

Ghunucha

By Late **Sarat Chandra Goswami**

(Translated from the original Assamese by **Arundhati Nath**)

It was the rainy season. The Sun God made his exit so slowly that no one realized He was gone. It was drizzling — splash splash...sploosh sploosh. The sky was overcast. The small bushes and trees were drenched in the spray of raindrops. Patches of mud and puddles adorned the village road. A lady was walking along the narrow lane near the river. One side of her *sadar* covered her head but the Rain God did not spare her and splashed all her clothes. She walked briskly, as if she had an important task at hand. At first glance, she looked to be in her thirties, though a closer look would reveal that she must be around twenty five. She must have suffered some disease or hardship, which had left its mark on her. She wasn't very attractive, but if she lived in reasonable comfort, she would have been simply 'beautiful'. Walking alongside the river, she reached a small thatched hut. The hut was surrounded by small bushes and trees beside the river. The base of the thatched roof looked like the skinny hands of a starved man. The walls of the hut were caked in mud. The mud had come off due to the incessant rains, the wind and the work of various insects. The home turf was a small one — unclean, covered with weeds. One corner of it had four posts of the *taatxaal**. In the thin streak of light emanating from the cottage, a tragic but unclear sound could be faintly heard. The lady walked up to the lawn and stood there. She moaned, "Oh God, my son!"

The hut belonged to her. The only hope in her world was her five year old son Maniram. He was suffering from fever for the last twelve days. On the first few days, the fever was intermittent, but now the fever is continuous and seems to be burning her tender boy. The poor widowed mother couldn't bring the doctor home; she didn't have the means to pay him.

Having no other option she visited the village doctor. She only hoped to bring a pill for her suffering son. She knew how the doctor treated the poor; she took some money with her after selling four of her bangles. She lighted the lamp before leaving for the doctor's place as she knew she'll return late.

Her name is Ghunucha. Her fortune wasn't always like the present. She was the daughter of a rich man. Her father-in-law and husband were very wealthy too. However, fortune doesn't remain the same. The wheel of fortune rotates like the wheel of a chariot—it goes up at some points and comes down at others. In this world, the happy also face doom, the sad too experience pleasure. The rich lose their riches and the poor sometimes get rich. Brought up in comfort, Ghunucha got married to a suitable match at an appropriate age. Her happiness and good fortune were objects of jealousy for many.

Unfortunately, her in-laws and the relatives of her father passed away due to cholera, leaving her all alone, to patiently suffer the huge burden of grief. Ghunucha was pregnant at the time of her husband's untimely demise. When she gave birth to a baby boy, Ghunucha though caught in the shackles of grief, could see a ray of hope, like a flash of lightening in a cloudy overcast sky.

However, strong winds of jealousy and greed almost extinguished the little light of hope.

Ghunucha had a relative—he was her father –in –law's brother's son. When everyone else of her family died in cholera, this relative was the first to inherit the family property. In his greed for riches and property, he took utmost care of her for some days.

When he learnt that Ghunucha was pregnant, he could not rest in peace — what if Ghunucha's unborn child becomes the sole inheritor of the property? Though he tried to get rid of the child even when it was in Ghunucha's womb, he wasn't successful. He still had hope –if the baby was

a girl child. But eventually, Ghunucha gave birth to a baby boy, much against the hopes of her greedy relative. He felt a fire of jealousy burning within him.

He got in touch with the village arbitrators to prove that Ghunucha was a slut and her son was an illegitimate child. Money could make the arbitrators do anything under the sun. They falsely proved that Ghunucha was a whore and had given birth to an illegitimate child. Thus, her relative managed to become the owner of her property. The application for registration also got approved at the sub-registrar's office. Power, money and influence made it all too easy.

Devoid of any help or support Ghunucha was left insulted, deprived and cheated. She had been staying in the small hut near the river, with her only joy and hope—her son, Maniram. She didn't get the property which she was entitled to. Does the law exist for the poor, anyway?

Slowly, three years passed by like the waves in the sea of time. During this time, the happy turned unhappy, and the unhappy found happiness; the sick recovered from their illness and the healthy got sick. Ghunucha's fortune, however, didn't change. For the last three years, she managed to feed her child by begging from others.

Now he had fever. She sold most of her jewellery to get rid of the fever. However, without a proper diet and treatment the initial fever converted to an inability to digest. There was nothing to eat at home if Ghunucha didn't go out and request people to offer her some food. Whenever Ghunucha would go in search of food, Maniram would feast on mangoes, cucumbers and jackfruit, with his friends. This harmful diet made his indigestion worsen turning it into black fever. Day by day, he developed a pot belly, his hands and legs grew thinner and he had sunken eyes. His complexion turned black and the fever affected his appetite. Every symptom of black fever could be seen; the once hale and healthy Maniram turned into a fearful figure like a devil. Ghunucha grew frightened as she watched her child change. She had to do something. She

owned a few sets of *pat silk riha- mekhlis* and a gold ring—the one received when she first met her husband. She had kept these as the fond memories of her husband and treasured them more than her own life.

At that moment, Ghunucha had no alternative. She handed everything over to the village doctor and pleaded with him to treat her ailing son. The village doctor treated Maniram for a month. After that he would come one day and skip the next day. He had been offering treatment for Maniram against Ghunucha's gold ring, in lieu of payment. He said that he could continue with this arrangement only with some new item of value. The doctor felt, Ghunucha must have more valuables; she was a rich man's widow. The crestfallen Ghunucha returned home empty handed cursing her fate. While Maniram's condition worsened, Ghunucha too grew thin and weak without anything to eat.

One day, after Ghunucha had taken a bath in the river, she spotted their family priest. This was the first time she met him after misfortune struck her. She fell at his feet in the hope of getting some solution or respite from her problems. Initially, the priest tried to walk away on seeing Ghunucha, whom he considered an adulterer. Ghunucha's prayer made him stand there for a moment. After Ghunucha had narrated her sorrowful story, the family priest gave her a long speech regarding her 'bad' character and the resultant misfortune of her sins.

She bore the insult and humiliation by putting immense love above those insulting words. As a solution, the priest said to her "There's nothing in this world except devotion to God." If one worships with devotion, worldly sorrows, diseases and sins could do no harm. If Ghunucha performs *pujas* and *naam* and offers prayers, her son would be healed in two days. A simple soul, Ghunucha easily believed these words and planned to offer *pujas* to the Gods. A foreign traveler had once offered a rupee to Ghunucha, after listening to her sorrowful story. She offered

that rupee at the feet of the family priest. The priest walked away, showering boundless blessings like the heavy downpour of the monsoons.

However, Ghunucha's sorrows never came to an end. After begging and pleading for food, Ghunucha worshipped the Gods, made so many offerings of '*prasad*', but her prayers were never fulfilled. Neither the chants or prayers, nor the offerings could cure Maniram. And, one day Maniram silently passed away, leaving his mother all alone in a sea of sorrow. Poor Ghunucha! Her only hope of existence, he too was not in her fate!

Today, Ghunucha is not there, nor is Maniram. There are no relatives of Ghunucha or Maniram either. However, near the river banks, a mad woman would be seen by many travelers. She curved out clay models of God and God men and would torture them in different ways by breaking them, while cursing and grieving. A shrill cry of sorrow breaking the still silence of a peaceful night has also been heard by many.

*cloth weaving traditional loom

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About the author: Sarat Chandra Goswami (1887-1944) was an eminent Assamese writer. He has basically enriched Assamese literature with his short stories. Goswami was a founder member of Asam Sahitya Sabha and elected as a Secretary of the Sabha for the first time. Some well known collections of his short stories include Golpanjoli, Moina, Bajikor and Golpomala.

About the Translator: Arundhati Nath is a freelance feature writer with bylines in The Guardian, BBC Wildlife, The Christian Science Monitor, Mint Lounge, Child magazine and several others. She's an ex-banker and writes full time from her residence in Guwahati.

Occasionally, she dips into children's fiction and poetry in English, Hindi and Assamese. Her work can be read on her website, <http://arundhatinath.com/>