

The Flood

Mudra Rakshasa

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The Hindi original was published on pages 52–58 of the short story collection *Śabda damś* (Delhi: Lipi Prakāśan, 1984). This translation is by Robert A. Hueckstedt and is copyrighted © 2009.

Though almost ten years old, Chundoo had never seen anything like it. He had experienced floods, but this one went far beyond his imagination.

The thick thatch roof that slanted out in front of the house had been built on the fat bamboo of the doorway, and since one side of it had become wedged in against the neem tree, it seemed strong, and in addition to mother and father it easily supported him and his two little sisters. It was difficult at first to get settled on that slanted thatch roof, but they quickly became accustomed to that, too. The roof had been built on long rafters, their lower ends set on mud walls no longer visible, but since some of the thatch had been strapped to the rafters, they were able to perch happily above the water.

Since Chundoo was on the upper end of the thatch roof, where normally his father never let him climb, he was able to see quite far. The sky above was not blue at all but a brownish black, like a mass of mucus. Below, randomly carrying along foam, rotten garbage and tree branches, the yellowish water constantly gave off the smell of rotting rats. Spreading well beyond the limit of his vision, the water seemed to run every which way, sticking to the wart-like knobs on the

trees that appeared black against the horizon. Chundoo felt more oppressed by the water than frightened of it.

He was well versed in dirty water. In the muddy ponds nearby he would get drenched catching small fish, crabs and anything else he could find, and when he became thirsty he would spread away the rotting leaves and scum on the top of the water and drink his fill. This water, however, was different. He felt it hated him.

He was unable to fathom what had happened to the houses nearby, but within the range of his voice the state of one family, likewise huddled on their thatch roof, seemed particularly bad. Four children were in that family, but only one was visible, and even when Chundoo called out to him, he said nothing and just stared at the water. The sound of that boy's mother constantly crying, which came to Chundoo from that faraway roof along with the oppressive sound of the noisy water, particularly troubled him.

As it was, he could have comfortably fallen asleep on that slanted thatch roof, but an inconvenience prevented that. His stomach was so empty that when he fell asleep, he either felt a pain in his ribs, or a restlessness broke his sleep. And during this entire time, that crying sound was always audible.

In fact, Chundoo wanted to ask that boy if there were any stones or pebbles on his roof. From the very beginning he had found an excellent way of breaking the boredom of this dirty, black, cold, damp situation. On his own roof he had found the stones he himself had thrown at birds and squirrels. Throwing them as hard as he could into that terribly disgusting water gave him a particular pleasure.

Flat pieces of clay pots he threw so that they danced and skipped far out on the surface of the water.

But whenever he called out to that other roof, that same crying sound kept coming, unchanged.

Just then his father suddenly let out a sound as if he were snoring. He was actually laughing. From a chest filled with two days of rain and hunger he could not have let out a better laugh. But soon afterwards, he became serious. He realized that the very thing he had laughed about, very quickly and in all seriousness, could to a large extent help them out.

In a pot in one area of their collapsed home they had stored chickpeas which, because the flood had come so swiftly, they had had to leave behind. Caught between the collapsed walls, the pot would have broken when the chickpeas inside got wet and expanded. After the pot broke, bubbles and many chickpeas floated up onto the surface of the dirty floodwater. Imagining the pot breaking is what had caused Chundoo's father to laugh, but he quickly became alert and thought he could gather up some of those soaked chickpeas. Chundoo's mother saw them, too. "Uh, ji, see if. . ."

Even before she finished, Chundoo's father, like an inexperienced chimpanzee, had begun crawling on his hands and feet to the lower end of the slanted roof. When he reached the end, his weight caused the lower part of the roof to drop so suddenly that if he had not scampered back quickly enough, the water would have sucked him in.

The dropping of the roof made the distance between the chickpeas and

Chundoo's father even greater.

Looking back he yelled, "Gamcha, gamcha - throw me my gamcha!"

Chundoo, his mother and the two girls could only look at each other.

It was, in fact, a completely senseless request, which Chundoo's father himself realized. The floodwater had come so quickly that when they waded out of the house and climbed up onto the thatch, the idea of taking his gamcha along was as absurd as a man falling into a crevice in a mountain valley holding onto his hat.

The chickpeas in the pot must have expanded so much that many of them stuck together before the pot broke because a ball of them bobbed up in the middle of the dirty water's garbage. Anxiety draped Chundoo's father. The current was so swift that in no time the ball started to float away.

He looked around. Either to help in some way or to cover up his shame, he tried quickly to untie the knot of the cloth around his waist.

Old, threadbare cloth has its own characteristics, one of which is that the end of a knot is hard to find, and even when it is located, the knot will not loosen easily. Chundoo's father found that to be the case with the cloth around his waist. He tried to untie the knot quickly and then became so anxious that he slipped the cloth down over his haunches like a pair of baggy trousers. The part of his body that was always covered could testify that no one could see it, or even if someone could, it did not matter; nevertheless, an involuntary modesty contracted his body. He threw one end of that cloth at the bobbing ball of chickpeas.

It landed right on target. The ball of chickpeas came right in to the middle of

the cloth's ring. Not only Chundoo, his mother and two sisters, too, shouted for joy. They could almost taste the soaked chickpeas as if they actually held them in their hands. Chundoo started clapping.

Then they worried. Instead of coming toward them, that ball of chickpeas in the loincloth's ring floated farther away, and their hopes were dashed altogether. Chundoo's father, his body rough and black, had no idea at all of the whereabouts of the other end of his dirty loincloth. The water rose up even more on that part of the roof, and dirty foam and a small pile of rotten twigs swirled around it.

Suddenly, they could not understand what had happened. Then they realized that Chundoo's father all of a sudden had jumped into the water. In total silence those four stared at the water where Chundoo's father, like a primeval man, was fighting to get the chickpeas. They were certain he would toss up his bald head on the surface of the water, spewing water out of his mouth like a syringe. But then they felt it was getting too late even for him.

Perhaps they were looking in the wrong place. They quickly looked in other possible areas. There was no sign at all of Father. Chundoo wanted to climb up a little further and call out when a sharp scream pierced his spine. Chundoo's mother realized what had happened. She hugged her two daughters and cried uncontrollably.

From the other roof in the dirty, damp half-light that penetrated every joint like malarial fever, the sound of crying momentarily stopped. The sound coming from Chundoo's mother was so ominous and unsettling.

Chundoo looked straight in the direction of the other, now silent, thatch roof.

Between his roof and theirs the black crown of a mango tree spread above the water like the half-submerged head of a demon, obstructing the view of that other roof. Through the branches the woman and her boy were trying to look in this direction.

An unusual sound broke Chundoo's attention. The source of that strange sound was a mystery. While his mother continued to cry, Chundoo and his sisters looked skyward. In fact, they were afraid of rain. That was what they were most afraid of now - rain. Soon the noise sounded like so many automobiles roaring in. After a careful listen, though, it was clear the noise came from something else. In fact, it sounded just like the night when all this began.

Chundoo recalled with terror the sound of the insane screams of people half asleep and of the foaming water rising all around them. In the half-light now, however, he and his sisters saw in the distance spot-like things that were quickly getting bigger and coming toward them.

They were, in fact, a fleet of small, motorized boats coming their way in order to report on the state of the flood. That was the source of the noise. Their outboard motors that ran on petrol made a huge noise.

In the boats sat a number of people, even some women. Almost everyone wore a padded orange or blue thing, to protect them from drowning should the boat overturn.

Chundoo eagerly looked at the boats. His mother stopped crying, then seeing them she screamed out as loud as she could, "Save him, saheb! . . . O, saheb! . . ."

The sound of the boats' motors was too much. Having come fairly close, the

fleet moved on. Chundoo's mother screamed again.

A woman sitting in the last boat waved her hand toward them as if she herself were traveling by train and taking leave of them. Just then one of the boats separated from the rest, stopped suddenly, made a wide arc and turned back in the direction of Chundoo's thatch roof.

Chundoo's mother all at once went silent and watched intensely. Chundoo thought they might even rescue them and take them into their boat. It came quite close. Three people sitting in the boat again waved toward them as before. Then one of them bent over and took a small plastic bag out of a larger bag stored in the boat. In that properly sealed bag were very tasty, roasted kernels of corn. He tossed it up toward Chundoo and his family, and the boat quickly curved out away as fast as it had come.

The children were unable to rip the bag apart, so Chundoo's mother took it. As soon as she was able to open it, with the help of her teeth, the fragrance that engulfed them after going hungry for so long only made Chundoo and his sisters that much more ravenous. Their mother began carefully rationing out the kernels. She did not want to hand them all out now. She wanted to save some for later.

After she distributed most of the kernels to Chundoo and his two sisters, she began crying again.

"Ma!"

Both legs of Chundoo's little sister, one by one, slipped through the rotten thatch. Just as Chundoo's mother sprang over to save her, Chundoo's sister fell through the rafters into the water below and disappeared. Twice the girl's head

came up above the surface of the water. Screaming, her mother kept trying to catch hold of her, but then only foam remained where the girl had been.

In the same position she had assumed to try to save her daughter, Chundoo's mother started wailing. Which was good, because otherwise she would have seen Chundoo and his remaining sister quietly picking out of the thatch the corn kernels their little sister had spilled before falling into the water.