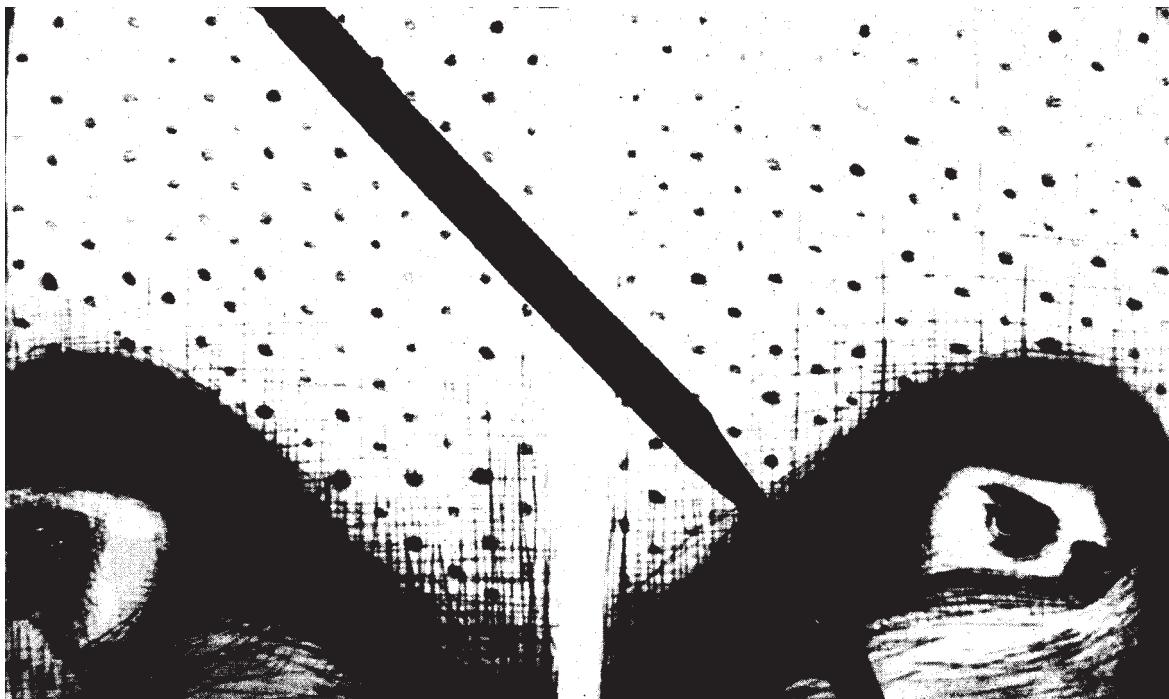


By the Grace of Shasthi

by
Rajshekhar Basu



AFTER performing Shasthi *puija*, Sukumari laid down her son on the *piri*, and, bowing before her husband, took the dust from his feet, Sukumari was twenty four and her husband, Gokul Goswami, fifty four.

"You look ravishing, Suku", exclaimed Gokulbabu, "... like Urvashi rising from the sea.... after a bath."

Sukumari said with folded hands: "I beg you, let me go now. I have been with you these seven years and given birth to six children. Five are gone; one still alive. I'm a wreck and can't bear this any more. I'll surely die if I become pregnant again - and this little boy will die too."

Gokulbabu laughed. "God forbid. Why should you die? Children are born, they live, they die; it all depends on him, that is to say, on one's *karma*. I can tell you that you have now worked out your *karma*. The danger is past there's nothing to fear now."

Gokul Chandra Goswami was subregistrar at Sheoragachi. His was a very cushy job with little work and his own house next to the courthouse. Gokulbabu himself was a scholarly man well read in the 'shastras, not to mention the many Bengali and English novel; he had perused. He was in comfortable circumstances as a trustee of ancestral

property that had been gifted to the gods. In addition, he also engaged in illegal money lending. Seven years ago, after doing the rounds of all pilgrimage spots in the Himalayas, he had ended up at Mansarovar for Kailash *darshan*. On his return, he announced that he had been reborn; he could not therefore continue his relationship with his erstwhile wife and sons. He was going to start a new family. There were no

Shasthi Devi: A household goddess popular in Bengal and worshipped too ensure the wellbeing children. The cat is her familiar.

obstructions to this plan, and Sukumari, an orphan from a poor family, came to his house. Katyayani, his first wife, went away with her three sons to Calcutta where she lived at her brother's place. She received a small monthly allowance from her husband, but all other connections were severed. Her two daughters had already been married off. They lived with their respective inlaws.

Sukumari listened to her husband's words of reassurance and replied: "Don't try and fool me with those false assurances. I have read in the newspapers that there are ways of controlling pregnancies, and the ministers at Delhi think well of such measures. You're so well informed; didn't you know this? Go to the ministers in Calcutta and learn what you can of such things."

Gokulbabu retorted; "Much they know."

"Then ask the chief minister; I've heard he's a doctor."

"Have you gone mad, Suku? It's shameful - such words from the mouth of a woman married to a pure Brahman. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. A little bit of literacy, and you immediately start reading the newspapers and fill your head with, sinful ideas. Are you aware that it is sinful to prevent birth by artificial means? God has created man and woman to propagate the human species. And it's the duty of woman to bear children. How can you presume to go against this writ of god?"

"Well. I've heard that it's a common enough practice these days and I'm afraid for my own life. I'm ignorant and don't know what's right and what's wrong. But don't we all go against the writ of god? God has sent us naked into this world, then why do you wear clothes? Why do you shave? Why have you got those dentures made?"

"Radhamadhav! Don't even bring such words to your mouth, Suku. Your tongue is going to fall off."

"The ministers at Delhi still appear to have their tongues."

"Not for long, I can tell you. Just wait until their sins ripen. One is faithful to God's wishes only as long as one keeps to the *shastras*. Step outside and you're finished. Just remember, there's no way you can avoid what's fated. You were fated to suffer because of the inauspicious star which governs the house for progeny. Just wait till your luck turns and you're bound to be happy. Learn to accept what's already been decided. These are profound thoughts.... I'll explain it all to you some day."

Sukumari remained silent in her despair.

Within six months Sukumari was pregnant again and this time she fell seriously ill. The doctor pronounced it to be an acute case of anaemia with all sorts of other complications. There was some chance of survival if she was taken to Calcutta and provided with expert care. Gokulbabu dismissed this diagnosis and told his wife: "Don't you worry, Suku. Make sure you wear that *moduli* given by Jyotishastriji and keep taking those globules of Bidhu Doctor's. You'll be well in no time."

Just before the Puja, Gokulbabu informed Sukumari: "Haven't gone anywhere for quite some time now. I feel so out of sorts these days. I've added a week to my Puja vacation.... Nareshbabu and his group are going to Ramchshwar and I've decided to join them. Don't worry, dear - there's the part time maid and that servant boy Goopey, and the milkman's wife is going to come around twice a day to look you up. I should be back around Kali Puja."

A few days after Gokulbabu's departure Sukumari's illness worsened. She took to her bed. Three weeks went by - somehow. Then, one evening, she felt as if she were suffocating. A hurricane lamp lit the room but she could not see anything. Her little boy lay next to her. She put her hand on his head and cried out silently: "Jagadamba, I will soon be gone. Who will take care of my son? Ma Shasthi, have mercy on me.... save my Khoka."

Suddenly the room filled with light and Shasthi Devi appeared before Sukumari. She asked, her voice full of kindness: "What do you want, my child?"

Sukumari said: "My life is fast running out. I've heard it is by your will that children are born and your grace ensures their life. You are the goddess who is the mother of us all. Dear mother, I am dying - look after my little boy."

Her lotus hands caressing Sukumari's forehead, the goddess said: "I will see to your son, just you go to sleep."

Sukumari fell asleep. Shasthi Devi called out "Meni!" A huge cat stood before her. A snowwhite body, the head coalblack with a fine parting in the middle and the tail ringed with bangle like stripes. She stood on her hind legs and folded her front paws in greeting. "What is your wish, Ma?" "You're to take care of Khoka." "But Ma, I'm a cat." "Well - become human." In a moment Meni had metamorphosed into a comely young woman. She said: "Ma, I shall certainly look after Khoka. But I too have children; what, is to become of them? I don't worry about the ones from the earlier lot - they've grown up. They'll live off the leftovers from the neighbouring houses or do some stealing or can at least catch moles and rats and manage somehow to fill their stomachs. But the four little ones that haven't been weaned yet, still quite blind. What will happen to them?"

"You will occasionally turn into a cat to feed them."

"But what will the master of the house think? There will be a great to do if Saheb happens to spot me."

"Don't worry. If he does happen to spot you, he too will turn into a cat."

"And then back into a man again"

"Oh no. He'll become a cat for and will never again be able to any trouble. And you won't be stuck here for too long. I shall let you go as soon as we can do something for the boy."

The goddess vanished, Sukumari's

Khoka woke up and started crying. Meni put him to her breast. The hungry boy gurgled in delight at the abundance of milk.

A hackney stopped before the house. Gokulbabu had returned; he was expected at work the day after. He began crying out for his servants; "Where's that Goopey? Get these things down. Don't tell me that wretched maid's run off already. Not a sound indoors. Suku, why don't you come out?"

No one came. He was obliged to take the coachman's help and unload his bedding and sundry items himself. The fare paid, he went into the house enquiring: "Suku, you all right, I hope. How's Khoka? Why didn't you write me?"

In the dim light of the hurricane lamp, Gokulbabu saw a beautiful young woman standing with the baby in her arms.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Meni replied: "I am Menaka, a distant cousin of your wife's. When I heard that Suku *didi* was very ill and quite alone, with no one to look after Khoka, I hurried over."

Gokulbabu was quite gratified. "You did quite right in coming, Menaka. Now that you have come, you should stay on. And how is your *didi*. Poor thing, she appears to be unconscious.... has the fever gone up?"

"*Didi* has just died."

Gokulbabu beat his forehead and lamented loud and long. "Where have you gone?" he wailed, "leaving me behind? And your little one.... And so on in the same vein.

"Do shut up, brother-in-law" said Meni, "Keep your weeping for later. Don't waste any time now. Get some people and arrange for the cremation."

Gokulbabu did so.

A couple of days later Gokulbabu said: "Thank god you'd come over, Menaka. Otherwise who was to feed me or for that matter, look after Khoka? You're such a wonderful creature! Well, since you've taken charge of me, why not make the whole thing permanent. You'll lighten up the house as my wife."

"Hmmm, can't wait a minute can we?" replied Meni. "Why do you rush? What will people say? Let your grief for *didi* die down abit, let's get over the period

me - have you? Don't be so upset, Gosaiji. You'll not find even a teeny spot in my 'character'. I'm a hundred percent pure what they call unblemished. Done so much reading of the *shastras* and never heard of the virgins who are blessed with milk? I'm one of those. From time to time my breasts have milk for three or four months and then for a while the milk dries up. You're lucky to have such a girl in your house. Otherwise, that half starved little thing of yours would have died he hardly got any milk from his own mother."

The uneasiness within Gokulbabu persisted. But he was quite enchanted by Menaka's beauty. He told himself that it was hard to come by a jewel such as this for a wife. "Come what may, I can't let go of Menaka."

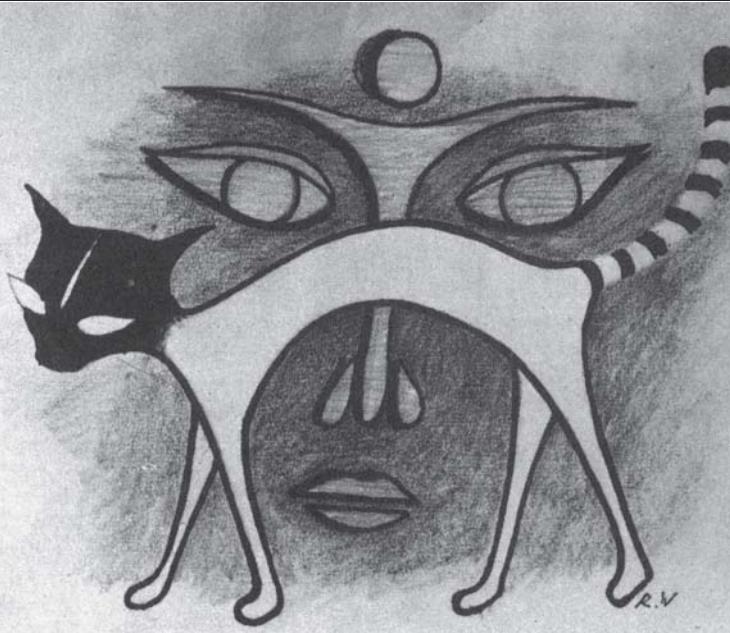
Within two months he had married her.

Gokulbabu was increasingly racked by doubts. Where did Menaka go off so secretly every night? Even on a Sunday afternoon she was not to be found

for a couple of hours: perhaps she slipped off everyday. Gokulbabu had become entangled in domestic bliss. He had no wish to annoy this beauteous woman - his third wife. Nevertheless, he could not help asking one day: "Darling, you seem to vanish sometimes..."

"No need to bother yourself about that" said Menaka. "After all, I'm not a convict in a jail. Do I ever want to know where you go off for your *adda* sessions in the evenings?"

Gokulbabu decided it would not do to keep quiet: he must know whom she went to. He bought a torch and placed it in the bedroom so that Menaka remained unaware of it, but it lay within his reach.



of mourning, the *shraddha* and so on, and then you may speak of such things."

The *shraddha* was over and done with, but Gokulbabu could not rest easy; he found Menaka's goings on rather suspicious. Unable to remain silent, he burst out one day: "I must say, Menaka, your conduct doesn't seem to be quite right. Here you are, an unmarried girl, and yet how do you have milk....? I've noticed you've been nursing Khoka. Have you had kids or what? You'd better own up right away. Beautiful you maybe, but I'm not about to marry a rotten woman."

Menaka laughed. "Been spying on

That night he pretended to fall asleep. At midnight Menaka silently left her bed and went outdoors; Gokulbabu followed her barefooted.

Menaka crossed the courtyard and, opening the outer door, went into a little shed that lay beyond it. The shed was used to store firewood, coal and the like. Menaka had been wearing a white *sari*, so it had been possible to spot her, however indistinctly, in the darkness. But once she entered the shed, she suddenly disappeared. Gokulbabu saw by the light of the torch there was no Menaka. Only a white cat lying down and four kittens suckling her.

Gokulbabu flashed the torch in all possible directions, calling out "Menaka" all the while.

"What's up?" enquired Meni. "Don't shout so - you'll scare my little ones."

Gokulbabu was thoroughly shaken at Menaka's metamorphosis. The torch slipped out of his hands. But he was not surprised that his vision, even in the ensuing darkness, was still quite strong. He only cried out in a grief stricken tone: "Radhamadhav! Bastards in a Brahman household!"

Meni replied: "A Brahman indeed! So what if you can't see your own face, at least try putting your hand behind you,"

Gokulbabu found on putting his hand behind him, that a tail of enormous dimensions had sprung up from his bottom. But he was not surprised even by this. In a furious temper he cried out: "You slut! How many paramours do you have?"

"I don't keep an exact count."

"Get out of my house, this minute!"

"And who are you to throw me out, Gosai? Don't you know ours is a mother run society, what you call a matriarchy. The males don't run the show they're quite redundant. Pals for a moment,... that's all."

Letting out a tremendous yowl, Gokulbabu leapt at Meni, intending to bite her. Meni darted away in a swift movement and called out "Oooraoowooo". (The wellknown linguist, Dipankar Basu, maintains that this is the precise phonetic equivalent of the sound produced by the Marjar mother when she calls her unruly children to order).

Meni had variety in her tastes: she had had several kinds of children by several kinds of husbands. As soon as she let out her call, cats - black, white, pale, brickcoloured and striped, and of other assorted hues, came running to her side. "What's up, Ma?" they chorused.

"Get rid of that *badmash* tom" said Meni.

Her seven youngsters sprang at the Gokulbabu turned cat in true tigerish fury and proceeded to decimate him. Mauled beyond recognition, he fled, limping and howling pathetically in his pain.

Three days later, Gokul Chandra Goswami's first wife, Katyayani Devi received a letter. It went as follows:

"Respected *didi*

I am your unfortunate younger sister, the third wife, Menaka. Gosaiji quarrelled with me last night and left the house. Before leaving, he tore off his caste

thread and vowed never to return. He says that domestic life disgusts him. I am therefore requesting you to come over immediately with your sons to claim your property. Suku *didi* has left behind a son who is now about nine or ten months old. He's a lovely child I'm sure you will take to him. I don't want to stay on here, and will leave for my mother's as soon as I hand over the household responsibilities to you.

Your servant, Menaka."

Katyayani did not waste any time and came back to her old home with her sons. She picked up Sukumari's little son and, fondling him, said: "This is my littlest *khoka*."

Menaka was a remarkable woman, not the least bit greedy. Katyayani wished to put aside a small monthly allowance for her younger cowife, but Menaka said: "There's really no need, *didi*. I lack nothing at mother's." She didn't even accept any money for her trip home. Before she left she told Katyayani: "Didi, you're not a widow. Whether you hear of the master or not, you must continue to eat fish, other-wise, evil may befall him. And yes, I have a request. There's an old tom who turns up every day at this house. Be kind to it and throw in a little fish with its rice. Some milk too, if you can. Poor thing, it's quite a wreck."

Katyayani assured her: "Don't worry, little sister - I'll be sure to feed your tom."

(translated by Rimli Bhattacharya from the Bengali short story *Shasthir Kripa* by Parasuram, pseudonym of Rajshekhar Basu. Written in 1952.)

