people like you. Lying, manipulating men with hidden agendas who only want profit for themselves. Fight me, you coward!”

“Can’t we just sit and talk?”

Maya was surprised to hear this. What was this man saying? In the middle of this jungle, in the dead of night, this man wanted to sit and talk? Many men came and went, a few survived, a few perished, but none had the guts nor the valour like this one right here.

“You said your name is Maya, what a beautiful name! Not a Tripuri name though,” Jamichholong said.

‘Maya wasted no time. Clearly this person was trying to make small talk. She attacked. They engaged in a fierce battle. A gash of radiant light broke through the cauldron-black sky. It was an all-out war. The place had a cold, malevolent air; the wind howling past every which way as if trying to express its own confusion at the sudden clash. The two friends who returned with the hens, quickly hid seeing the fight. The duel continued for several hours. Maya smashed an elbow into the side of Jamichholong’s skull, the soft spot high on the temple. A sudden gush of pain jolted through Jami’s body. His stomach twinged, his arms lost their tension and his legs began to weaken. He was tired and exhausted. He fell.

‘Maya wanted to finish this then and there, but she stopped. There was something pure in Jamichholong’s eyes, something deep as the ocean, wanting to hold the whole world. She hesitated.’

Jamichholong, catching his breath, said, “Come on, finish it.”

Maya didn’t reply. She was watching him closely. Jamichholong struggled to get up; he was wounded and gasping for air, “You know Maya, these fights have no moral codes, no meaning, no purpose at all. We fight to end another fight.” He was in extreme pain.

‘His words struck a chord with Maya. She threw her staff away and turned back to leave.’

Jamichholong shouted, “You know, I came here in search of a man stronger than me, instead I found a woman who is not only stronger but also possesses the highest virtue—the act of showing mercy. That still makes me the strongest man on the planet though!”

‘Maya smiled. “What do you want?” she asked. “Nothing much, just a conversation,” Jami replied.

“Okay, clean up. I am going inside. And also tell those two stupid friends of yours to stop hiding.”

“Brothers, please come out, enough already. It’s over.”

‘That night they had a feast. They discussed myriad topics. Maya told Jamichholong about her father who was an honest and hardworking person, and that they came to the forest to play and collect fruits. One day, some hunters killed her father because he tried to stop them from killing a Kasturi deer. “You know, the one with the sweet smell?” she remembered fondly. She ran away from that sight. They tried to find her, but she hid deep in the jungle so that nobody could ever find her. She lost her way back home; she lost her way back to life.

‘Jami and his friends listened to her. Jamichholong then revealed his name to everyone. His two friends were stupefied. They were in complete awe, but Maya said, “What kind of name is this?” It sounded very funny to her. Jamichholong was happy that Maya treated him like a friend, like a regular human being, equal to her, one she could laugh and share her secrets with. Gradually the two of them started getting along. It was believed that they had genuine affection for each other. Both of them found common interests in their love for animals and for the environment.

‘Years passed and their love grew stronger. They got married. Jamichholong tried to find Maya’s mother, and was finally able to reunite them. That was the first time Jami saw Maya cry. Everybody cried. They were tears of joy. Maya and Jami returned to their beautiful

house in the forest along with her mother and vowed to protect the forest from further attacks. They also found others who were working for the same cause. They formed a group and started working together. They started planting trees every morning and took care of the animals. The two friends who had initially joined Jamichholong on his journey helped them and protected the forest in their own ways. Maya and Jami lived happily ever after’.

‘What a story Mom! I really liked it. It feels like I know them, like they are in some way connected to me.’ Little Jhimiri was ecstatic. Her mother smiled and planted a cheek on little Jhimiri’s forehead. ‘Okay girl, now go to sleep. Enough for today. I have to go help your father. Goodnight.’

The mother slowly closed the door and went to the other room. The father was there, cleaning and cutting vegetables for next day’s feast. ‘So, the story took long! Is she asleep?’ he asked. ‘Yeah finally. She likes my stories better by the way,’ the mother replied.

‘Oh! Does she now?’

‘Yeah, your stories are boring. She wanted to listen to a new one.’

‘So, which one did you tell her?’

‘The story of Jamichholong and Maya.’

The father stopped, looked up, laughed and said, ‘I am still the strongest man though.’

‘Yeah right,’ the mother chuckled as she joined him.

2. THE STORY OF THE HEN AND THE CAT



2.1

In the southern part of the mountain clad Tripura, there was a village in Belonia. In the farthest corner of that village, free from the hustle and bustle, inside a small hut lived a hen. She was a free-spirited, self-sufficient working mother who lived with her kids. Part of the reason she chose to live in that area was the greenery, the fresh air and the calmness that surrounded her children and her.

In the morning, the hen went to the paddy fields to eat grains, clucking all along. Her obedient chicks followed their mother gleefully, cheeping and tweeting. Before noon they came back and relaxed in the sunlit courtyard in front of their house. They watched the sunlight creep into the forest, bathing the leaves and the flowers with a warm glow. Then they left again at noon to visit a nearby household, to eat some more grains and then returned to their peaceful residence before darkness surrounded the place. In this way, the sun rose and set in the hen-house. They were happy. But happiness doesn't always last. A perfect storm was waiting for them.

A cat stayed in their neighbouring house. She was a tenacious little mouser who was trying to befriend the hen. At first, the hen was reluctant and suspicious of her motives. She was afraid that the cat might have wicked intentions like eating her children. She was always on pins and needles. But she had no choice but to give into the cat's persuasions as she had a unique way with words, always charming and eloquent. She could win anybody's heart. But the hen thought to herself that she must warn her kids about this aunt of theirs and that she ought to be more careful herself. Before bed time she gathered her little ones and said, 'Listen to me. You all are growing up. You all know how to feed yourselves, how to select and eliminate the chaff and eat the grains. Now you understand certain things related to life much better than before. You're not little anymore. There should be a healthy dialogue between you and me. I must tell you, something is bothering me, and it has been bothering me for a long time. I know I might be overthinking, but I have to tell you. This Aunt Catty of yours, I think she has got some agenda in her tiny little whiskers. Every evening she comes to our house, plays poker, chit chats, but her eyes are always on you all. She notices every step you take, every move you make. Nowadays she comes twice a day. So be careful, cautious and have each other's back, come rain or shine.'

Petrified on hearing this, the chicks came closer to their mother for comfort. 'What's going to happen Mommy?' they asked, their big, concerned eyes wide open. Mother-hen caressed her children and said, 'Don't worry. There is a way out. Always listen to me. Always listen to your mother, then no harm will ever befall you.' They all nodded their heads in unison.

2.2

After a few days, Aunt Catty came to their house and called the mother, 'Sister, are you home? Sis?' Mother-hen and her children were relaxing

and enjoying the warmth of the sun on a winter morning after having breakfast. She gave her children the signal. They were prepared. The moment they heard their Aunt Catty, they hurriedly marched back to their rooms. Aunt Catty was furious but somehow controlled herself. Recovering her poise, she asked the mother-hen, ‘Sister, why are they running away after seeing me? Are they afraid of me?’

‘No, no, sis. What are you saying?’ said mother-hen. ‘Why would they be afraid of you? You’re their Aunt Catty. Actually, a wild cat has been following them since last Monday, so they’re a bit jittery and scared. I guess they mistook you for that nefarious creature. Please don’t mind. Okay, listen, I was thinking of making *pitha*³ for the kids. It’s almost *kouchengma*,⁴ and I haven’t had the chance to make any. I was wondering if you could come too. They are all clamouring for the mom-special *pitha*. I need your help for this. If you’re free please come tomorrow evening. Then we can make it together.’

Catty was not happy. It stung her that those chicks didn’t even acknowledge her. But in a fake, nonchalant voice she said, ‘Since you’ve requested me, I’ll surely come. But your kids, the way they fled after seeing me, I guess they are not comfortable with me being around them,’ she said and left.

That night mother-hen caressed and kissed her children. She was very happy that her kids had followed her instructions. She told them, ‘Listen, tomorrow I’ll make you all some *pitha*. In the evening, you’ll all stay at home in the dining hall. Then your Aunt Catty will arrive, and we’ll be busy grinding rice. Remember to stay near the oven. She’ll never come near the fire. Besides, I’ll keep her busy outside. After we have made the *pitha*, she’ll eat and go home. Simple. So no need to worry. Understood?’ Everybody said yes. The chicks were over the moon—tomorrow they would get to eat so many types of *pitha*—*puli-pitha*, *pati-sapta* and *fried pitha*—they were drooling at the thought. They thought if Aunt Catty didn’t come it would be so much more fun.

The next day mother-hen woke up early. She had lots of work to do. She told her kids to fend for themselves as she was going to be busy. Then she went to bring some cow dung to paint the courtyard.

After coating her place of work with cow dung she left it to dry. Then she scrubbed and cleaned the kitchen. It was spotless. She was content with her work. Then she smoked some tobacco. She was visibly tired and needed some rest. After some time when the cow plop was dry, she spread the rice grains and scattered them with her beak so that each and every grain was exposed to sunlight. Then she adjusted the husking machine and started husking the paddy. The kids playfully started circling the husking machine. Mother hen was having a whale of a time. After so many days she would be able to feed her children *pitha*. After a while the paddy was converted into rice. Then she started winnowing to separate the rice grains from the chaff. The winnowed rice looked fresh. She then went into the kitchen and dipped the rice in water. All of a sudden, the thought of the arrival of the cat ruined her mood. All kinds of nuisance! ‘No one has ever heard of a cat being friends with a hen,’ she thought. ‘Your main purpose is to eat my children, isn’t it, you evil creature?!’

2.3

The last rays of sunlight had kissed the heartland. The usually sunlit courtyard was dark. The birds had gone to roost, and the crickets had started singing in the swaying grass. Mother-hen was crushing the rice and dusting it off. No sign of the cat. She was pretty irked by the cat’s no show. ‘She’ll come only to eat *pitha*,’ she mumbled. After crushing, the rice had become thin. Then she went to the kitchen with the fine textured rice powder. The chicks were excited. ‘Finally, the time has come,’ they thought. Mother-hen had already brought some jaggery in the morning. She daubed the rice powder with the jaggery and some water. While blending them delicately she told her kids, ‘Today I’ll only make fried *pitha*. There is no coconut or milk in the house, so I will not be able to make any *pati-sapta* or *puli-pitha*.’ Then she lit up the oven. She had already made round shaped chunks from the batter.

She put a frying pan on the oven, and when it was hot enough, she poured some oil. There was a splashing sound when the oil touched the pan. Just at that moment Aunt Catty called from outside.

‘Sister, are you home?’ The kids had their hearts in their mouths. Mother-hen replied from the kitchen, ‘What? You have come sister? What happened? Why are you so late? I was looking forward to your arrival. So much work, how can I do everything alone? I was just frying the initial batch of *pitha*. There is no space in the kitchen, please sit on the verandah outside, I am coming with some hot and crispy *pitha* for you.’

Now, Mother-hen was frying the *pitha* while serving them to her kids. She had no time for entertaining her cat-sis. The cat sat outside on the verandah in the cold for some time. Winter had already arrived. She was shivering. A cold wind was blowing through the vast, unobstructed paddy fields. She was so angry that she was shaking. She kept contemplating, ‘That stupid hen invited me over here, and now she is humiliating me in this way. She didn’t have the courtesy to say hello to me let alone bring some food or water. Okay! I’ll teach her some manners. I’ll eat her little munchkins one by one. Then she’ll learn.’

Just then, mother-hen arrived with a plate full of hot, crispy *pitha*. The cat was overjoyed. Sitting out in the cold, she hadn’t realised that she was very hungry. She gobbled down all the delicious *pithas*. Then mother-hen brought a glass full of water. The cat thanked her for her hospitality and while leaving said, ‘Those were delicious, sister. I’ll send my kids over to your house. They’ll be delighted to eat such yum-yum fried *pithas*. They haven’t eaten them in such a long time.’

Mother-hen was furious. ‘First, she ate a whole plate full of *pitha* all be herself, now she will send her children! What does she think? I don’t have any other work or what! And besides, I haven’t eaten one single piece. Okay, let them come. I will prepare such *pitha* that they’ll remember the taste their whole lives.’ The chicks were happy to see their aunt leave, but when they got to know about the imminent arrival of her children, their hearts started pounding again. Mother-hen was

smart but gross. The next thing she did was unthinkable. She collected some cock/hen poop from all around the house and mixed it with the leftover rice powder and deep fried it. After some time, the kittens came meowing. Mother-hen had no other choice. She ought to teach that silly cat a lesson. She gave the kittens the specially made *pitha* on a banana leaf. The kittens had never seen such food. They gorged on it. But after a moment they realised that the taste and smell were highly unpleasant. They were confused because their mom had told them that they were delicious. But these ones tasted like poop. Poor little things, they were staring at each other's faces. Then they all left. While returning home some of them puked too.

The cat was enraged hearing this from her kids. 'I'll not spare her. She gave my little kids shit to eat! I will not spare her. I'll eat all of them right now,' she was shaking with anger. She sprinted towards the hen-house. Mother-hen was cleaning the messy kitchen after having sung her kids to sleep. She had kept some *pitha* so that her children could eat it the next day. Suddenly she heard the cat's voice, 'Sister, what did you do?' Mother-hen smelt danger. 'The cat has come at such a late hour; something must be wrong,' she sensed. She casually replied, 'What happened, sis? You're here at this hour? Anything wrong?'

'What did you feed my children? They're puking and feeling unwell. They said that you served them rotten food. And it tasted like shit. Why did you do such a thing?' Aunt Catty asked angrily.

'What are you saying? Oh, now I realise. I made a mistake feeding them *pitha*. What can I do? We are not very rich people. Didn't have *ghee* and all. Cooked those with what we have. Please forgive me, it's my fault,' mother-hen replied in a soft tone.

'Okay, okay. I came to inquire about this. Another thing, where are you sleeping tonight?' the cat asked slyly.

Mother-hen felt a thud inside her heart. She spoke carefully, 'Sister, we'll sleep by the furnace, on the bamboo shelf.'

After the cat had wandered off, mother-hen woke up the chicks. They were fast asleep after eating plenty of *pitha*. She spoke to them

in a hushed voice, ‘Listen carefully, your Aunt Catty has just left. Tonight, we can’t sleep in the kitchen. As scary as it may sound, your aunt is coming to eat all of us. We’ll sleep in another room. Let’s go hide before she comes.’ Then she took them to the adjoining room and instructed them to keep quiet when their aunt came. The kids were fast asleep after some time. But mother-hen was awake. The night was long. Deep into the night, suddenly, the door opened with a screeching sound, and the cat was there looking for them. She was humming,

Will eat them all– Meow

Will kill them all– Meow

Deep into the night

Nobody will fight

They are all cowards

They’ve lost their sight

Will eat them all– Meow

Will kill them all– Meow

Meow Meow Meow!

Singing she entered the kitchen, but there was no sign of the hen family. She searched thoroughly but couldn’t find any trace of them. She was very angry; her face distorted with rage. Before leaving she ate all the remaining *pitha* left for the chicks and defecated all over the kitchen.

2.4

The next day, mother-hen woke up a little bit late. She went to the kitchen and was horrified to see what the cat had done to the place. It had been torn down and filled with filth. Further, the cat had eaten all the remaining *pitha*. Out of anger and pain, tears rolled down mother-hen’s cheeks. In the evening, the cat arrived again. Seeing her the

chicks went inside the house. The cat didn't pay any attention to them. She said, 'Sis, I have come to you looking for a thing.'

'What do you want?' the hen asked.

'Will you give me your winnowing fan?'

'Of course.'

While taking the fan the cat asked again, 'Where shall you sleep tonight?'

'Tonight! Tonight, we'll sleep on the deck.'

After the cat had left, mother-hen called her kids and said, 'Listen, tonight we'll sleep inside a *marowa*^s okay! Your aunt will again come tonight.'

In the evening, she fed the chicks and went inside the *marowa* to sleep. The chicks were not well. They had eaten more *pitha* than they could digest. This led to indigestion and upset stomachs. They were farting occasionally and had gone to the bathroom several times. Inside the congested atmosphere of the *marowa*, they were also feeling uncomfortable. Mother hen urged them to be quiet. Again, at midnight the cat came dancing and singing,

Will eat them all– Meow

Will kill them all– Meow

Deep into the night

Nobody will fight

They are all cowards

They've lost their sight

Will eat them all– Meow

Will kill them all– Meow

Meow Meow Meow

Entering the house, she jumped on to the deck but couldn't find them. 'Again, they have tricked me,' the cat said. Still she didn't lose hope. She searched and searched. Inside the *marowa*, a serious problem surfaced. After hearing the cat's cry, the chicks were shaking with fear. The poor little things were so frightened that they were

having stomach cramps. When the cat, after searching the whole place, came near the *marowa*, out of fear all the chicks farted in unison. It was like a loud eruption, like several trumpets blowing together. Such was its sound that the *marowa* broke into several pieces. Thinking there had been an explosion the cat took to her heels. She thought that the hen had planted an explosive to kill her. She said to herself, 'Whoa! That was close. That stupid hen had planned to kill me. But I am alive. I'll come again tomorrow. She can't protect herself or her children every day.'

The next morning, mother-hen was very anxious. She knew that the cat would come again. Every day she was trying to kill them. This couldn't go on forever. She had a life; her kids had a future. She hadn't slept for the past three nights. Then she devised a plan to put a check on the cat once and for all. She took a big pan from the kitchen and went to the fields and brought five or six catfish. Then she smoked some tobacco. While smoking she made some sharp knives out of bamboos. She took these knives and planted them inside the bamboo fence all around the kitchen. She put the catfish inside the water jar and placed it next to the oven. Then she went inside and brought two rotten eggs and placed them inside the fire place and then spoke to herself, 'Let's see, sister, who wins today.'

That evening again the cat came. This time her excuse was returning the winnowing fan. They didn't talk much. There was tension of things unsaid. They looked at each other carefully with intense eyes. Both of them wanted to know the other's next step. To ease the tension, the hen asked, 'What did you do with the fan?' 'Nothing much, winnowed the rice grains. Will see if I can make some *pitha* for my kids,' the cat replied. Before leaving she asked, 'Where are you sleeping tonight?'

'In the kitchen, near the fireplace,' the hen replied coldly.

It was dusk. Mother-hen prepared food for her children. After dinner, they all climbed on to the cross-beam in the kitchen and slept. But mother-hen was awake. The cat came before midnight. She had vowed to kill every single one of them today, and she intended to keep that promise. That's why she came earlier, giving no room for

the opposition to regroup. She moved slowly, crossed the courtyard, then very cautiously opened the door and entered the small hut. She hummed once again,

Will eat them all– Meow

Will kill them all– Meow

Meow Meow Meow

She entered the kitchen. But she couldn't see the hen family. She thought, 'Today I'll not leave this place till I've killed them all. I will search every inch of this house.' At that very moment, mother hen spoke from the cross-beam, 'Hey sister, today we didn't hide. My kids are unwell, and since the room is warm, we slept here. I have kept two eggs for you inside the fireplace. Please blow the fire, boil them and eat. Then you can eat us. Where can we go every day? There is not a place on earth where you can't find us. We are nothing in front of you.'

The cat beamed. She was also hungry and was tempted to eat the eggs. She started blowing the fire in the fireplace. The place was hot. The fire breathed out. She again gave a puff. Then with a huge noise those rotten eggs blasted on the face of the cat and seriously injured her. Reeling with pain she shouted, 'Sister! Sister! Please save me... please.' She was now rolling on the floor.

The hen, controlling her laughter, retorted, 'What happened, sis? What happened?'

'I can't see a thing! My eyes are blinded, they're burning. Oh my god! Where is the water? I have to wash my eyes... please tell me...' she cried.

'Sis, there is a jar of clear water just next to the oven. Please find it and use it.'

The cat thought to herself, 'Ah, I will pour some cold water into my eyes. That will surely make me feel better.'

She found the jar nearby, but the minute she put her hands into the jar, the catfish, all at once, stung her. The cat shouted at the top of her voice, 'Sister, please help me, please. I have committed so many

sins. I am a sinner. Please help me.' Mother-hen replied, 'Sister, just beside the fireplace there's the bamboo fence. Rub your hand there, you'll get relief, I hope.' The cat, with excruciating pain in her eyes and on her hand, was perplexed, bewildered and half-dead. Listening to the hen she crawled towards the fence and rubbed her hands there. But alas! Those knives set by the hen almost cut her hands off. She let out a mind-numbing cry and became unconscious. She didn't regain consciousness that night. The next day, mother-hen found her dead. From that day onwards, cats and hens have never been friends.

3. TETNAI



3.1

The historic town of Udaipur situated in Gomati district was once the capital of Tripura. Today it is famously known for its lakes and temples, but some 100 years ago, it was rather infamous for the huge upsurge created by a circle of thieves in and around the town. In this land of red soil, also known as *Rangamati*, hardly a day went by without some family or the other reporting losses due to theft. The leader of the circle was Tetnai. Nobody knew the identity of the thieves. They came wearing hoods in the dead of night like slithering snakes and sneaked inside the houses and looted everything.

Actually, these thieves were seven women. Under the leadership of Tetnai, the ferocious leader, these seven notorious, extremely skilful thieves walked through the town at night and committed both petty and grand theft. Tetnai was bold, fearless and sharp as a tack. She was like a raging torrent, free in her wildness. She came up with and executed such ideas as people could only imagine in their wildest dreams. She could blend in in any scenario. She was a master of the

craft; nobody had seen such a smart thief before. Despite constant vigilance, she would throw dust in everybody's eyes and steal everything. She would say, 'So few have so much, and so many have so little. Let us bring some balance.'

However, Tetnai was not happy stealing from the commoners in the city regularly. After all, they were all working-class people with very limited valuable possessions. Stealing from them would negate her whole purpose of bringing balance. Tetnai thought of herself as a woman with a greater purpose. Never in history had the people of Tripura seen a woman thief of this calibre. She wanted more. She wanted to commit a big heist. A heist that would change everybody's lives. A dangerous idea crept into her mind. She fixated on stealing from the king's palace. She set up a perfect plan. It seemed easy. First, she would go to the king's court and ask for a job at the royal palace. It could be any job—washing clothes, cleaning the floors, serving as an errand girl or anything of that sort, it didn't matter. Following her employment, she'd steadily learn the nitty-gritty, the daily conduct of the king's residence. After studying and knowing every nook and cranny of the palace by heart, she would call her friends and show them the rooms filled with gold, diamonds and other riches, and they would steal everything. After the heist they would never have to steal or earn a penny for the rest of their lives and for generations to come.

The next day, Tetnai, taming her nervousness, went to the king's court and sought permission to meet the king to ask for a job. But she was rejected instantly. It wasn't easy to meet the king. The king was a busy man; he didn't have time to deal with common people like her. Tetnai came back dejected but didn't lose hope. She assured her comrades that she would positively find a job at the palace by hook or by crook. At last, after constant requests and pleading, one day she got permission to meet one of the king's ministers. In a very dramatic fashion, she narrated to the minister her poor condition and how desperately she needed a job. Struck by Tetnai's beauty and pleased by her passionate description, the minister's heart melted. He felt for her. He thought that Tetnai was an honest and poor woman in dire need of

a job and that he was doing her a favour. So he employed Tetnai, and she was given the responsibility of cleaning the rooms, washing clothes and attending to the queen.

3.2

Tetnai was very happy. Her seven thief-friends were informed about her new job. Tetnai stayed in the palace and did her duties with utmost dedication and diligence. During her stay, she observed everything in the palace, noting every detail of the household and its people. After only a few days people were impressed by her honest behaviour and hardworking nature. She even earned the trust of the queen who was so pleased with Tetnai that she showed her the closet where she kept her most precious and invaluable jewels. Days passed and gradually Tetnai became the most popular person in the palace and the go-to-girl for every problem.

After about a month, she requested a vacation to visit her residence. On that day, she held a secret meeting with the circle of thieves. After dinner, they discussed how to approach this heist that they were planning for so long.

Tetnai said, 'There is a door at the side of the lake in the royal residence. I'll be there at midnight. Come stealthily and knock three times on the door.'

The thieves asked, 'What are we going to steal?'

'We'll be stealing from the royal residence only. The queen possesses some of the most beautiful diamond engraved jewellery I have ever seen. If we can steal the ornaments of the queen and the princess, we can live the rest of our lives without doing a thing. Another thing, there is a pot full of gold coins in the queen's room. She keeps it close to herself, even sleeps with it by her side. If we can bag that then we'll be queens ourselves.'

‘We are seven people here. To increase the share, we must steal some expensive utensils from the kitchen too.’

‘Don’t worry about that. Your heads will spin when you enter the kitchen. You have never seen that many utensils.’

The whole night they talked about their strategies, plotting and planning. Tetnai’s thief-friends were thrilled. Till then they had only stolen from the commoners, the middle-class people of the town. Now that they had got this chance to become some of the richest people in the kingdom, they couldn’t control their excitement. Their discussion continued till dawn. The next day, Tetnai returned to the palace and again engaged herself with her daily work. The date of the heist was gradually coming nearer. Tetnai had goose bumps. She became more and more restless.

3.3

The day of the heist finally arrived. Everybody finished dinner in the first hour of the night. Tetnai, after cleaning up everything, went to sleep like everybody else, but in reality she was awake. When the clock struck midnight, she woke up. With caution she observed her surroundings. There was silence everywhere. But the whistling of the guards and the sound of snoring coming from some of the rooms far and near disturbed its profoundness. Tetnai’s mind was full of possibilities, each more fanciful than the last. A spark came to her eyes. Crouching carefully, she went to the side of the back-door and waited there, alert and attentive. She was trembling with excitement. Suddenly she heard three distinct knocks on the door. She opened the door quickly and let her friends in. Everybody, aware of their roles, instantly got to work. They had steady nerves, but the gravity of the situation made them twitch and think of the worst-case scenario. They were stealing from the king after all. If caught, there was only one punishment—death. Tetnai snapped them out of their negative

thoughts and in a low voice instructed them to do the job as per plan. Tetnai had already shown them the blueprint of the house, which she had drawn based on her observations during their meeting. So now it was time for the final execution.

At first, they entered the princess' room. It was a lavish room with all kinds of comforts. The lush curtains framing the bed created an awe-inspiring effect. The princess was fast asleep. Tetnai knew where the jewellery was kept; she slowly opened the closet and brought out the box and handed it to her friends. On opening it they couldn't find the pearl necklace that the princess wore all the time. 'Surely she is wearing it while sleeping. How do I collect it from her neck?' Tetnai was deep in thought. Then she entered the room again. This time she went alone and stood by the princess and saw that she was in deep sleep. Without any further delay, with the swift use of her hands and deft precision, she tore off the necklace from her neck and gave it to her friends. The thieves were overjoyed.

Then one after another, they entered the rooms of the other queens and stole every valuable object—ornaments, expensive dresses, whatever met their eyes. Only one room was left, that was of the first queen, where there was the pot of gold. It was almost dawn, but Tetnai couldn't control her temptation of stealing that pot. She let her friends wait for her outside and entered the queen's room. On entering she saw that the pot of gold was kept just beside her bed, on a small table. She kept still for a moment and sensed that the queen was sleeping like a log. Then very carefully, she picked up the pot and came outside. Her friends were worried sick thinking about her. They wanted to go to the kitchen and loot all the costly utensils. They didn't have much time left. They put the valuable clothes in a bag. Then they divided into two groups, one comprising of four people, and the other of three. It was decided that the team of four would steal the utensils from the king's kitchen, and the other three (one of them was Tetnai) would wait for them with the ornaments and the pot of gold. They didn't want to waste any more time. The guards could come any minute. They entered the kitchen.

At that moment, the bell tolled for the third hour—immediately the guards shouted in a long-drawn voice, ‘The third hour of the night, everyone careful.’ Announcing this they entered the residence to patrol. After coming near the back-door they sensed something was wrong. The door was slightly open, and a faint noise was coming from the kitchen. They were at once alert and suspected that the thieves had entered. One of them called out, ‘Who is there?’

Hearing the guard’s voice, Tetnai and the circle of thieves rushed towards the main entrance. Seeing them run, the guards also started running after them. There was chaos. In the meantime, all the other guards were informed, and they quickly came from all sides towards the main gate to stop them. But Tetnai and her team crossed the gate by the skin of their teeth and ran on the highway. The guards were still chasing them. The team of four ran faster and went to a safer place, but the other three including Tetnai were caught. When she sensed that she might get caught too, Tetnai put the ornaments into the pot of gold and threw it into a nearby ditch covered by water-hyacinths.

The guards came running and caught them. Then they called their female counterparts. They started beating them. They were thrashed, knocked and thrown into prison. The guards were shocked to see Tetnai. ‘The innocent-looking girl from the residence is the culprit!’ they fumed.

3.4

During the time of the heist, the king and his wards had gone hunting. So the thieves were kept in prison till his arrival. Tetnai was filled with tremendous guilt and embarrassment. Never in a million years did she think she would be caught like this. Yes, she wanted to live deeper instead of living longer, but this was the last possible outcome she had expected. While in prison she contemplated and tried to figure out why such a disaster of epic proportions had taken place. This was the

first time self doubt crept in. Although she was the leader, she didn't check the back-door before leaving, first mistake. Second, her obsession with the pot of gold. She took an ample amount of time to steal it. She had planned to keep the pot for herself.

Tetnai realised that once the king returned, her friends couldn't be saved. They were doomed. Now, what about her? She was thinking of how to escape death. She refused to eat anything. Watching her like this, her two friends became very anxious. They were thinking of their families. They also stopped eating. Finally, the king returned and heard the news. He was furious. He immediately sentenced them to death. He ordered them to be guillotined in front of everyone. After the king's announcement, the stage was set, the wooden structure erected, the blade sharpened. The executioner was summoned. An atmosphere of gloom surrounded the palace. With one sharp signal from the executioner, Tetnai's friends fell one by one. Now it was time for Tetnai. She was the chief convict, having committed treason of the highest order. As she was walking through the gangway, she could see that the ropes had been tightened for her, the blades sharpened. There was the naked raw steel. It feared nothing, hid nothing. One moment and her head would be separated from her shoulders. Tetnai took a deep breath. For the first time in her life she felt vulnerable.

Before they could take her to the structure of doom she pleaded with the executioner, 'Friend, I am aware of my fate, but please, I want to meet the king once before my execution. This is my last wish.'

Listening to her, the hangman cackled like a maniac, 'You little thief! Why do you want to meet the king? No way I'm letting you. Prepare for your death.'

Tetnai begged and pleaded for mercy, 'For god's sake, please fulfil my last wish, please. I want to suggest something to the king for the prosperity and improvement of the economic condition of his kingdom.' This made the executioner think. After giving it some thought, he said, 'Okay. You have my permission. Let's see what His Majesty says or decides.'

Since there was a tradition of listening to the last wish of a soon-to-be-executed prisoner, the king agreed. Tetnai was presented before the court in chains and shackles. The king asked her what her last wish was. Tetnai instantly said, 'My majesty, I want to tell you that there is something I know through which you can improve the economic condition of the state.'

'What is it?' the king asked.

'You have to sow gold in the soil. From there crops of gold will grow. Gold in the fields, golden trees, golden leaves, fruits, gold everywhere. Your economy will reach new heights. Your wealth will know no bounds,' Tetnai said convincingly.

Everybody in the courtroom was stunned: there was rumbling inside the house, people whispering about what they had just heard. The king's mouth was wide open. He couldn't believe it. He thought to himself, 'What is this woman saying? Is she mad?' But there was a believability in the way Tetnai spoke that he couldn't ignore. Plus, he felt a sudden temptation for more gold. He asked, 'What are you talking about? Is this possible?'

Tetnai spoke confidently, 'Definitely, my king, it is possible. I can show you how. Please let me prove it to you.'

The king thought for some time. Then he said, 'Okay, I am accepting your proposal. Tell me, how can I help you?'

Tetnai was relieved. Her plan had worked. The chains were removed, shackles taken off. Then in a more confident tone, she said, 'Your majesty, please provide me with 50 acres of land near the palace and also one pair of cows. I will first level the field and will let you know before sowing the gold seeds.'

At once the king ordered his minister to give Tetnai 50 acres of land near the royal palace and a pair of healthy cows. The minister, without any delay, sanctioned everything according to the king's order. The king, however, reminded his minister that Tetnai was a royal convict and should be under constant vigilance.

So, under close observation, Tetnai started farming on the 50 acres of land. For one month she levelled the surface, flattened it and fluffed up the soil. The king kept close tabs. After some days, Tetnai came to the king and said, 'My king, the soil is ready for sowing. I have to smash a gold-disc into fine powder, make gold seeds out of it and plant them tomorrow. Since it is a special occasion, I request you to be present tomorrow in the field along with everybody.' Immediately the king ordered his minister to give her a large golden disc. She had to burn the midnight oil to smash that gold disc into fine powder.

The next day, the momentous occasion arrived. Tetnai was going to showcase something that had never been done before. The king was present with his queens, the princess, relatives and the members of his court. There were soft whispers. People couldn't believe they were going to see something so extraordinary that it could change their lives forever. Tetnai kept the gold dust in a small plate. She said, 'My king, now it is time for planting the golden seeds under the soil, but one thing, sir...'

'What?' the king asked impatiently.

Tetnai replied, 'What we are doing here is something very pure. Only the purest person can sow the golden seeds. They have to be planted by the most honest being here, who has never stolen anything from anyone. Otherwise, it's not going to work. But, my majesty, I am a thief, a thief with the lowest moral conscience, I must say. I cannot do this. It will not work. So I am requesting anyone pure of heart, who has never stolen anything in his/her life to come forward and do the honours.'

The king asked everyone, but no one answered the call. There was a numbing silence. Everyone was uncomfortable. Then Tetnai asked the king, 'Sir, nobody is agreeing, so I'm requesting you to do the honours.' The king laughed at this and said, 'I am also not pure by heart. I also stole coins from my father's pockets during childhood. So, if I plant the seeds, nothing will happen.'

Listening to the king, Tetnai humbly said, 'Your majesty, it seems everyone present here has stolen something at some point in his or

her life. It is clear that nobody is pure of heart. Everybody is a thief. Then why am I the only one who is getting a death penalty? Everybody should be punished too, am I not right?’

An eerie silence prevailed. Everybody was looking at each other’s faces. The king sensed trouble. He couldn’t reject Tetnai’s argument completely. It had solid grounds. He couldn’t help but praise Tetnai’s intelligence and presence of mind. ‘You’re smart Tetnai, I give you that,’ the king said. Tetnai replied, ‘Truth makes the tongue smart your highness.’ The king decided to give Tetnai the container filled with gold dust and set her free. The king asked her, ‘So now that you’re free, what are you going to do the gold dust Tetnai? Tetnai replied, ‘I will bring balance sir.’

As she was walking down the road, she was relieved. Finally, she was free. Carrying the gift, she marched towards her house. After walking some distance, she came to a place where, by the side of the road, there was a ditch filled with water-hyacinths. She soon recognised the place, looked around, got down and retrieved the pot full of gold and ornaments that she had thrown away. She became one of the richest persons in the whole state of Tripura and never stole anything again.

If you find a rich person now, wearing lots of gold, don’t forget to ask him/her, whether he/she knows anyone by the name Tetnai.

4. A FOX OR A FAUX!



There was once a time, very long ago, when a fox became friends with a *jumia*.⁶ The fox lived inside a hole just beside the *jumia*'s land. Those were fine days under the summer sun. The sky blazed blue, and the sun was in a celebratory mood, free and bright. The trees by the side of the hills rose to the occasion and donned their favourite hues while the flowers and scattered rainbows smiled everywhere. During the daytime when the *jumia* worked on his land, the fox came out and chatted with him, and the pair smoked tobacco in a hookah made of bamboo for hours. Gradually they became the best of friends.

One day the *jumia* told the fox, 'Listen, today I will be attending a function at a friend's place, so I won't be meeting you tonight. I will return tomorrow morning.' Learning about the invitation the fox was curious and engulfed by thoughts of various mouth-watering dishes and desserts that would be prepared at that friend's house and was tempted to taste them. Unable to control his urge he told his friend, 'I have an enormous fondness for delicious food my friend. For so long I haven't tasted good food cooked by humans. Ages ago, I had an

opportunity to attend one function. And god, it was a blessing! Such delicious food! I will never forget it. Please let me accompany you.'

The *jumia* was unsettled listening to his friend's proposition. How could he bring an animal like a fox into the community? What would his friends say? Moreover, the savage dogs at his friend's residence might chase the fox and try to kill him. Also, how could he jeopardise his own reputation for this? Perplexed by these thoughts but also not wanting to hurt his friend's feelings, he said, 'Friend, it would really be a pleasure to take you there; we could have talked about so many different things. But...'

'But what?' asked the fox.

'Nothing, I mean, I was thinking that my friend doesn't know you, what will he think? And...' the *jumia* spoke with some hesitation.

'And what? Tell me friend,' the fox asked.

'I was saying that there might be a pack of dogs at his house, and they might not react in a very friendly way,' *jumia* explained.

'Oh! Is this what you're worried about? Don't you worry. I will go with you in such a manner that not even your friend, let alone the dogs, will be able to recognise me. And anyway, it will be late in the evening when we reach your friend's house, and in the dark, he will not notice me. And I know how to trick a stupid dog. Listen, I will find a way to crawl under your friend's bed in the bedroom. You just bring me all the food that is cooked—fish, chicken, mutton whatever, one by one. Do you understand?' asked the fox mischievously.

'But...'

'What?'

'There is still a problem,' the *jumia* replied.

'Again? Okay tell me, what is it? Let me solve it for you.' The fox seemed very confident.

'I was thinking that at night when the foxes in the forest start howling and cry in unison, will you be able to control yourself? At that time if...' The *jumia* seemed really concerned.

‘Ha ha ha! You are worried that I will also HOWL and CRY with them! That is so foolish! Is this the thing you’re so concerned about? Okay, don’t bother. I promise you that I will control myself. Now everything is sorted, let’s go.’ Having said this, the fox started getting ready to go.

The *jumia* was reluctant but had no other alternative. So both of them embarked on a journey towards the friend’s house, walking through the hilly terrain.

When they reached the *jumia*’s friend’s house, evening had just fallen. The air had become much cooler. Now there was an imminent danger. The question of how he would enter the house with the fox was eating up the *jumia*. He didn’t even know where the dogs were. If they suspected anything, there would be hell to pay! Realising that something was bothering his friend, the fox asked, ‘What are you thinking? Tell me.’

‘I am worried how I will take you inside,’ the *jumia* blurted.

‘Listen, I am hiding behind this banana tree. It is dark now; your friend will not be able to see me,’ the fox replied.

‘That I understand, but when are you going to enter the bedroom?’ the *jumia* asked.

‘Hear me out. I guess your friend is now busy cooking, and the dogs tempted by the smell, will be roaming around the kitchen. I will be observing everything from here. You go inside; when I find a window I will slip into the house, and nobody will notice a thing. Don’t worry. And listen, don’t forget to bring fried rice and a good portion of sumptuous meat with you. Oh, and also, *Bangu*.⁷ How can I forget that! Ah! So many days have passed since I tasted some delicious *bangu*.’ It was all well planned in the fox’s head.

The *jumia* went inside his friend’s house. The fox was right. His friend was occupied in the kitchen and the dogs were relaxing beside him. The friend’s wife was really happy to see the *jumia*. He had come to their place after many days. For the occasion, she had herself brewed some rice wine. After the food was prepared, they sat

together and started drinking wine from a costrel made of bamboo. The wife started singing a tribal song. The fox, with his watchful eyes, was observing everything. When the *jumia* and his friends were busy drinking and singing, he looked around and very prudently slipped into the bedroom. Nobody saw him. He was eagerly waiting for his friend to bring him all the mouth-watering dishes.

The *jumia* and his friends were having a blast. After some time, they realised that it was getting late. So they came back to the dining area, but soon found out that they hadn't arranged for the banana leaves on which they were to eat. So the friend and his wife went to the jungle to cut banana leaves. At that same moment, the *jumia* took some fried rice, meat and *bangu* on a dish and hurriedly ran to the bedroom. He found that the fox had been hiding under the bed and was salivating thinking about the food. He was overjoyed to see the food and instantly started gulping it down. The *jumia* said, 'Friend, I have brought this food very cautiously, don't blow your cover, don't howl at night. I just wanted to remind you.' The fox was so busy eating, the *jumia*'s words made no sense to him. He just nodded once.

After finishing the food, the *jumia* and his friend slept on the bed under which the fox was lying. The wife slept in another room. The friend and his wife were fast asleep, but the *jumia* could barely rest; he was worried sick thinking about the fox and what would happen if he howled! He would also have to help the fox leave the house before sunrise. But the delicious heavy meal was so fulfilling that after sometime the *jumia* too was sound asleep.

The fox didn't sleep. He was afraid that they would smell his body odour. After becoming certain that they were all asleep, he was relieved. A few minutes later he too started feeling drowsy. Long hours of travel along with eating delicious food to the point of being too full had this effect on his body. He was tired. Suddenly at midnight, he woke up hearing loud howls of the foxes in the forest and was about to join them, but could somehow control his emotions. It frightened the life out of him to think about the repercussions if he had actually howled. He tried not to sleep. But after some time, he was dozing again. The foxes

in the forest again let out a loud howl. The fox couldn't control his urge this time. In his sleep, he forgot that he was at a human's house and howled along. The moment he howled, the people in the house woke up. Thinking that a fox has entered the house to eat the cocks/hens, they charged against him. The dogs were also alert; they were waiting for an opportunity like this to embarrass a fox. They also barged in. The fox jumped high and landed on the courtyard outside and ran with his tail between his legs. The fox ran and ran. Behind him he could hear the howls which seemed like jeering laughter targeted at him. He sprinted, swiftly avoiding the various obstructions that came in his way. After some time, while running by a household, he collided with a *dheki*,⁸ which was kept there. His body got stuck in the paddle, and when he tried to come out of it, a rattan basket fell on him, and the handle got stuck in his neck. He sensed that the dogs were near, so he ran with it. His lungs and heart were pumping hard as he sprinted forward. His limbs were exhausted.

He lost track of time while running. Soon he realised that he was deep in the forest and suddenly he noticed that only a few steps away a tigress was playing with her cubs. He had made eye contact with her. Now he was in trouble. He could not flee because then the tigress would jump and eat him. He was worried sick, but he thought of something. He went towards the tigress as if nothing had happened and asked her very casually, 'Hey *marey*,⁹ is friend home?' The tigress was confused, how had her husband befriended a fox? But she held her composure and asked in a deep voice,

'Why, what do need him for?'

'*Marey*, actually your husband, my friend, had borrowed a basket full of paddy on credit. Neither did he return the paddy nor has he paid the money. Look, I have brought the basket around my neck. Help me remove it, then I will tell you everything,' the fox said slyly.

Listening to the well-crafted words of the fox, the tigress was convinced that he was telling the truth. She believed him and behaved cordially. He might have been be a fox, but her husband had borrowed from him. The fox was very happy. After some small talk, he told the

tigress, 'Please tell friend about me, that I had come. I must leave now. It's getting late. Students are waiting for me. I have to teach them.'

After some time the tiger returned. His wife asked him, 'Hey, your friend, the fox had come to our house. You had borrowed paddy from him, he wanted his money.' The tiger was surprised to hear this. He realised what a liar the fox was. He became very angry. He told the tigress, 'Listen, I have never borrowed anything from that stupid fox. He is a liar. Let him come again, I will eat him up.'

After some days, beaming with confidence the fox came to that place again. Like the previous day he thought that the tiger might not be at home. And also, he had a certain affection for the tigress. He looked around and asked, 'Hey, friend's not home?' The tigress didn't tell him the truth that the tiger was actually in the house.

'Oh, bad luck. He's never at home when I come. Although when he was borrowing from me, he said so many things—that he would pay me by tomorrow and made many such promises. Now he'll have to pay me with interest. How can you live with this cheater?' Saying this he went closer to the tigress. The tiger was listening to everything. He was writhing with anger. When he saw that the fox was flirting with the tigress, he couldn't control himself and roared. The fox was terror-stricken; he had not realised that the tiger was could have been inside. Instantly he fled towards the jungle. The tiger gave a giant leap and started chasing him. They were running through the jungle. The fox had the advantage of size. He moved swiftly through the various twists and turns in the forest; the tiger couldn't. After some time, the tiger was inches behind; he had almost caught the fox, but while jumping he landed in the gap between two trees and got stuck. He was stuck so badly that he couldn't move. He became frustrated and was roaring and howling and trying very hard to get out, but the more he tried to escape, the more his body got stuck, and he couldn't move an inch. The fox observed this from a distance. At first, he wanted to come near the tiger and laugh at his face to add insult to injury, but the next moment he decided against it. One never knew, the tiger could free himself and, with one strike of his paw, kill him. After some time the

tiger became tired of this unending endeavour to get out. Perhaps his ribs were also broken, his pupils dilated. He was almost on the verge of passing out. The fox now very carefully came behind the tiger and started kicking and hitting him with a log and biting him. On the one side, the tiger couldn't move, and now on the other the fox had come up with a barrage of offences from behind, so he couldn't defend himself. The tiger was helpless. Eventually, he collapsed. The fox examined the body and was reassured that the tiger wasn't alive any more. His happiness knew no bounds.

Soon after, he once again went to the tigress. He was panting and, while at it, started fake crying. Then with a very subdued voice he said to her, '*Marey*, a tragedy has befallen you. What a sad day.' The tigress couldn't fathom what the fox was saying. 'What happened? What kind of tragedy?' she asked. Then the fox, seemingly very concerned, said to her, 'Your husband, my friend has killed himself. He was so sorry for not paying my loan back that he preferred not to live anymore.'

The tigress was stunned. The whole world seemed to collapse around her. Never had she imagined that such a tragedy would strike her, destroying her family like this. The person she most dearly loved was no more, and she was not ready to believe it. She couldn't cry. Grief dried up her tears. She stayed with the tiger's dead body for a long time, and didn't move an inch. The fox tried to console her and after several hours tried to convince her to return home. After this incident, he visited the tiger's house every day and eventually started living there. The tigress remained indifferent. The fox took care of the cubs.

Many years passed. Now the cubs were full grown adults. They called the fox their father. They were educated by the fox. He even took them hunting. The tigress didn't mind this, but every now and then she remembered her lost husband and would growl in anger. She was very proud to see that her cubs had grown up to become such smart adults. 'If only their father was alive,' she thought.

One day, the young tigers asked the fox to take them hunting. The fox was reluctant at first, but, in the end, he decided to go. They told

him that they would go deep inside the forest and scare the deer, pigs and rabbits out towards the fox, and the fox could catch them and keep them till they came out. They roared into the forest, and all the animals, scared of them, came running in the direction of the fox. The fox was flustered by the gradual turn of events. He couldn't capture a single animal. The tiger cubs were very surprised to see that their father had managed to capture only a wild rooster. They were disappointed. The fox felt ashamed but didn't let it appear on his face. He said 'Look, all those animals that you scared off called me uncle or maternal-uncle or something like that and pleaded to let them go. I am a very kind person, you know. How could I capture them after that, let alone kill them? And I am old too. Don't you realise? Okay enough hunting for today, let's go.'

They came back home with a pig, one deer and one rooster. The tigress cooked a delicious meal for them. First, the fox ate and went to the other room to relax. Then the kids and their mother started eating. While having lunch the cubs told the tigress, 'Do you know mother, father couldn't catch a thing. He is bad at hunting. We sent so many animals towards him, but he could only capture a rooster. We sense that he is old now.'

Then tigress said, 'Listen to me, he is not your father; he is a fox. Your father was a huge tiger. As big as a small hillock. He told me that your father had borrowed some paddy from him and failed to pay back. The fox came to our house and asked for his money. One day, worried that he could never repay the debt, your father killed himself and left us all alone. The fox told me that your father had entrusted him to take care of us. And from that day onwards, the fox has been staying here, and you call him your dad.'

The fox was eavesdropping and heard everything the tigress said. He knew that the young kids would not forgive him. He would have to flee. At that moment, the cubs roared and jumped to catch him. The fox instantly got up and started running through the forest. The tiger cubs were after him. After some time the fox realised that he was not as fast as he used to be. It would only be a matter of time before

they caught and devoured him. They were young and agile and their blood was boiling with rage. Suddenly he saw a temple in the middle of the forest. In front of the temple there was a pot with bees inside. He instantly thought of a plan. He took that pot carefully on his lap, closed the opening with a lid and started beating it like a drum. The hundreds of bees inside started buzzing, and a strong but weird sound came out of the pot. The fox didn't stop; he continued playing like a deft percussionist.

The tiger cubs saw that the fox was in a very joyous mood and was playing something. They were curious. They forgot why they were chasing him. They came near and asked, 'Father, what are you playing? Please let us play it.'

The fox, like a wise saint told them, 'Listen to me, this is not a normal drum; it belongs to a king named *Subrai*. I last saw it being played on the king's wedding. You need special permission to play this drum. One has to seek permission from King *Subrai* himself. You take this and wait here. I am going to ask for permission. You start playing only when I instruct you to.'

Then he went behind some bushes nearby and hid, maintaining a safe distance. After some time, he shouted, 'Start playing.'

At once the tiger cubs started beating the drum and what a scene it was! They pounded on it and beat it with such power that it broke into half and thousands of frustrated bees came out and stung them left, right and centre. The cubs couldn't take this kind of pain. They were wincing in pain, and after some time their bodies gave up and collapsed. Seeing everything, the battered old fox started walking towards his home. It had been ages since he had had a conversation with his friend, the *jumia*. He dared not to go to the tigress. That chapter was closed.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE



In the earlier stories, I have flexed my imaginative muscles, but while translating *A Fox or a Faux!* I have tried to be as faithful as possible to the original text. Although, in this story, I have occasionally described events, character motivations and so on in a different light, in my own way, it has been very minimal in comparison to the previous ones. Part of the reason why I chose to do so is because I wanted to point out how these stories, or so-called folk-narratives were originally contrived and why they need to be retold or reimagined or even turned upside down to suit the present orientation of culture, behaviour and thought.

This is a story about survival—about a fox, who from the very outset has been portrayed as lonely, unwanted and weak. He is always trying to find a home for himself, whether consciously or unconsciously. It is only through his quick-witted nature and unorthodox ways of handling things that he has managed to survive not only the ire of the humans but also the wrath of the animals, his own brethren. He is definitely an outcast in his own realm. There is a picaresque quality to this story, which makes the lead character much more flawed and capricious.

Also, the fox possesses qualities that can be deemed anti-heroic. Such characters, who lack the traditional attributes of conventional heroes, like courage or morality, are generally less explored in the world of folklore. In the previous story, Tetnai, the eponymous character has some roguish tendencies but has a sense of morality in her which keeps her from becoming a full-fledged anti-hero. But in this story, the fox is a prime example of a desperado who wants to control his own narrative in whichever way he deems right, which inevitably makes him flawed and distasteful at times.

The story is conventional. It follows similar tropes of patriarchy that have been an issue with such stories. The female characters are domesticated, meek, docile and not at all empowered. I would therefore like to mention some suggestions as to how this narrative can be modified or corrected:

- i) By making the tigress a single mother, giving her a backstory. In that account, she dies while chasing the fox in place of the tiger, leaving the cubs behind in the hands of the fox who mistreats them, thus becoming a character similar to Count Olaf.
- ii) The character of the fox as an anti-hero can be further explored by providing a context behind his actions and the survival instinct in him. This can also be done through an exploration of his position in society as an outcast, making him a picaresque-like character—kind of a rogue who lives by his wits.
- iii) By turning the story into a revenge tragedy, where the fox becomes the chief villain—a lousy character who suffers the same fate as that of other villains.

It is obviously important that these stories be reimagined, but it is equally important to allow the children to locate the problem and to realize its severity. I hope this note serves that purpose.

NOTES

1. The Kokborok name for a poisonous fly found in the forests of Tripura.
2. Chicken curry.
3. A sweet dish popular in the eastern Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha and the South Indian state of Kerala as well as states in the North East, especially Assam and Tripura. Over time it has been interspersed with the indigenous culture of Tripura. Here lies the beauty of Tripura's mixed culture. Here lies the beauty of Tripura's mixed culture, where there has been an immense sharing of traditions, customs, and even food habits. There are various kinds of *pitha* but the most popular one is *pati-sapta*, which is made with rice powder, coconut, milk, kheer and sugar.
4. Overlapping December and January of the Gregorian calendar, it marks the beginning of the winter season.
5. A large earthen jar or vat.
6. An indigenous farmer in Tripura who earns his living practising *jhum* cultivation.
7. A delicious preparation made with rice.
8. An agricultural tool used for threshing to separate rice grains from chaff.
9. Friend's wife.

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