Chakma Folk Tales

Retold by Rupak Debnath

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Rupak Debnath is currently associated with projects on Indo-Aryan linguistics, especially the eastern dialects of New Indo-Aryan spoken in Northeast India. Author of *Introducing Stylistics* (2002), *The Sounds of the Bengali Dialects* (2003), and *A Glossary of Phonetics and Phonology* (2004), he is currently working on the phonology of Chakma and on the socio-cultural life of the Tangchangyas.

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To my daughter

Shree

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Prefatory Remarks

It is more than a hundred years since Sir George Abraham Grierson (1903) included a Chakma folktale ('Jāmāi-Mārani') in *Linguistic Survey of India*, Part IV. The same tale was retold nine years later by R.H. Sneyd Hutchinson (1909) in *The Chittagong Hill Tracts*, though he also included another tale 'Fable of Dhanpati and the enchanted tree' in the same book. The latter is part of the *genguli* ballad, the *Rādhāman-Dhanpudi-Pālā*, which along with another ballad, the *Chādigāng-Chārā-Pālā*, deserves to be told in greater details after the manner in which *gengulis* are wont to narrate them. Those preliminary efforts should have inspired attempts at retelling in English the vast stock of Chakma folktales. Strangely, there has been a marked absence of the same in the last hundred years.

The present collection includes selected tales, which I had the fortune to hear from *kadhagis* and *jummo* householders and their women folks in course of my work on the Chakma language and the socio-economic life pattern of the Tangchangyas. Some of these tales were collected as samples to analyse the language that the Chakmas, nay the Anokyas and the Tangchangyas, use in their everyday life, and these would not have gone to make a separate book if some of my Chakma-Tangchangya friends and well-wishers had not encouraged me to proceed with the work. They would tell me time and again that Chakma folktales have

not been retold in English. And so I undertook to initiate a process that has lain inert for more than a hundred years. A well-planned methodology has been followed in retelling these tales. A story collected from a particular teller has been compared and verified with other oral versions, as well as some written specimens when available. In certain cases, as many as six oral versions were compared to repair discrepancies and avoid inconsistent interpolations that disrupted the natural flow of the story line.

Besides, a complete list of Chakma words and phrases collected in course of my work on the Chakma language has proved very effective in attempts at reproducing in a target language the essence of the *jummo* idiom. These stories have ceased to interest most Chakmas living in the cities; even in the interiors where the *jummo* lifestyle will perhaps continue maximally through a decade or so, these stories occasionally do come alive after sunset, as aged *kadhagis* and grandmothers try to recall the tales that gave them great delight when they were children. The Chakma and Tangchangya *gengulis* have already become museum pieces while *kadhagis* and storytelling grandmothers have begun to tread the same path. Naturally, I came across many unwilling storytellers who, owing to the lack of storytelling sessions, have silently chosen to ignore their natural talent. It was only after much persuasion that some of them agreed to tell me a few tales from the vast store of their oral inheritance.

Most importantly, my numerous sojourns with the Chakmas and the Tangchangyas settled across the extreme eastern part of the subcontinent, most particularly in the *jummo* villages under CADC, Mizoram, the Pecharthal-Konpui belt of North Tripura and the Devipur-Ratanpur areas of South Tripura, have helped me considerably in understanding their mode of life, their way of conversion, their food habits, their attitude to life, and their likes and dislikes. And these experiences I have tried to exploit in course of retelling the Chakma folktales.

Before we try to discover the principal ingredients of Chakma folktales, it would be worth considering the elements common to all folktales. Similarities among the folktales of different peoples are explained in terms of the conflicting theories of polygenesis and historical-geographical diffusion. The present

account intends not to initiate a discussion on the common motifs of all folktales but to briefly introduce the readers to the types of and the motifs in Chakma folktales. To begin with, all folktales have these characteristics:

1. Stories are simple and straightforward. The typical beginning is 'Once upon a time...' while the ending is mostly 'And they lived happily ever after.'
2. Characters are flat or uni-dimensional, and typical characters include the dupe, the trickster, the wicked stepmother who maltreats her stepdaughter, the innocent who suffers silently, the virtuous who is ultimately rewarded, the villain who is finally punished, and so on.
3. Characters interact with human as well as superhuman personalities and perform acts whose consequences the entire humankind bears. The acts involve confrontation with gods, monsters, and oversized or undersized creatures.
4. Human characters undergo transformation into animals and vice-versa.
5. Animals talk and behave like human beings, and provide a light on human nature.
6. The power of magic, both beneficial and malevolent, is strongly felt. The simplest of magic devices include the use of charms, uttering of incantations, and the occurrence of the magic numbers 'three' and 'seven.'
7. Emphasis on dreams and visions in changing the course of human destiny.

As already remarked, these motifs will be found in the folktales of every community. Beyond these are the distinct cultural elements, which make a familiar tale sound unfamiliar or novel in different cultural context. To be precise, there are distinct elements of Chakma culture in Chakma folktales. Some of these are:

1. Human characters have a distinct *jummo* background and their principal occupation is shifting cultivation. Other vocations such as weaving and textiles are also pursued but rarely at the expense of *juming*. Human activities in the *jum* inspire animals to imitate the *jummo* way of life ('How Animals failed to become Jum Cultivators,' p.79-84).

2. Most animals, birds and other creatures are always from the familiar Chakma stock – the pig, the crab, the tortoise, the snail, the tiger, the fowl, etc.
3. Kings and princes appear in some tales but, in spite of the fabulous wealth they possess, they cannot be extracted from the *jummo* background ('Kahbi-Dahbi,' p.62).
4. Human characters transform to birds, animals with which the Chakmas are familiar ('Kahbi-Dahbi,' p.50, 58, 64).
5. The setting is usually the hill country. Characters undertake journeys and movements across hilly-terrain, mostly hillocks, knolls and hill-forests ('Ālsi Michchingā and Munirām Serpent,' pp.42-3). Mountains appear in the distance against a receding skyline, and the attempts to scale towering summits are virtually absent. References to sea occur in mythic stories ('How the world was made,' pp.23-4; 'Ālsi Michchingā and Munirām Serpent,' p.42) while sea-voyages are few and far between, and these mostly verge on the borderline of fantasy ('How the World was made,' pp.23-4).
6. Dresses and ornaments that characters wear are from the traditional Chakmas and Tangchangyas stock.
7. In conversation, specific forms of address such as an old woman addressing her old husband as *bujyā* ('Kahbi-Dahbi,' p.49), an old husband calling his old wife or any elderly woman *buri* ('Kahbi-Dahbi,' p.50), a son or daughter also referring or addressing, besides the commonly used relationship terms, the parents or grandparents as *bujyā* and *buri*, and so on. Typical, of course, is the convention of referring to, even addressing a family man not by his real name by as 'someone's mother' or 'someone's father' ('Kahbi-Dahbi,' p.52).
8. Significant roles are played by the elderly characters known as *chalā-bāp* and *chalā-mā*. The former is an adviser, a man who is ripe in years and wisdom ('The First Jum,' p.28). He is also a good friend of a would-be bride or a maiden fretting in love (*Rādhāman-Dhanpudi-Pālā*, 'Lāngyā -Lāngyani'). The *chalā-mā* is an experienced woman, who helps in child-delivery (*Rādhāman-Dhanpudi-Pālā*) and also

a caretaker-cum-governess-grandmother of maidens (*Rādhāman-Dhanpudi-Pālā*, 'Jāmāi-Mārani,' p.68-9).

9. The use of *jummo* logic to arrive at conclusions ('Ālsi Michchingā and Munirām Serpent,' p.42; 'How Ghosts came to fear Black Dogs,' p.74; 'Wisdom's Fowl,' p.93).

The common motifs and the distinctiveness of Chakma folktales having been discussed, one may proceed to classify the tales under the following heads:

1. Myth of creation ('How the World was made,' p.15-25) and *jum* cultivation ('The First Jum,' pp. 27-36;'Ālsi Michchingā and Munirām Serpent,' pp.37-44).
2. Legends of migration and settlement (*Chādigāng-Chārā-Pālā*).
3. Pourquoi tales ('How the Moon came to have eclipse,' pp.45-8, though pourquoi ingredient are also evident in 'The First Jum,' pp.27-35)
4. Tales of magic and wonder, including fairy tales ('Senahri-Pachchan')
5. Animal Stories ('How Animals failed to become Jum Cultivators,' pp.79-84; 'The Tiger and the Snail,' pp.97-101; 'How the Toad became so ugly,' pp.103-11, etc.)
6. Cumulative Tales ('How the Crow became White,' 'The Cat and the Tailorbird,' pp.85-6, etc.)

Finally, I would like to mention that though a total of only twelve tales retold in this book, these come from most selected stock of Chakmas and Tangchangyas.

Agartala *Rupak Debnath*
20 February 2006

Contents

A single tree emerged out of the water.

How the World was made

Before the creation of earth and all things we see today, things moving or static, breathing or inert, there was only water, an endless stretch of water, the depth of which was known only to the gods. The water itself was an endless stillness, because wind there was none.

Our *bujyā-buris* tell us that out of the stilled stretch of unending water emerged a singular tree, like the banyan tree we now see, but so huge that its roots daunted the heart of the seabed and its several branches bending down into the water formed additional trunks. Some of those trunks were almost as broad as the main trunk, which was so broad that a light-flying cotton teal of our time would pant for breath to make a circle around it.

Things were in that state for a long stretch of eternity. Then, Gozen, the sire of the universe, plucked a leaf from the tree, and, sitting on it, began to meditate. No one knows how long he sat thus, meditating, because time did not exist. Also, there was neither the sun to count the days nor the seasons to mark the years during which Gozen meditated. But from the tale that the ancestors of the Chakma people have told their children, it is learnt that Gozen sat in that liquid stillness, meditating for many thousand years.

At long last, he opened his eyes, and lo! before him lay a wide stretch of land with the huge tree standing upright in

the centre. He looked at the land mass and knew at once that while he was absorbed in deep meditation, Kāngārā the crab had toiled and toiled ceaselessly under the water, digging up with his claws the clay from the roots of the tree and slowly piling it in little mounds around the trunk to make this wonderful specimen of expertise.

Then Gozen set to work. He made another sea. He placed this sea upside down and high above the reach of the land and the sea below, and called it Āgāz the sky. In this sky-sea, He put afloat a boat. Then Gozen made Bel out of the heat of His body. And He made Cha-n from the calm light of His eyes. Having thus made Chān and Bel, Gozen called them brothers, and He assigned to them the duty of acting as the custodians of light, saying, 'Go forth and illuminate the world.' Everyday, Bel the great ball would traverse the sky from the east to the west everyday and dispel the darkness that enveloped the world. Chān would also do the same work but only after the tired Bel rested in the evening

Gozen sat on a leaf and meditated for a long stretch of eternity.

So, days and nights were created. And he made the day warm and the night cool.

Then, Gozen bestowed plenitude on the land by making mountains and rivers, hills and dales, forests and plains. And he called the land *Pitthimi*. He also made the six seasons. He then put on the land he called *Pitthimi* every kind of creature that walked or crawled, flew, or swam, and gave separate names to each of them.

One day, it so came to pass that Gozen felt that he should take a close look the world he made. He came down from heaven to *Pitthimi* and was delighted at the fruitful abundance he saw around him. And he began to walk on the land. He walked and walked. While he was thus walking, delighted at his own creation, he suddenly felt that someone was following him. He stood and asked, '*Kedugā*?' ('Who is it?') When no one replied, he started to walk again.

Some time later, it again occurred to him that he was still being followed by that someone. He stood for a moment and repeated the same question, '*Kedugā*?' Again, no one replied.

When the same thing happened for the third time, Gozen became annoyed. '*Kedugā*?' he cried, 'Why don't you answer my call?' And he quickly turned round only to see his own shadow behind him. He was deeply embarrassed by his own foolish annoyance. 'Bah!' he said to himself, 'It's my own shadow and so long I have been trying to get an answer out of it.'

But the next moment, he contemplated something remarkable. 'Why not fill this shadow of mine, which follows me, with clay and breathe life into it,' he thought. Soon Gozen moulded a creature in the shape of his own shadow and called him Kedugā after the first word he had uttered on mistaking his own shadow for a man.

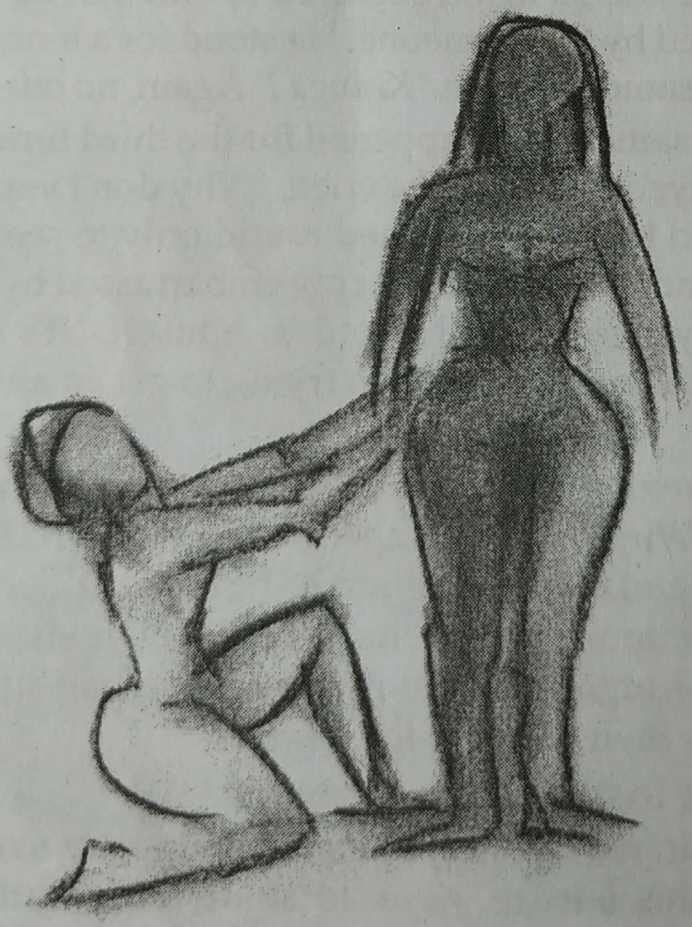
And so the first man was created.

But the man was alone. He had no company to converse and beguile his leisure, none to share the emotions that swelled his heart and made him sigh. And so Gozen, the sire of all creation, scratched the filth of his own body and,

accumulating it in the palms of his hand, made the woman out of it and called her Kedugi.

Then Gozen called them to his presence and told them, 'You'll live on *Pitthimi* to be masters of it. I have fruits to trees and flesh to animals, so that you may eat them and remain strong and healthy. I've also made the velvet grass for you to sleep on. Now go forth at your will and happily multiply your race.' Thus said, Gozen retired to heaven.

And the first man and the first woman were left to themselves to make their own living. At that time, they did not know how to make fire. They did not know how to *jum* the land or how to produce the things we now eat. And they were naked and nomads, and, roaming the land, which Gozen made them masters of, they ate fruits, leaves, roots, tubers, and birds and animals and fish that did not taste bitter.



Gozen made the woman and called her Kedugi.

Time passed in this way. Then, one day, children were born to Kedugā and Kedugi. They grew up and, in course of time, fathered their own children. In this way, many years passed, and the race of man multiplied amid peace and plenitude.

But, one day, a severe *khabāt* set in, ruthlessly laying its icy hands on the abundance Gozen had left for man to thrive on. A severe frost that occasioned the *khabāt* soon bared the trees of all foliage and fruition. It also penetrated deep into the soil to destroy the roots and tubers that grow there, and suddenly the children Kedugā and Kedugi were left with no food to eat. The frost had even killed the birds, the animals, and the fish.

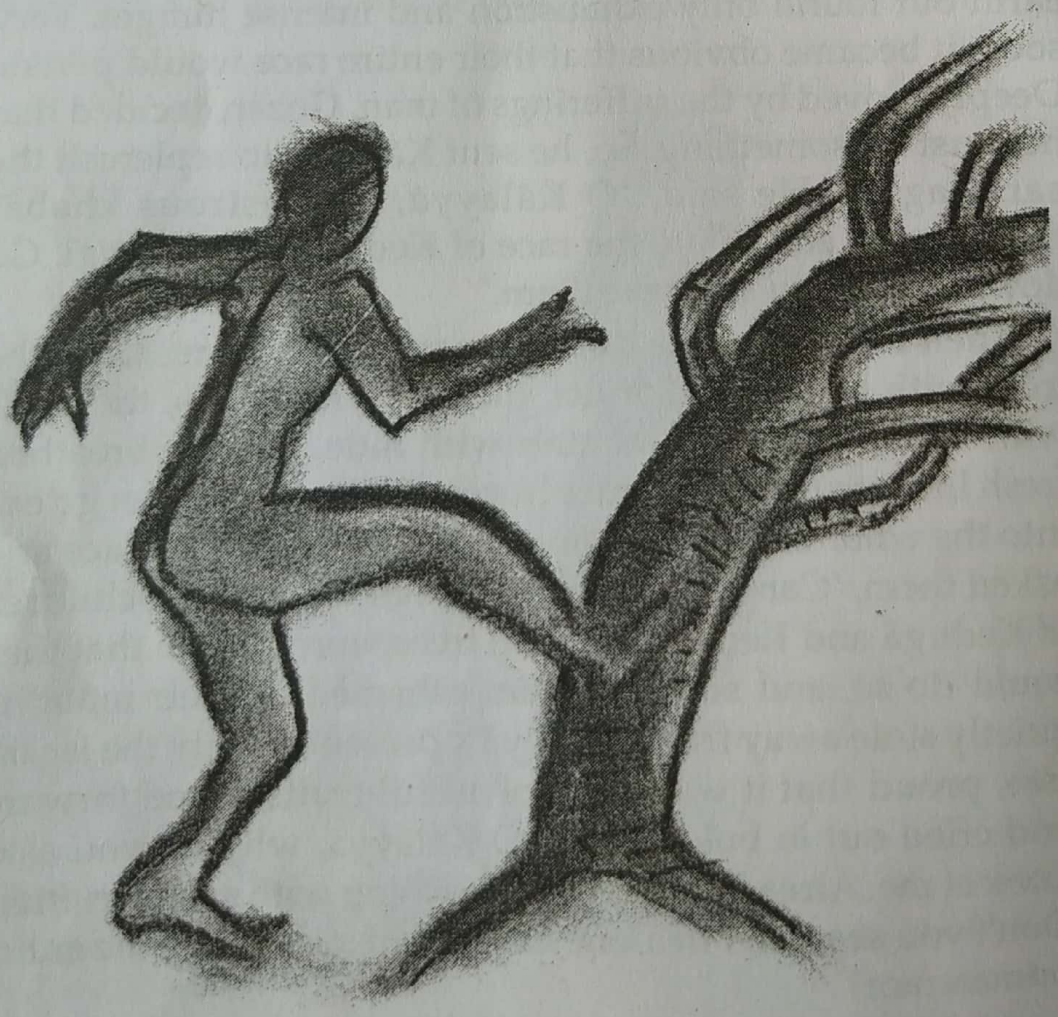
Helpless man searched and searched every corner of the earth but found only exhaustion and intense hunger. Very soon, it became obvious that their entire race would perish. Deeply moved by the sufferings of man, Gozen decided that he must do something. So, he sent Kālayyā to replenish the earth again. He said, 'O Kālayyā, a disastrous khabāt threatens to annihilate the race of Kedugā and Kedugi. Go down to *Pitthimi* and save them.'

Then Kālayyā came down to earth. And he restored the trees with foliage and fruits, the fish with scales, the birds with feathers and the animals with hide. And he breathed fresh life into every creature he restored and let them go out into the wild. Then he summoned the trees at one place and asked them, 'Can you produce enough food for the children of Kedugā and Kedugi?' Not all trees were certain that they could do so, and some of them ashamed of their inability quietly stole away from Kālayyā's presence. Only the *jaganā* tree, proud that it was of its plentiful fruits, came forward and cried out in bold terms, 'O Kālayyā, why do you ask? Look at me. Already my limbs are aching with sweet fruition. Don't you see that I'm alone capable of sustaining the entire human race?'

And for some time, the *jaganā* tree produced so much fruit that there was no scarcity.

But the race of man continued to multiply and increase everyday. Then, one day, they had become so numerous like the stars of the night that the tree could not produce enough fruits for every one. On that day, some men went hungry. When Kālayyā heard about it, he came and asked the tree, 'What is it that I hear?' The *jaganā* tree told him that animals had eaten some of its fruits, causing the day's shortage. 'But,' it said, 'don't you worry. No man will go hungry another day.'

Yet, the same thing happened on the following day. Again, the *jaganā* tree laid the blame on the animals. This continued for days, then for weeks, then months. And finally, a year passed but no change occurred, and Kālayyā found it difficult to contain his rage. One day, he cried out in anger, 'That



Kālayyā kicked the jaganā tree with much aggression.

braggart of a tree must be taught a lesson!' And boiling with rage, he went down to the riverside where the jaganā tree stood, and kicked it with so much of aggression that it writhed in pain and its body became twisted. And while it was still smarting in extreme pain, Kālayyā cursed it, saying, 'Henceforth man will shun the fruits you bear.'

The Chakma people believe that since the day Kālayyā kicked it, the *jaganā* tree has had a permanent curvature in its trunk. And the fruit of the same tree is no longer edible.

In the meantime, the food shortage with which the children of Kedugā and Kedugi were beset began to turn acute, compelling Kālayyā to seek Gozen's intervention. And after hearing everything that had come to pass, Gozen sent Kālayyā to invite Māh-Lakkhi-mā to Pitthimi that the food shortage may end. So Kālayyā went to Māh-Lakkhi-mā and, appraising her of the sufferings of man, said, 'O mother, you must come to Pitthimi. For, there is no one except you who may teach man the ways to produce grains.'

Māh-Lakkhi-mā told Kālayyā that she would accompany him on the morrow. 'O Kālayyā, take a little rest tonight. You look so tired and the journey ahead is a long one,' she said to him. Then she called her attendants, and instructed them to see that the god lacked nothing during his stay. Actually, she wanted to test Kālayyā.

Soon the attendants served the god with all delicacies of heaven, placing in front of him every variety of meat and wine. Kālayyā enjoyed the sumptuous feast and gorged entire plates in gulps.

But once he took a sip the wine, he let loose all restraint. He emptied tumbler after tumbler, forgetting who he was and where he had come. And in that state of inebriation, he began to show off, shouting and violently gyrating his head on the point of his shoulders and kicking utensils and breaking pots. When Māh-Lakkhi-mā came to see how her guest was doing, Kālayyā, who was then quite beside himself, began to prattle, addressing his hostess sometimes as *jedai*, sometimes as *kākki*, and sometimes as *bhuji*. When Māh-

Lakkhi-mā saw the things that Kālayyā did, she became so annoyed that she decided not to accompany him.

Kālayyā's failure prompted Gozen to send his son Biyetrā on the same errand. And he blessed Biyetrā, saying, 'Surely you must succeed where Kālayyā failed and bring Māh-Lakkhi-mā to *Pitthimi*. Also remember not to dilute the respect she deserves.'

And Biyetrā bowed his head and said, 'O Father, I'll do as you bid me. But allow me some time to dwell among the race of man so that I might know their ways of living.'

'So be it,' replied *Gozen*.

So Biyetrā came down to *Pitthimi* and began to dwell with the children of Kedugā. And when he had lived with them for sometime, he saw that man lived under trees and in caves and ate only those things that tasted sweet. They did not know how to build a shelter. They did not even know how to cook and make palatable things that did not taste sweet. So he taught them to make the *māzāghar* with bamboo and *sunn* grass, that they might live in comfort. Then he brought fire from heaven and taught them to cook food.

In this way some time passed. There had been no shortage of food since Biyetrā came to live among man but he knew that at some time, in the unknown future, there would be problems unless man acquired the means to produce food to feed himself and his family. Besides, while he did these things, Biyetrā never for a moment forgot that Gozen had asked him to bring Māh-Lakkhi-mā to live among man.

Then, one fine morning, Biyetrā set out quietly, taking with him as companions *Kāngārā* the crab, *Sugar* the boar and *Māgarak* the spider, and set out for the heavenly abode of Goddess Laksmi. He walked and walked until he came to the shore of a weird and wonderful sea, somewhere between earth and heaven, in which there was no water but only milk. The waves of that sea broke softly and gently, like morning dew on the petals of the *nāksā* flower, against the shore, leaving behind thick layers of cream instead of foam. And Biyetrā called this sea the Milk-Sea.

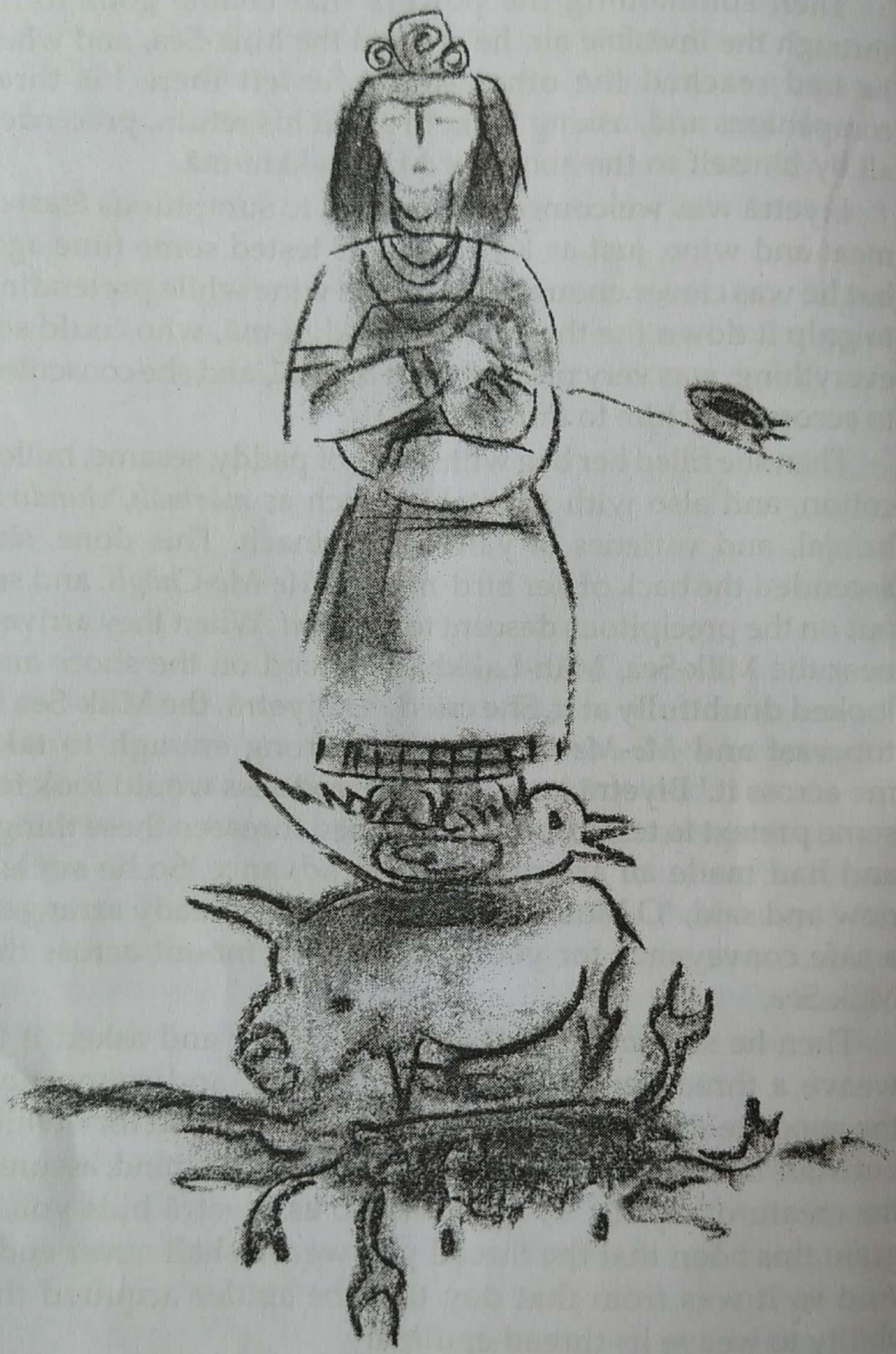
Then summoning the powers that enable gods to fly through the invisible air, he crossed the Milk-Sea, and when he had reached the other shore, he left there his three companions and, asking them to await his return, proceeded all by himself to the abode of Māh-Lakkhi-mā.

Biyetrā was welcomed and treated to sumptuous feast of meat and wine, just as Kālayyā was tested some time ago, but he was clever enough to spill the wine while pretending to gulp it down the throat. Māh-Lakkhi-mā, who could see everything, was very pleased with Biyetrā, and she consented to accompany him to *Pitthimi*.

Then she filled her bag with seeds of paddy, sesame, millet, cotton, and also with vegetables such as *mārmāh, chindirā*, brinjal, and varieties of yam and spinach. This done, she ascended the back of her bird-mount, *Me-Me-Chāgli*, and set out on the precipitous descent to *Pitthimi*. When they arrived near the Milk-Sea, Māh-Lakkhi-mā stood on the shore and looked doubtfully at it. She cried, 'O Biyetrā, the Milk-Sea is too vast and *Me-Me-Chāgli* is not strong enough to take me across it.' Biyetrā knew that the goddess would look for some pretext to test his resolve. He had foreseen these things and had made all arrangements in advance. So he smiled now and said, 'O Mother Goddess, I have already arranged a safe conveyance for you and for your mount across the Milk-Sea.'

Then he summoned *Māgarak* the spider and asked it to weave a thread long and strong enough, and connecting the opposite shores of the sea. The spider hesitated for a while but Māh-Lakkhi-mā, who knew what was in its mind, assured the creature, saying, 'O *Māgarak*, do as Biyetrā bids you. I grant this boon that the thread you weave shall never end.' And so it was from that day that the spider acquired the ability to weave its thread endlessly.

Now, after the spider had connected with a thread the two shores of the Milk-Sea, *Me-Me-Chāgli* sat on the back of *Sugar* the boar while the boar stood on the back of *Kāngārā* the crab, which then swam slowly across the thick



Me-Me-Chāgli sat on the back of the boar, the boar stood on the back of the crab while Māh-Lakkhi-Mā stood on the back of Me-Me-Chāgli and kept her balance by gripping the tread the spider spun.

foam of milk and cream. Then Māh-Lakkhi-mā stood on the back of *Me-Me-Chāgli* and kept her balance by gripping firmly to the thread the spider had spun.

They arrived safely on the opposite shore. Māh-Lakkhi-mā was very pleased with the intelligence and gentle manners of Biyetrā, and blessed him with the words, 'From this day, O Biyetrā, people will worship you before every other god.' Then, she blessed the pig and the crab. And from that day, the pig excelled all creatures in the possession of bodily fat while the crab acquired the ability to move with equal agility in both land and water.

Having thus blessed Biyetrā and the three creatures that had patiently worked with to bring her to *Pitthimi*, Māh-Lakkhi-mā went to live among the children of Kedugā and Kedugi. She would teach them the ways to produce food through *juming*. But that is another story, which Chakma *Kadhagis* still love to retell.

Biyetrā taught man to build the māzāghar.

The First Jum

This story begins at a time when the children of Kedugā and Kedugi were yet to begin jum cultivation. The race of man had barely settled down in *ādāms* stretched across hillocks. At that time, Biyetrā dwelt among them. He taught man to use the fire, and also to build the *māzāghar* with bamboo and *sunn* grass. But with the method of food production, the hill folks were not familiar. For sometime, the abundance on earth was enough for man to survive but when their numbers multiplied, difficulties began to arise. Food was becoming scare and the race of man would have perished if Gozen had not intervened and sent Biyetrā to fetch Māh-Lakkhi-mā, so that she might teach man to make the *jum*.

When Māh-Lakkhi-mā alighted from her bird-mount, *Me-Me-Chāgli, Bel* had completed its daily journey across the sky-sea and gone off to sleep, leaving to Chān the duty of the custodian of light. Our *kadhagis* recall with disappointment that the advent of the goddess of crops went unannounced. Then Biyetrā had to take the initiative and engage the services of *Pechchyā* the owl. And he asked the bird to go to down to every *ādām* and, hooting as loudly as it could, proclaim to the folks dwelling therein the arrival of Māh-Lakkhi-mā.

The owl obeyed and left its perch, and away it flew, hooting and crying through the silence of the night. It is still recalled whenever the occasion arises to retell the tales of yesteryear

that the owl hooted and cried so loudly on that night that its cries and hoots were heard even in the *ādām* where Bel goes to sleep every night. Folks were startled out of their sleep, and knowing not what was happening, they went to Biyetrā but finding him not in the house, they called on *chalā -bāp*, for he was the wisest among men and he alone knew the language of the birds.

On reaching the place where *chalā-bāp* lived, one of them cried, 'O *bujyā*, come out and tell us message the bird of the night brings for us.'

Soon they sat in council and, after some deliberation, took the unanimous decision, at the instance of the *chalā-bāp*, to send out a search party to find and bestow reward on it.

So when Bel appeared in the east, the search party went into the forest to find the bird that announced the good news. They searched every corner of the deep and dense forest and peeped into thickets and peered into the hollows of trees. They carried with them a lovely tiara of gold. But the owl, exhausted after the nocturnal errand, had fallen asleep. Not far from the tree where the owl slept was a woodpecker, busy knocking on the trunk of another tree. And the men who had gone to the forest to reward the messenger bird mistook the woodpecker for the one they were searching. 'Look, that must be the one we are looking for,' cried one of the men. 'Let's catch it first,' said the others. And they ran to catch the woodpecker.

After some time, they caught the woodpecker and placed the tiara on its head. The commotion woke up the owl, and it was about to fly away. But when it saw the woodpecker thus crowned, it sighed deeply: 'So this is how it is. I do all the hard work but the woodpecker takes the reward.' And since that day, the woodpecker has proudly worn the tiara that was truly the owl's privilege to wear.

In the meantime, Māh Lakkhi-mā had put on the disguise of *rāni-mile* the widow. In that attire, she went to the house of a food-gatherer whose name was Michchingā but his laziness had earned him the nickname Ālsi.

His wife had died some years ago and he lived in a little *māzāghar* with three unmarried daughters. When Māh Lakkhi-mā entered his house, the girls were asleep. They had not eaten anything for two days and were famished by hunger. She woke them up and introduced herself as a relative on their mother's side. 'I'm your *mujhi*. I come from the land where birds talk and sing like human beings and little children saddle flying-horses to sport with clouds,' she said. From there, she had walked and walked, for three days and two nights and was now very tired and hungry. She sat down beside the girls and said candidly, 'I haven't eaten a morsel for last two days. Now give me something to eat.'

The owl looks at the crown that woodpecker wears.

The girls blushed and kept silent. The widow pretended not to notice the blush and insisted, 'Quick, give me something to eat.' Then the oldest sister, who was around fourteen, broke the silence and said in a low voice, 'The old man has gone out in search of food. When he comes back, we'll sit together and eat whatever he brings.'

'And when will this old man come?'

'He usually returns by dusk,' replied the youngest sister who was around ten at that time.

'That means we've to wait for sometime,' said the widow. 'Never mind, we could do something in the meantime.' And after pretending to do some thinking, she added, 'Let's do some cooking. What do you say?'

Then the youngest girl brought her a *kurum*, and the widow covered it with the piece of cloth. A few moments later, she removed the cover, and, to the surprise of the sisters, the *kurum* was filled with little white grains, the kind of which they had never seen before. The youngest looked at the white grain with curiosity and asked, '*O muzi, iyān ki pazā*?' ('Aunt, what is this stuff?'). The widow told her that it was *chul*. Then she gave a handful of the white grain to oldest girl, saying, '*Mile-bua*, bring an earthen pot half filled with water and set it on the oven. Then put these grains into the pot and let the whole thing boil for sometime.'

The oldest girl did as she was told by the widow. Her younger sisters huddled together round the fire, anxiously observing the happenings inside the pot. At first, the grains lay in the bottom. Then the water began to boil, gradually turning cloudy. A strange muttering began to exude from inside the pot. Soon soft bubbles were seen bursting on the surface. A few of them even rolled down the side of the pot in tiny trickles. And when the white grains, now swollen with water, began to dance and play with the bubbles, the girls, unable to constrain their anxiety and longer, cried out together, 'O *mujhi*, come and see what is happening!'

The widow came in, and, after taking a close look at the pot, announced, '*Chul* is ready.'

After some time, the food thus prepared was served on plantain leaves. Some of it was left for the householder. Then widow and the three sisters sat together and ate the rest to their fill. The new food was indeed sweet to taste, and it also gave a pleasant fragrance. In this way, the daughters of Ālsi Michchingā became the first among the race of man to eat *chul*. They also learnt to cook the new food but the method of producing the white grains was yet unknown.

A little while after dusk, Ālsi Michchingā returned. He slowly clambered up the *chāngu* and went straight into the *pinā*. And he had not noticed the widow sleeping in the *gudi*. He called the youngest daughter and gave to her the wild potatoes he had collected. She took them and returned after sometime, not with the potatoes he gave her but with the white grains they had cooked.

So Ālsi Michchingā ate *chul*.

While eating, he asked her, '*Dange*, what is this food that looks white and tastes so sweet? Surely this cannot be the wild potatoes I gave you.' And she told him, one after another, as our tales are told, everything that came to pass while he was away from home.

And when he had heard everything, and had savoured the food to the last morsel, Ālsi Michchingā said, 'Let this woman stay in my house as long as she wants.'

Having said thus, he retired to bed and was soon asleep.

No sooner did he fall asleep, Ālsi Michchingā began to dream. He saw a boatman rowing downstream with the current. The water was so clear that one could distinctly see the shrimps playing between the rocks on the riverbed. Upon waking in the morning, he called his youngest daughter to his side and asked her, '*Mile-bua*, doesn't the house look different today?'

At first, the little girl looked around her, quickly surveying the inside of the house. Then she turned to look at her father, and said, 'The house looks as it did yesterday.' It was obvious that she had failed to guess what he was thinking.

But Michchingā was amused at the reply and continued to speak in the same vein: '*Mile-bua*, are you quite sure that we're not living in a different house today?'

'Old man, don't you see that it's our same old house we've been living since understanding came to us,' she curtly replied and went off to play with other girls of the neighbourhood.

For the next few days, Michchingā had no work to do. The widow took good care of everything and she also saw to it that there was enough food for everyone in the family. So some time passed happily for Ālsi Michchingā and his daughters.

Then, one day, in the month of Māgh, the widow woke him up early in the morning and said, 'Go to the hillocks that raise their maiden heads against the young sunlight and find a place where bamboos and bushes grow.' At first, Michchingā hesitated. He said, 'O *rāni-mile-bua*, should one work when there is in his house food to eat?' For the past few days, he had been quite content doing no work and eating the food the widow so nicely cooked. Then the widow gave him this piece of advice: 'Bad days come unexpected, and one must always be prepared for the worst.' And she was so insistent that he had no choice than to go out, though with much reluctance.

A few days later, the widow gave him a *ta-gal* and said, 'Go back to the place you selected and cut down all standing plants.' Michchingā obeyed, and going out to the site of *jum*, he felled the bamboos and cut down the bushes that grew there. But he did not complete the cutting in a single day. It took him several days, because the site he had selected for *jum* stretched across four hillocks. Then he left the plants he had cut down with the *tāgal*, as the widow had directed, for *Bel* to dry them.

Towards the end of Chaitra, the widow asked him to go to the site of *jum* and put fire on dried bamboos and bushes. But when he had gone a few paces from his house, she called him from behind and said, 'Ask all creatures – birds, beasts and the creeping things to leave the site and go to the other

side of the river, so that when the fire begins to consume the dried leaves and twigs no living creature may come to harm.'

When this too was done, the widow went to the *jum* again to clear it of the half-burnt twigs the fire had left unconsumed. 'Here I plant the first crop,' she said to herself and sprinkled the various seeds she had brought with her. Upon returning home in the evening, she gave a piece of advice to Ālsi Michchingā: 'You'll good care of the crops that grow in the *jum*. You'll also build a little shed at a convenient place, that you may keep watch and scare away any creature that dares to intrude.'

After some time, she went to the *jum* again, and she gathered the weeds that had grown among the saplings. 'I must do something to prevent the weeds from growing in the *jum*,' she said to herself. Then she made a pit and, putting the weeds into it, placed a large stone atop, firmly sealing the mouth.

On the morrow, she sent Michchingā to the *jum* to see if everything was all right. As he was about to leave, she added a word of caution: 'To every side of the *jum* you may go but avoid the one that lies to the right of Bel when he goes to sleep.'

The widow's words set Michchingā into thinking, and as he walked up the hill, he asked himself again and again, 'Why did the woman ask me to avoid the side that lies to the right of Bel when he goes to sleep? Surely there must be something which she wants me not to know.' But curiosity, which has not always showered benefits on man, continued to push him into a decision. 'I must find out,' he said to himself, and started to walk in the forbidden direction.

No sooner had he reached there than he heard strange voices, voices of men, women and children quarrelling, cursing and provoking one another. He looked to his left and he looked to his right; then he looked in front of him and behind him but not a soul anywhere. Surprised and with his anxiety increasing every moment, he searched and searched until he came across the stone the widow had placed

on the pit. And he heard voices were coming from the beneath the stone. He stood uncertainly for a while, not knowing whether to remove the stone or leave it as it was.

At length, he mustered courage and cried out, 'Who's in there?'

Suddenly the commotion died and everything fell silent. And it was not until some moments had passed that a voice cried out from pit below, 'O seed of Kedugā, please let us out of this pit. There is so little space in here. Be quick or we'll die of suffocation.' Soon other voices joined and the commotion broke out again. Moved by the piteous cries and thinking that human beings might have fallen into the pit, Michchinga quickly removed the stone from the mouth of the pit, and lo! no man, no woman nor children came out but weeds came and began to fly and scatter in all direction. Michchingā realised his mistake, 'Curse my luck. What is it that I've done?'

And he began to run after the weeds, shouting desperately, 'Come back this moment. You cannot cheat me thus.' But the weeds fun of him, called him names, and settled in *jum*.

When he told the widow all that had passed, and that he had disobeyed, she became very angry. 'You fool, see what you have one,' she cried. 'You have only added to misery. Did I not say to you, "To every side of the jum you may go but avoid the one that lies to the right of *Bel* when he goes to sleep"? And yet you chose not to listen.'

Then she ran to the jum field as fast as her legs could carry her and hastily resumed the task of clearing the weeds, but sadly for man, some weeds managed to escape. Angry with himself, Michchingā promised never to act irresponsibly again. He said, 'Henceforth, 'I'll always keep watch for weeds. I'll chase them away whenever they return to the jum field.' But the widow said, 'It's no use now that you've let them out. They'll come back every time you clear the jum-field.' And because this happens every time, the Chakmas attribute the difficulties they face in clearing and weeding the *jum* field to the disobedience of their ancestor, Ālsi Michchingā.

Time passed and slowly but steadily the saplings grew taller and taller. In the beginning of Bhādra, the crops began to turn yellow. Soon it would be the time of harvest. So one fine morning, the widow sent Michchingā to summon the people of the *ādām* in front of his house. And when this was done, the widow discarded her disguise and told the assembled folks that she was indeed Māh-Lakkhi-mā, whose arrival a bird had had announced one night, less than a year ago. They remembered the incident and now looked at the goddess with awe and reverence. Each of them invited her to their house.

Māh-Lakkhi-mā then spoke to the gathering, explaining to them how to *jum* the land and produce rich harvest. And having said so, she summoned her bird-mount, *Me-Me-chāgli*, for the time had come for her to leave *Pitthimi* and return to the heavenly abode. The folks who had gathered in front of the house where she had spent almost a year begged her to stay but she said that she could not do so. 'I have taught you how to jum the land. Henceforth, you'll produce your own crops and feed your family throughout

Every year Me-Me-Chāgli makes her nest in the paddy plant.

the year. Surely, I have to go back to the place from where I came but I leave behind my presence in the crops you produce.' Then she added, 'I also grant you another boon. Every year when jum crops begin to turn yellow, *Me-Me-Chāgli* will come down and make her nesting in the plants of paddy and hatch her offspring.'

And having thus assured every one of happiness and plenitude, Māh-Lakkhi-mā went back to her heavenly abode.

Ālsi Michchingā and Munirām Serpent

One day, towards the end of Chaitra, Māh-Lakkhi-mā, who was then disguised as a widow, told Ālsi Michchingā to go to the site of the *jum* and put fire on the dried bamboo and bushes. And she also said to him, 'Ask all birds and beasts and creeping things to leave the *jum*. Tell them to go to the forest across the river, so that the *jum*-fire may not devour them.' So Ālsi Michchingā went to the *jum*, to warn all creatures that lived there about the fire. He cried to them at the top of his voice, 'Hear, O creatures that fly and walk and crawl, linger not any longer than this night in your dwellings. Tomorrow, when Bel takes charge of daylight, a fire will set ablaze this *jum*. Go as fast as you can to the forest across the river. Only there, you'll be safe.'

Every creature with the exception of one serpent heeded to the words of caution and was away from the site of the *jum* long before daybreak. This serpent, known by the name of Munirām, was a monstrous creature having not fewer than five score heads, and he could move faster than any other creature of the land. He was proud and he was also vain and, priding on his singular swiftness, he decided to linger a while. When his wife, who had as many tails as her husband had heads, begged of him to accompany her, he dismissed her grossly, saying, 'I've indeed heard the man

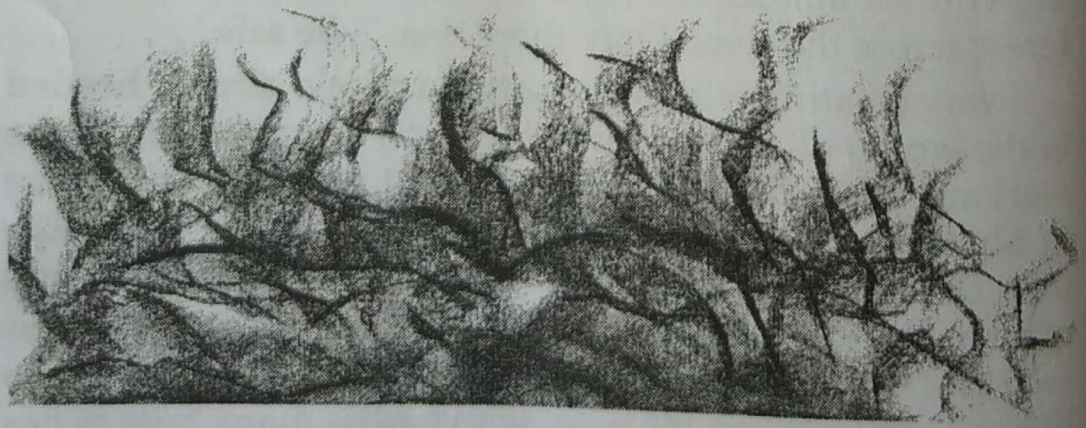
announce, "Linger no longer than this night in your dwellings." But I'm swift, and the fire can't catch me so easily.'

'How can you be so sure that the fire can't catch you?' asked his wife. 'We've never seen a *jum* fire before and know not what it is like.' And she wept and wept, imploring the headstrong male to accompany her to the forest beyond the river. But Munirām said that he would go down only after he had seen the fire. Then he remonstrated her, 'Don't be such a baby – this fire can't even touch me.'

And on seeing that Munirām would listen not to reason, his wife left him and went down to the forest to be with the other creatures that were already there.

Sometime after daybreak, Michchingā set the *jum* on fire. Soon the flames, fed by the bamboo and grass that Bel had dried, began to spread, reducing to ashes everything that came in its way. Munirām had not expected the fire to spread so quickly. He was still recuperating from the sluggish indolence that clings to one's body after one has come out of sleep when the fire approached his dwelling.

Suddenly, he felt the heat of the flames and, stricken with panic, he started to run for life but the flames pursed him doggedly. Soon he became exhausted. He had not anticipated the fire to be so swift. Finally, in desperation, he turned to



The jum fire spread fast, reducing everything to ashes.

hiss back and extinguish the pursuing flames. The serpent's defiance so angered the fire that it leapt upwards, made a huge swirl, and swooped down on him, like a falcon on its prey. Munirām also leapt desperately, trying to escape the quickness and ferocity of the flames. The next moment, he fell into the river with such a loud splash that the fall spilt all the water and made the river dry. His heads and body were safe but the flames had scorched a portion of his long tail.

A couple of days later, Māh-Lakkhi-mā, still disguised as a widow, woke up Michchingā very early in the morning and asked him to go to the *jum* again, to see if the fire had completed its task. And as he went out, she gave him another piece of advice: 'O *bujyā*, to every side of the *jum* you may go but avoid the side that lies to the right of Bel when he goes to sleep.'

On the way, Michchingā wondered, 'Why did the woman say, "To every side of the *jum* you may go but avoid the side that lies to the right of Bel when he goes to sleep"? There must be something she wants me not to know.' And he asked himself again and again whether he should go to the forbidden direction or not. At length, driven by a kind of compelling curiosity that has not always been beneficial to man, Michchingā went to the forbidden side of the *jum* to see what was there.

Having reached the place, he saw not anything unusual than an ashen waste spread across the face of the hillock. And he was thinking of returning home when, suddenly, he was startled by a loud hissing noise. Turning round quickly, he saw scores of serpent heads, their eyes all blood red, glaring down at him. He took a quick step backward, frightened, and would have run for his life. But the serpent showed no further aggression. 'Please don't run away. I'm Munirām and I intend no harm,' the creature pleaded. 'The fire has burnt my tail and I'll surely die soon if you deign not to help me.'

'But I'm afraid of you,' cried Michchingā. And the serpent allayed his fears by promising non-violence.

Then Michchingā saw the scorched tail and he was moved to pity the serpent. He said, 'What can I do to lessen the pain you now suffer?' The serpent told him to collect certain herbs, whispering their names into his ears. He said, 'You've only to apply the paste to my wound to see it healed.' In this way, Michchingā became to first among his kind to know the names of remedial herbs.

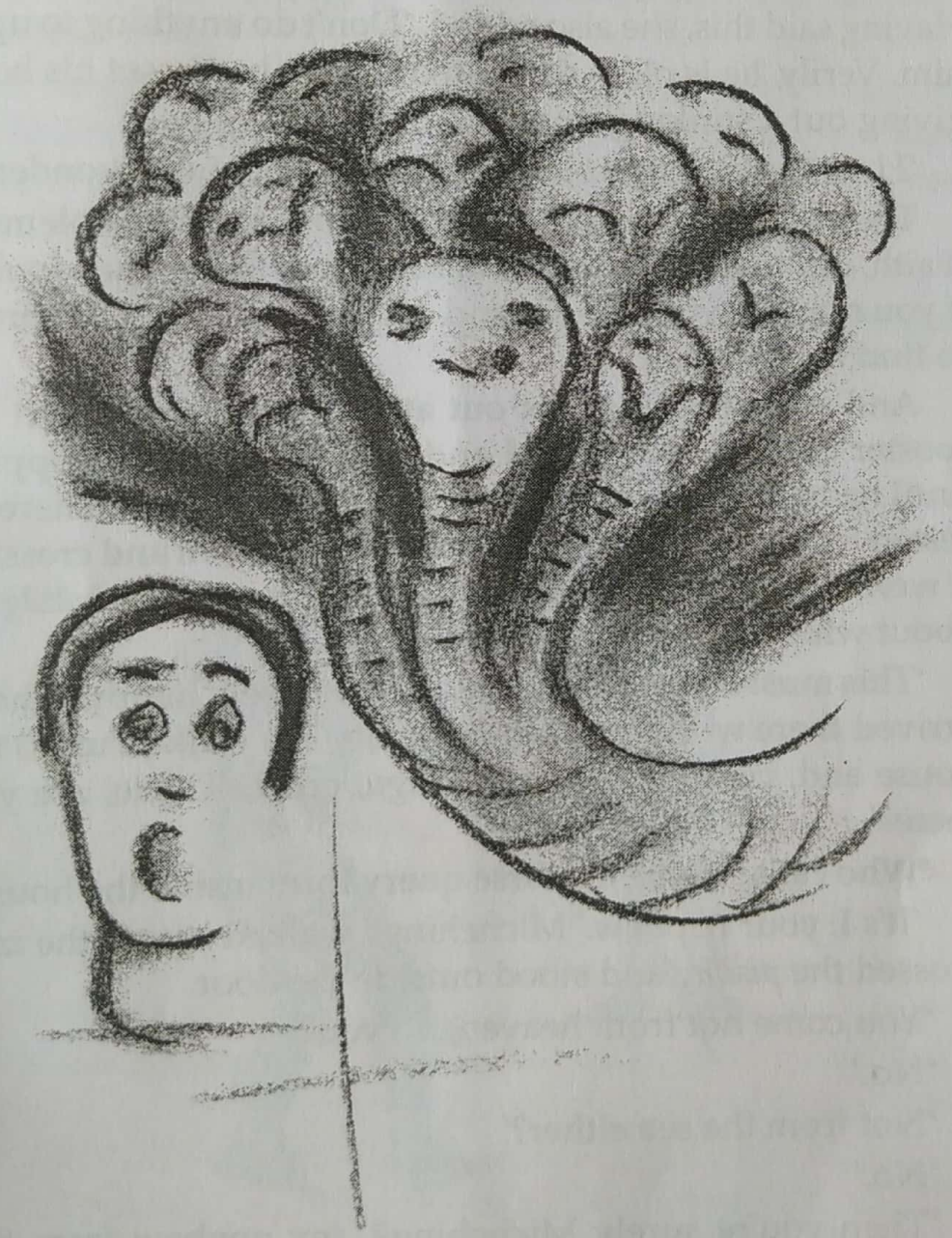
But Munirām was cunning and he was also deceitful. As soon as the wound healed, a transformation came over him. He caught Michchingā in his coils and said, 'I must eat you, for you've learnt the secret that Gozen held back from the race of man.' Michchingā was terrified to hear the serpent speak thus. He besought Munirām not to devour him but the serpent would show him not the least compassion. So when Michchingā saw that he must perforce die, he applied to the serpent his last prayer: 'Since you must eat me, I cannot but comply with your wish. But to compensate for the service I've rendered to you in your great distress, I pray unto you to spare my life for a couple of days, that I may visit my kinsmen and take their leave.' The serpent pondered for a while and said, with much reluctance though, 'Let it be so. But remember, if you keep not your word, I'll go down to the *ādām* and destroy your whole family.'

Poor Michchingā, he was so overcome with grief that he neither replied to the queries nor reciprocated the greetings of folks on his way back to the ādām. He thought of his daughters and grew wistful. When the widow saw him depressed, she asked him, 'Whatever's the matter with you?' When his daughters saw him dejected, they became worried. 'Is anything wrong with you?' But he uttered not a word. He slowly clambered up the *chāngu*, then slumped on the bamboo matting of the platform-floor and sat there speaking not a word for some time.

When at length he spoke, it was quite late in the night. His daughters had fallen asleep, and he told the anxious widow everything that transpired during day in the *jum*. He said, 'The *ladi-beriye* threatened to destroy my family if I

failed to keep my promise.' The widow became very annoyed with Michchingā and rebuked him with much harshness: 'Serves you right, old man, serves you right. Did I not warn you twice, "Avoid the *jum* that lies to the right of Bel when he goes to sleep"? But look at you! You dared to disregard the warning.'

When his daughters came to know of the terrible fate that awaited their father, they began to wail. The widow saw that



Suddenly a hundred-headed serpent confronts Michchingā.

they were indeed very sad. She went up to them and tried to console them with gentle words. 'Don't weep, dear ones,' she said, 'I know some one who could help your father.'

And she turned to Michchingā and told him, 'That blue knoll over there, it's two day's walk from here. Go straight, and having climbed the rounded top, you'll see a deep blue sea churning silver foams. On the shore of that sea, you'll find a *māzāghar* in which lives a very old man. Call him "Uncle," for he is your uncle and only he can save you.' Having said this, she also added, 'Don't do anything to upset him. Verily, he is old – so old that decay has beset his body, giving out a stinking smell.'

'How could one so old help me?' Michchingā wondered.

The widow seemed to read his mind. She said solemnly, 'Faith, old man, only faith can save you. Save your doubts, if you may, for your leisure and off you go early at daybreak to find the old man.'

And so Michchingā set out at the early hour when the rooster crowed. He walked and walked, without stopping until he had reached the foothill of the blue knoll. There he rested for a while. Then he climbed up the knoll and crossing it went down to the seashore, where he found the *māzāghar* about which the widow had told him.

'This must be the place,' he said to himself, happy to have arrived there without much difficulty. He walked up to the house and, climbing up the *chāngu*, cried, 'Uncle, are you there?'

'Who calls?' came a hoarse query form inside the house.

'It's I, your nephew.' Michchingā walked across the *izar*, crossed the *pisāng* and stood outside the door.

'You come not from heaven, do you?'

'No.'

'Not from the sea either?'

'No.'

'Then you're surely Michchingā, my nephew from the land across the blue knoll.'

'Yes, I'm Michchingā and I've come to seek your help.'

'Come in,' said the voice from inside the house.

So Michchingā entered the house. On the bed, he saw a dilapidated frame that resembled a human body in structure but in details was no more than an assortment of million sores. The stink inside was indeed very repulsive. But Michchingā's life was at stake and he was determined not to do anything that could upset the old man. So he sat down on the bamboo matting of the platform-floor and narrated the whole story.

At length, the old man spoke, 'To go with you, I cannot. The journey is too long and I'm old and too weak to walk.' Then he added in a feeble voice, 'However, I could help you if you carried me on your back.'

And Michchingā, knowing not that he was carrying a god, took the old man on his back and went out of the house.

The old man struck the ground with a queer staff.

He minded neither the stink nor the sores. When they had advanced a few paces in this manner, the old man expressed a desire to alight on the ground. This done, the old man muttered a magic incantation, and presto! a queer-looking staff appeared in his hand. He struck the ground with the staff, incanting the *satru-mārani* charm, 'With this, I destroy your enemy.' At that instant, a small patch, wet and scarlet, discoloured the yellow sand on which they stood. And while Michchinga saw this and wondered what the old man was doing, far away in the *jum*, Munirām writhed in intense agony. For, no sooner did the old man strike the ground with the queer staff than a portion of Munirām's tail got severed from the body.

And this was had done seven times, after which the old man doffed his disguise. To his utter amazement, Michchingā found himself standing before Lord Nārān himself. Quickly, he dropped on his knees, supplicating before the god, who said, 'Rise, O humble seed of Kedugā, and return to your people. Verily you've passed the test of determination.' When Michchingā did not rise to his feet, the god told him, 'Your enemy will never trouble you again, for I have cut him into seven pieces with this staff and destroyed him.'

Having said that, Lord Nārān disappeared.

Michchingā then got to his feet and returned to the *ādām* to live happily among his people and become, in course of time, the first among the race of man to cultivate the *jum*.

How the Moon came to have eclipse

Gozen had made Chān and Bel the custodians of light and said, 'Go forth and illuminate the world.' And they continued to do so for a long time. Then, one day something happened and Chān ceased to be as stout and colossal as he was when Gozen made him, and he also started to suffer the cyclic soreness of the eclipse.

When we were children, our grandparents told us that this thing came to pass in the time of Narasingh *vaidya* who has remained until this day the most revered figure among men of medicine. They told us that, one day, Narasingh *vaidya* found the vine that would make man immortal. Delighted with the discovery, he cried out, 'From this day, man will know not death.' Then he pulled up the vine by the root and, bringing it home, he planted it with care in the yard in front of the *māzāghar* in which he lived with his daughter, his wife having died a couple of years ago. There were five-and-twenty scores of plants, each of a different variety, and double the number and type of vines and creepers that grew in the yard. And he planted the vine of immortality among similar looking vines so that no one other than he could identify it.

At that moment, Chān was journeying across the sky-sea. He was just over the *vaidya*'s *māzāghar* when the *vaidya*

cried out, 'From this day, man will know not death.' On hearing those words, Chān fretted in deep anxiety. The thought of human immortality disturbed him, and he itched to foil the *vaidya*'s plan. 'If that vine grows, there will be no end of worries,' he said to himself. 'There'll be no death on *Pitthimi* and people will multiply endlessly. Without the fear of death, they'll also forsake their commitment to Gozen and have no faith in his all-powerfulness.' Then he decided to act swiftly. 'I must steal the plant,' he said.

And he lingered above the vaidya's *māzāghar*, which stood on a hillock, anxiously hoping that the vaidya would go out sooner or later. He must have waited longer than he was wont to do, because he could see Bel far away getting ready to take charge of daylight.

At length, Narasingh came out of the house and slowly clambered down the *chāngu*. Then he went into the yard. He collected a few herbs, stuffed them inside a *khalyā* and started to walk down the hillock.

No sooner did Narasingh leave his house than Chān came down stealthily into the yard. The *vaidya*'s daughter was busy with her household chores, and she saw not Chān. The *vaidya*'s dog was sleeping on the *izar*. It showed no interest in the activities of Chān, who in the meantime rummaged about the garden for the vine of immortality. 'I wonder if I could ever find it in this mess of look-alike vines and creepers,' he said and stood with eyes downcast.

Suddenly, his eyes shone with excitement, for he just had a flash of wisdom. He struck on a means by which he could summarily frustrate the *vaidya*'s efforts. 'I'll severe the top of the hillock from the base and take it to a place whence Narasingh could never again retrieve the vine,' he cried exultantly.

So Chān scooped up the flattened top of the hillock into his hands and hastened to carry it to heaven. This done, he put it down in the middle of Gozen's garden.

In the meantime, Narasingh returned and was surprised to see not the top of the hillock and his *māzāghar* on it. He

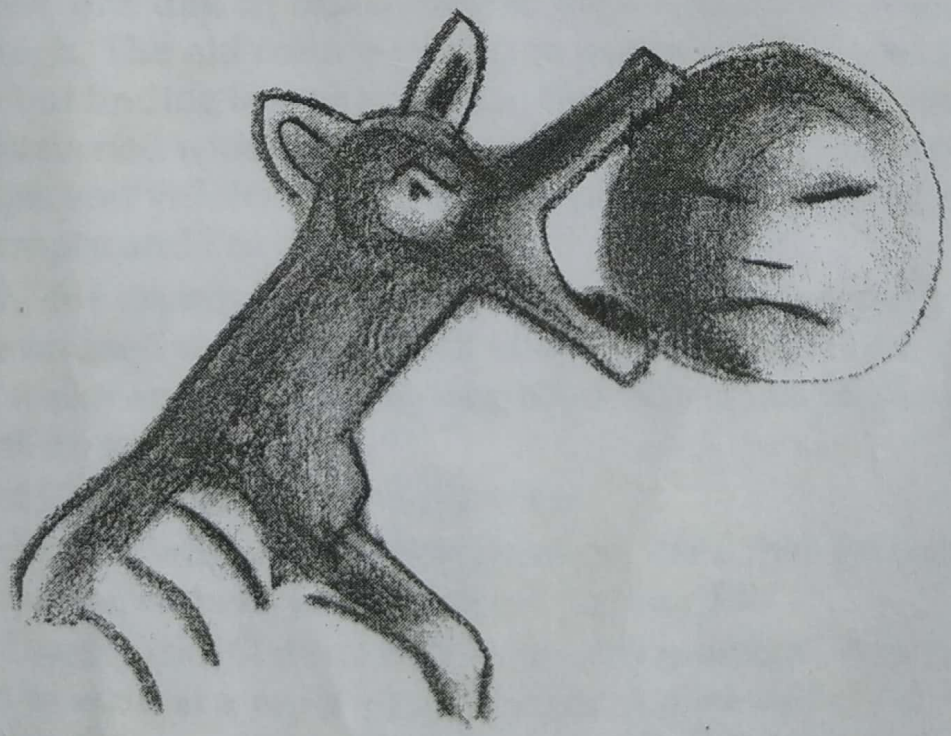
wondered for sometime what could have happened during his absence. He called out to his daughter but she responded not. Then he whistled for his dog but creature barked not in response. Worried, he sat down quietly to meditate and visualised everything through the mind's eye. 'So it's Chān who has done all this,' he muttered angrily. And he uttered a curse, as the result of which Chān now looks a diminutive luminary beside Bel.

But Chān's woes were not over with Narasingh's curse. No sooner had he put down the hillock-top in the middle of Gozen's garden than the *vaidya*'s daughter cried angrily, 'What place is this and why have you brought me here?' When Chān told her that she was in heaven but gave her no explanation for bringing her there, the girl became angrier. She said, 'You'd better take me back to where I belong.'

'That I cannot to do,' said Chān.

'And why not?'

'Oh, don't ask so many questions,' replied Chān curtly. 'You can't simply go back.'



The vaidya's dog bit Chān deep into the flesh.

On hearing this, the vaidya's daughter could contain her rage no longer. 'Shoo!' she shouted to the dog, 'Get him now.' And the dog, which until that moment looked tame, sprang to its feet with a sudden yap and then it began to bark ferociously. Chān was so terrified that he started to run. But the dog chased him with a stubborn determination and finally bit him deep into his flesh.

Slowly, the poison from the dog's fangs started penetrating his blood and it soon made his complexion pitch-dark.

After sometime, Chān did get well but to this day, the wound has not healed completely. Every time it recurs, the poison spreads through his body and his complexion becomes pitch-dark again. And when this happens, we say that a lunar eclipse has occurred.

Kahbi-Dahbi

There lived a poor old *jummo* with his old wife and their beautiful daughter Kahbi. When the old couple went out to work in the *jum*, they would leave Kahbi at home. They took with them *bhāt-majā* to eat and water to drink. They would work through the day and return shortly before nightfall. And, in this way, they lived happily for sometime.

Then, one day, in mid-summer, the temperature soared very high. The old couple started to perspire and thirst for water but finding not a drop left in the *pānikutti*, which they always carried with them, the woman called to her husband, 'O *bujyā*, you've left no water for me to drink. The *pānikutti* is now empty and I'm dying of thirst.'

'Oh, for crying out loud, why do you always put the blame on me?' retorted Kahbi's father, petulantly. 'The day is too warm and Bel must have gulped down the pitcher to the last drop.'

'But I'm so thirsty,' cried his wife.

'Abide this while. I've almost finished. We'll then go down to the *sorā* and there you can drink to your fill.'

'I'll surely die if I don't find water this moment.' And she began to walk at a rapid pace. The old *jummo* called off his work for the day and followed her. 'Wait. I'm coming too,' he cried from behind.

And so the old couple left the *jum* in search of water. They walked and walked but a drop of water they found nowhere. The increasing heat had dried all waterholes. Kahbi's mother felt that she would surely die of thirst. The old man encouraged her to walk a little further ahead, and shortly they arrived at a place where the ground under their feet was soft. They walked a few paces on this soft ground and came across footmarks of a tortoise and a squirrel. They followed the trail for some distance and found puddles of water in the shallow impression the footmarks had indented on the soft clay.

Having seen the puddles, Kahbi's father cried out, joyfully, 'O *buri, ei huchchyat ettuk pāni āghey*' ('There's little water in these footmarks'). You drink of the tortoise's foot. It looks clean and cool.' He intended to drink water of the other puddle and looked too see if he could find a hollow reed. But Kahbi's mother was so thirsty that she immediately bent down on her knees, as thirsting animals do, and licked the water of the squirrel's footmark. This done, she started to shiver violently.

Her husband was pondering how to drink the water in the puddle when he saw her behaving strangely. He wanted to rush towards his wife but could not move at all, petrified as he was at a sudden twist of the bizarre. The woman he had known until then as his wife shrank into a roundish lump and became a tortoise.

At length, he came to his senses and cried out, 'O Kahbi's mother, what's become of you!' But by then the tortoise had gone out of sight. He looked for her everywhere, ferreted around the dry undergrowth, but finding her nowhere, he began to lament and yowl,

'O Kahbi's mother, where've you gone? How'll I go back home? What'll I tell Kahbi when she asks where you are?' Then he called out to her, affectionately, 'O *buri*, come back now. The *jum* is ready to receive seeds of paddy and sesame, *mārmāh* and *chindirā*, gourd and chilli and brinjal but I've not a helping hand.' His eyes were filled with tears as he

spoke those words but neither human nor tortoise appeared to console the dejected old man.

At last, he returned home sadly. When Kahbi did not see her mother, she went up to him and asked, 'Where's mother?'

The old *jummo* replied not.

'Where's mother?' asked the girl again.

'She's gone to catch crabs.'

After some time, seeing that her mother had not returned yet, Kahbi repeated the same question, 'Where's mother?'

'Hasn't she come back?'

'No.'

'Then she must have gone to your *muzi*'s house.'

'But you said that she'd gone to catch crabs.'

'Did I say that?'

'Of course, you did.'

'Oh yes, I do remember now. Your mother told me that if she did not find crabs in the river, she'd go to your *muzi*'s house to borrow some for you.'

'She won't come back today, will she?'

'Perhaps no.'

'Then she'll certainly come tomorrow.'

But Kahbi's mother did not return the next day. Anxious and distraught, the poor girl began to weep. She asked again, 'Where's mother? Why doesn't mother come back?'

Now the *jummo* could not persist with the play-acting any longer, and he said, sadly, 'O *mile-bua*, your mother has become a *dur*.' And he slowly recounted the whole incident.

Poor Kahbi, how she wept and wailed to hear that her mother has become a tortoise! 'O mother, who'll comb my hair now?' She pined with an intense grief of separation. 'Who'll now trim my nails now? Who'll tell me a story every night?' Her father spoke to her sympathetically but Kahbi would not be consoled. She wept and wailed and tears ran down her cheeks.

On the following day, and then the day after, the old man did not go to the *jum*. He could not do all the work there by

himself. Then, as time passed, it slowly healed the sores of the *jummo*'s heart and he came to see that he could not sit idly, doing nothing. And so he made bamboo and rattan baskets. He was very skilled in this work, as most hill folks are, and in a few days, he had manufactured many baskets of different sizes and varying shapes – from the little *pulyāng* to the bulky *bāreng*. He also made *jumor, hlei, dulan, kum-dhāgani* and many fish-traps. And having finished his work, he decided to go out and trade them in the neighbouring *ādāms*. 'I'm going out to trade these things and bring food for us,' he told his daughter one morning. 'Take care of yourself until I come back. Forget not to feed the fowls and the pigs. And don't you ever go to the forest alone.'

On the way, he called on a widow who was a relative of Kahbi's mother and besought her to look after the girl while he was away.

Now this widow had a daughter called Dahbi who was of the same age as his daughter Kahbi. She assured him, saying, 'Kahbi-*bāppa*, don't worry at all. I'll take care of the girl while you're away. She's as good as my own daughter.' The old man was happy to hear these words, and he went out to trade his wares. He walked from one *ādām* to another, traded the things he manufactured and got plenty of rice and vegetables in exchange.

On his way back, he called on the widow again, as a gesture of gratitude. The woman invited him to stay at her house for the night. 'O Kahbi-*bāppa*, how awfully tired you look! Won't you rest here tonight?' she said in a kindly tone.

'But Kahbi is alone and she must be also hungry,' he replied gently.

'Oh, don't you worry about her. I've sent a *gābur-mile* with provisions for the night. When she returns shortly, you'll know that your daughter is fine.'

Poor man, little did he know what the widow had in her mind when she asked him to stay at her place. So he said, 'Since you insist, I'd not mind staying for the night.' And Dahbi's mother cooked *chul* and *chumā-gudyā* and made a

curry of eggs. She also cooked *sidal* and prepared delicacies of pork and venison. Before serving the food, she gave him a liberal round of *jagarā*. The *jummo* feasted to his fill and, as soon as he lay down on bed, he dozed off to sleep.

And while he was deeply sleeping in the *pinā*, the widow pursued the trail of her secret thoughts. She said to herself, 'If this man agreed to marry me, I'd have someone to take care of me and help me in the *jum*. My daughter would also have a father to look after her.' She did not sleep but sat wondering what she could do. Finally, she contrived a clever scheme. She nudged Dahbi with her elbow, whispering, '*Mile-bua*, wake up.' And when the girl woke up, her mother gave her two threads, a black one and a red one, and instructed her to tie one end of each thread to the feet and the arms of the old man. This done, she told her daughter to tie the other ends to her arms and feet.

At daybreak, the old man woke up and felt a pull in his arms and feet. He was surprised when he saw the red and the black threads tied to his arms and feet. He sat wondering what these threads were and how they came to bind him. At the same time, the widow also woke up and feigned to be surprised at what she saw. She was lying in the *gudi*. From there, she called to the old man and said, excitedly, 'O *bujyā*, see what has happened! We must've been husband and wife in previous births but separated in this birth by a capricious destiny. So god has kindly sent us this happy sign of wedlock. Shouldn't we obey him and perform a *chunglāng*?'

Kahbi's father, who was too simple to read the widow's mind, believed every word he heard now. He thought, 'Certainly, she was my wife in previous births. So god wants us to perform the *chunglāng* in this birth too, for who else would have bound us thus with these sacred threads?'

Soon they tied the wedlock and gave on that day a generous feast of pork and wine to their relatives and neighbours.

And so Kahbi, who could not be left alone in the old house, became a member of her father's new family.

But within a short time, she saw that her stepmother liked her not. One day, she heard her stepmother asking her father, 'O Dahbi-*bappā*, have we the bounty to feed one who sits idly?' And Kahbi's father replied, 'Let the one who sits idle do the household chores.' So Kahbi was made to work as a menial while her stepsister Dahbi sat idle, bloating everyday with jealousy. Every now and then, she would fabricate a cause to complain against Kahbi. She would cry, 'O mother, Kahbi has done this to me' or 'Kahbi has done that to me.' And when these complaints satisfied her no longer, she made an issue of Kahbi's looks. She went up to her mother and wept, saying, 'Look at me. I'm so ugly but Kahbi is beautiful, and everyone bestows praise on her.' Her mother stroked her hair sympathetically. She said, 'Don't cry. I'll see to that soon.'

In the evening, she again went to her husband and asked him, 'O Dahbi-*bappā*, have we the plenty to feed one who does only a few household chores and sits idling rest of the time?' The old *jummo* failed not to take the hint and he replied sadly, 'Let the one who sits idling rest of the time go out to clean the pigsty and feed the fowls.'

In this way, Kahbi's woes multiplied. The scorching daylight darkened her complexion while the endless chores about the house and the filth of the pigsty made look her pale and sickly. But she uttered not a word of complaint against either her stepmother or her stepsister. Quietly, she would clean the house and cook food for the family. And when everyone had finished eating, she would content herself with the leftovers and carry the load of utensils to the *sorā* to wash them. In between these works, she would also feed the fowls and clean the pigsty. At the end of the day, she would go down to the *sorā* again to fetch water. Often, she would sit on the bank and weep, remembering how much her mother loved her. Sometimes, she would take a stroll down the bank, calling out to her tortoise-mother.

Then, one day, as Kahbi sat washing utensils, and pining inwardly to see her mother, she noticed a tortoise swimming

towards her, slowly, and signalling to her with a foreleg raised above the water. It called out to her in a tenderly human voice, 'O Kahbi, *ma idu āy, ma ahāttānat dharichchi*' ('Come down to me and hold my arms').

Kahbi jumped up to her feet, overjoyed. It was, indeed, her mother. She fondly took the tortoise up in her arms, and then embraced the little creature passionately, and together the mother and the daughter wept for some time and spoke not a word. At length, Kahbi told her mother everything that came to pass since the day she became a tortoise. Her mother was greatly grieved to hear that her daughter has suffered so much. But she said, 'There's justice in god's world. Don't worry, my child, everything will be fine, now that I'm here. Come down to me whenever you feel depressed and we'd share our miseries for a while.'

Kahbi and her tortoise-mother spend their time together on the bank of the sorā, conversing.

From that day, Kahbi minded no longer the admonishments of her stepmother or the surly tantrums of her stepsister. She was so happy that she wished to tell her father about the tortoise but her mother cautioned her against doing anything of the kind, for the time being at least. She said, solemnly, 'If that wicked woman learns about me, she'll do anything to keep us separated. So tell not anything even to your father.' And Kahbi took good note of her mother's advice and spoke not a word about the tortoise to anyone.

But a change came to show itself in Kahbi's behaviour since the day she met her mother. And this did not go unnoticed for long. Dahbi and her mother saw it soon and they wondered what it was that made the girl suddenly so cheerful and sprightly. 'Must be something I don't yet know,' Dahbi's mother said to herself, and she set her daughter to keep an alert eye on Kahbi: 'See where the girl goes, what she does and whom she meets. And when you've seen and heard, come back and report the matter to me.'

'As you say, mother,' Dahbi obeyed and began to keep an eye on Kahbi.

One day, she came back running excitedly. She panted for breath. 'What happened?' her mother inquired. Dahbi told her everything she had seen and heard. Her mother listened carefully and thought for a while. Then, suddenly, her face lit up. 'A talking tortoise, did you say?' she asked.

'Yes, mother. The tortoise even sang a song,' cried Dahbi. She was still breathing excitedly.

'A singing tortoise indeed,' murmured her mother with an inscrutable grin, for she remembered the things the old *jummo* had told her about his former wife. Soon she began to vex inwardly, and, flared up by much rage and jealousy, decided to trap the tortoise. She pulled Dahbi to her side and confided these words in a subdued voice: 'Remember not to tell anyone what you saw today. Obey me, and I promise you a curry of tortoise meat. Besides, *e bābatyā git-geiyā dura erā khele tar raabuar kārkāchyagyān zebagai aah raabua pegāraa sānyā midhyā ahba*' ('The type of singing tortoise is a curative

meal; it'll heal the throat of hoarseness and make your voice sweet as a bird's').

'O mother, when will you cook this tortoise meat?' asked Dahbi, her mouth salivating already.

'Very soon, I'll send someone to catch the tortoise.'

Incidentally; Kahbi was feeding the fowls when Dahbi and her mother were planning to trap her tortoise-mother. She overheard the whole conversation and became greatly alarmed. Quietly she went down to the riverbank and sadly disclosed the nefarious plan to her mother. 'O mother,' she cried, 'Go away from this place, for Dahbi and her mother intends to kill you.' The tortoise became deeply distressed. 'O Kahbi, how would I live without seeing you,' she said, dejectedly, and started to weep. Kahbi's heart also wept to think of the separation from her mother but she allowed not the weaknesses of passion to temper her dread of the imminent. 'You must leave now,' she said. 'And for sometime, at least, come not back to this place.'

Reluctantly, the tortoise complied with the wishes of her daughter, and swam down the *sorā* and made a new home there, among the *khāgāra* that grew on the muddy bank.

She wept through the day and slept not a wink at night. The same thing happened the following and the day after. In this way, some time passed. Then, one day, at daybreak, she decided to risk the upstream journey. All she wanted was to catch a glimpse of her daughter and come back. And so she made the mistake of throwing caution to the wind and swam straight into the trap Dahbi's mother had laid for her.

When Kahbi saw her tortoise-mother captured, she wept and wept, entreating her stepmother to spare the tortoise's life. 'Please, let the tortoise go away.' But the woman heeded not to her entreaties. She pushed her aside, angrily. 'Be gone,' she cried irascibly, 'Else I'll smack you so hard that you won't be moving your jaws for seven days.' And when she had sliced open the top shell of the tortoise and minced the meat, she called out to Kahbi, '*Mile-bua*, get along now and cook the meat.'

'No, I won't,' Kahbi answered back crisply.

'Dare you contradict me?' She smacked her on the face.

On seeing an opportunity to take her anger out on her stepsister, Dahbi scratched Kahbi's face and told her rudely to cook tortoise curry. Again, Kahbi said, 'No, I won't.' So Dahbi and her mother went into the *olanchāl* and sat down to cook.

Having done that, the mother and the daughter sat down to eat while Kahbi sat outside on the *pisāng*, lamenting the sad fate of her mother. Suddenly, she heard the voice of her mother in the *olanchāl*, and going inside she saw, to her astonishment, the pieces of meat hollering for swift reprisal, 'O wicked woman, don't you touch me if you love your dear self. Let me go, else you and your daughter will surely die by nightfall.' And Kahbi's mother was terrified. She let out a shrill cry and shouted, 'O K-a-h-b-i, *m-i-l-e-b-u-a*, take away this horrid meat and throw it into the forest.'

Then Kahbi carefully collected the pieces of tortoise meat, weeping while she did this work, and went out of the house to throw it into the forest. This done, she started to walk back to the house when a voice crooned from behind, 'O *mile-bua*, should you depart thus, without having regaled with your sweet voice the eager ears of your mother?'

Kahbi turned round quickly. It was indeed her mother who spoke now. She clearly recognised the voice. 'O mother, where're you?' she cried out in joyous excitement. 'Here, right behind you' came the happy reply. And Kahbi saw that in the place where she had thrown the meat of the tortoise, there sprang a tree, tall and broad and spotlessly green in foliage. It signalled to Kahbi with its branch-limbs. 'Come to my arms now but remember not to tell anyone about me,' spoke the tree. 'Also take this heed not to unveil the joy you now experience and thus arouse suspicion. Verily, the woman is wicked and she'll brook no happiness between us.'

When Kahbi returned home, her stepmother asked her if anything had happened as she disposed the meat. Kahbi gave her a long stare and asked, 'What do you mean?' The wicked

woman took her query as indicative of no incident as having taken place. She let out a sigh of relief and soon began to churn the dark recesses of her soul. 'If only I could get rid of this girl!' she thought over and over.

Some time after this, Dahbi's mother took to bed, feigning to be stricken by a malady so strange that no *vaidya* could cure her. And she lay on her bed, twisting and groaning and forever complaining of a kibbling soreness in the bones. When a few days had passed and her condition indicated no mitigation, her husband, now worried to the extent of being exasperated with himself for not having found an effective remedy, came to her bedside and asked, 'How will this ailment be cured?' And she said that she would get well if Kahbi agreed to bring her the tigress' milk.

Kahbi's father shuddered at the thought. He exclaimed, 'That's impossible! The tiger would kill her the moment she went near the den.' But Dahbi had started to weep already, which obviously was part of the plan, and she wept so bitterly that her father became forced to ask Kahbi, much against his will though, to fetch the tigress' milk.

On her way to the tigress' den, Kahbi informed her tree-mother of the strange errand. Having heard everything, the tree told her to go forth fearlessly, giving her this advice: 'When you've reached the den, address the tigress as *muzi*. She'll come out and ask, "Who's it?" You tell her that you're her sister's daughter. Also remember to prostrate on the ground before her as you unfold the purpose of your visit.'

And so Kahbi went into the forest and did as she was instructed by her tree-mother. The tigress was so impressed by the manner in which Kahbi introduced herself that she readily gave the girl her milk and also bestowed on her a set of the five cloth-pieces that the Tangchangya women still wear. Kahbi would have returned with these to the *ādām* but her mother forbade her from doing so. She said, 'Leave the clothes with me. You take only the milk and go home.'

When Dahbi and her mother saw that Kahbi had returned unharmed from the forest with the tigress' milk, they became

very angry. But the *jummo* was in the house at that time; so, neither of them made any show of annoyance. The woman, who now fretted more than ever to get rid of Kahbi, drank the milk and got well by nightfall.

A few days later, she fell ill again. This time her husband did not call any *vaidya*. He went up to his wife and asked her, again, 'How will this ailment be cured?' And the woman told him that she would get well if Kahbi brought for her the snake's milk.

So Kahbi went out to fetch the snake's milk. On the way, she went to her mother and confided to her everything which transpired on that day. Again, her tree-mother advised her, 'Go near the snake's hole and call out loudly, "*Muzi*, O *muzi*, where are you?" When the snake appears, prostrate on the ground and tell her that she's your aunt on your mother's side. She will ask you to regale her ears with a song. Sing as well as you can and she'll happily give you her milk.' Having said this and seen her daughter go into the forest, Kahbi's mother began to think that she must do something to keep her daughter away from harm.

Kahbi returned as quickly as she had gone. She told her mother that the snake was so happy after having heard her song that she not only gave her milk but also a *chāmmoyā* filled with bright silver jewels. Again, her mother instructed her to return only with the milk, leaving the jewels in a hollow in the tree. Kahbi obeyed her mother, who then said, 'Three days from now, you'll come to this place again. You'll not see me here, for I'll have gone down to the king's palace. You'll find in this place where I now stand a pit covered with grass. There I'll leave your clothes and jewels. Put them on, come down to the palace and then tell the king that you can make the tree, which threatens to destroy his palace, disappear. When they've taken you to where the tree stands, you'll prostrate in front of the tree and say three times, "O tree-mother, let the king leave in peace." And I'll ascend and disappear. The king will then ask you to make a wish. Tell him that you desire to marry him.'

Kahbi's heart was filled with sorrow to hear that her mother would be gone and she began to bewail her fate. The tree-mother embraced and consoled her, saying, 'No one lives for ever. And I've outlived my allotted time on *Pitthimi*.'

That night, the king of the land was troubled in his sleep. He saw a dream in which a strange tree emerged in the middle of his palace. It grew both straight and athwart, and its top and branches broke through the roof and the walls. The king woke up with a startle and saw, to his bewilderment, the tree in the middle of the palace. It grew straight and it grew athwart every moment. He immediately summoned his men and ordered them to cut down the tree, failing which he sent for the best woodcutters of the land. But they too could nothing, and they went away, ashamed of their calling. In desperation, the king besought his Chief *Chege* to do something immediately. And the latter advised the king to send his drummers out in all directions, proclaiming a reward to one who could fell the tree and save the palace from destruction.

Soon many brave young men came to attempt the task but none of them succeeded. A day passed in this way. Another day also passed by, and the king grew more and more restless.

On the third daybreak, the herald came in to announce to a depressed court that a maiden sought an audience with the king. When she was brought in and asked what she desired, the maiden, who was none other than Kahbi, now splendidly attired and bedecked with jewels that she had received from the tiger and the snake, made obeisance to the king and told him in a sweet voice that she could make the tree disappear. The king, who was greatly moved by her beauty and deeply touched by the sweetness of the maiden's voice, said, 'Many brave men failed in the task you now aspire to achieve.'

But Kahbi remembered the advice of her mother and said, 'If your majesty would grant me to attempt the task once, I'd make the tree disappear.'

The king looked at her doubtfully. 'Are you certain that you'd do it?'

'Yes, your majesty.'

The king admired her confidence. Then he took Kahbi to where the tree stood. When Kahbi saw her tree-mother standing upright and broad with branches and roots breaking through the walls of the palace, she prostrated herself before the tree and uttered this prayer, "O tree-mother, let the king leave in peace" three times, weeping inwardly as she spoke. To the astonishment of the king and his courtiers, the tree at first became smaller and smaller, until it stood lower than the head that wore the crown. Then it rose higher and higher in the sky to disappear from sight altogether. Kahbi's heart wept to see her mother depart for heaven but she held back her tears, and stood, calmly taciturn.

At length, the king asked, 'What are you – a human or a goddess? Where do you come from?' When the maiden told him that she was Kahbi, a poor *jummo*'s daughter, and that she lived in an *ādām* not far from the palace, the king said, 'Ask what you want.'

And so Kahbi told the king of her wish to marry him.

The king was so delighted that he immediately had his messengers sent to fetch Kahbi's father from the *ādām*. And within a few days, the king and the *jummo*'s daughter tied the *jadan* in the presence of elderly folks and offered their worship to the god of *chunglāng*. There was great rejoicing in the kingdom and everyone was invited to a generous feast of pork and wine. Everyone in the kingdom was happy, except Dahbi and her mother, and they now disliked Kahbi more than they did before, for she had become the queen of the land. As for Kahbi, she harboured no anger or malice against her stepmother or her stepsister, and after the feasting, she liberally bestowed on them clothes and jewellery, and also gave basketsful of paddy and cotton from the king's *jum*.

For some time after this, the newly wedded couple lived happily.

Then, one day, when the king returned from the *jum* and had bathed and eaten, Kahbi went up to him and sought his

permission to visit her father. She said, 'How I'd love to see my father again!'

The king said, 'Surely, you must go and see him.'

The next morning, Kahbi came to visit her father. She intended to return to the palace before nightfall but her father, and subsequently Dahbi and her mother, pressed her so much to stay with them for some time that she finally gave in to their request. She went out and told the guards to go back to the palace. She said, 'Tell the king that I'll return by the end of the week.' Everyone in the house was happy but not everyone was happy for the same reason. Kahbi's father was happy because his daughter would be staying with him for a few days. Dahbi and her mother were happy because they would have another opportunity to get rid of Kahbi.

And it so happened that, one day, after Kahbi's father had gone to the *jum*, her stepmother came to tell the sisters, who were gossiping, that she was going down to the *sorā* to collect crabs. She said, 'O princess, I'll cook *ghilak-ton* today.' Poor Kahbi, she did not realise that the woman had gone out only to keep an eye around and ensure that the jummo would not see anything, should he return home early.

Accordingly, when she was gone, Dahbi expressed a desire to see the ornaments and clothes that Kahbi had the privilege to wear. She said, '*Kahbi bei*, I hear that you've plenty of jewels and clothes to wear. Could I see them?' And Kahbi, who was too simple to see anything amiss in the request, took out the royal outfit and showed them to Dahbi. She said, 'Surely you may see them. You can also put them on if you want to.'

So Dahbi put on the clothes of her stepsister. Then she bejewelled herself, and turning to Kahbi, asked smilingly, 'How do I look in this attire?'

'Oh, splendid!' replied Kahbi, 'If the king were to see you now, he would surely mistake you for me.'

Dahbi pretended to blush at the compliment. She took out the jewels, admired their exquisite finish, and then put them on again. And she continued to do this for some time. Suddenly, she let the *āhlcharā* slip from her hand into the

pigsty below. She cried out, 'O *bei*, the *āhlcharā* has slipped and fallen into the pigsty. Could you go down and pick it up? I'd have gone down myself but I fear the filth may spoil your *pinon*.'

And Kahbi went out unsuspecting the foul play on her.

No sooner did she bend down to pick up the *āhlcharā* than Dahbi poured on her a tumbler of boiling hot water. Kahbi screeched with pain, writhing and twisting. Again, Dahbi poured another tumbler of water on her. This time, Kahbi let out a shrill cry. Then she dropped flat on the ground, and lay unconscious. Dahbi's mother had seen everything. She came running into the pigsty, where Dahbi had also come down, and asked, excitedly, 'Is she dead?'

'Perhaps. But let's bury her now,' suggested Dahbi.

'We cannot bury her,' said her mother.

'Let's cremate her.'

'We cannot do that either. The stinking smell would sooner or later arouse suspicion.'

'Then what'd we do with the body.'

Dahbi's mother took out of the fold of her *phāduri* a tiny amulet and tied it to Kahbi's left arm. Then she uttered a magic formula. Slowly, Kahbi's listless body began to shrink and change until it transformed into a little yellow bird, which the woman caught before it could fly away and put it inside a cage. This done, the mother and the daughter laughed and congratulated each other on their success.

The old man returned from the *jum* earlier than he was wont to do but seeing not Kahbi in the house or in the yard outside, he inquired of her whereabouts. His wife told him that she had gone back to the palace. She said, sighing sadly, 'A messenger from the king arrived to inform her that her mother-in-law was unwell. And she left in such haste that she forget to take her clothes and even her jewels.' At that moment, the old man happened to notice the bird in the cage. When he asked what bird it was and how it came to be there, the woman spoke another lie. 'Dahbi caught that bird today to send it as a present to the king. But everything

happened so suddenly that she forgot to give it to her sister.' Then she added, 'Never mind, we could send Dahbi to the palace with the bird and with the clothes and jewels that Kahbi left behind.'

Then, after a few days had passed, Dahbi was attired in the queen's outfit and sent to the palace. When the king saw her, he asked, 'Why does the queen look so pale?'

'I'd to work in the *jum*. The strong daylight burnt my complexion,' she replied.

'What is it that you've brought with you?' the king inquired, pointing to the bird.

'A little gift for my king.'

'But why does your voice sound so hoarse today?'

'Oh, don't you worry. I'd had a bad cough that has left this lingering soreness in my throat.'

The prompt replies aroused the king's suspicion but he said nothing for the time being. Instead, he thanked her for the little gift. 'Does it talk?' he asked, looking admiringly at the bird.

'Of course, it talks.'

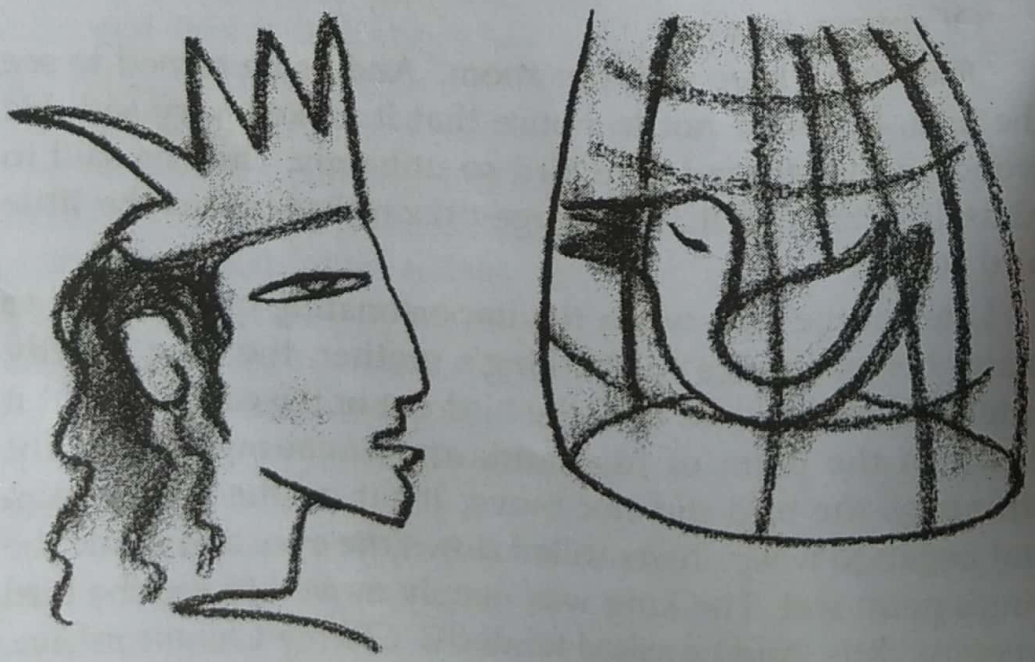
'Then we'll keep it in our room.' And as he turned to see the bird, he failed not to notice that it looked very sad. He wondered what made the bird so unhappy. Then he said to himself, 'Perhaps, it is the cage-prison that makes the little bird so sad.'

Later in the day, when the impersonating queen went to make her obeisance to the king's mother, the king quietly entered the room and took the bird out of the cage. He put it down in the palm of his hand, and encouraged it to fly. Strangely, the bird did not move. It sat on the king's palm and began to weep. Tears rolled down the eyes and made the king's palm wet. The king was deeply moved to see the bird weeping thus. And he asked tenderly, '*Chiring-Chirang pekhya, tui kittei kānach*?' (Sweet little bird, why do you weep?).

To his utter amazement, the bird spoke in the voice of the queen, 'O king, don't you recognise me? I'm Kahbi, your

queen.' And slowly, she unfolded everything that had come to pass, beginning from the day her mother licked water of the tortoise foot to become a tortoise herself. The king was so infuriated when he had heard the queen's story that he decided to condemn Dahbi to the stake but Kahbi pleaded clemency for her sister. With much reluctance, the king consented to spare Dahbi's life but he added, at the same time, 'I'll teach her such a lesson as she'll never again dare meddle with the lives of others.' So, that night, when Dahbi came to into the king's room, he pretended to be delighted at having the queen back home again. And they sat together talking and laughing, singing and joking until Dahbi fell asleep. Then he untied the amulet from the bird's left wing and gingerly put it on Dahbi's left.

Promptly, Kahbi became her human self again while Dahbi was transformed into the black bird, which cries hoarsely at night and makes people curse it every time they hear the cry.



The king was surprised to hear the little bird speak in the queen's voice.

At daybreak, the king sent his men out to fetch the old *jummo* and his wife to the palace. When they had arrived, the king immediately ordered the execution of Dahbi's mother. Kahbi interceded again and begged of the king to spare the life of her stepmother. Once again, the king gave in to her pleadings but he ordered her banishment from the kingdom. As for Kahbi's father, he happily accepted the king's judgement, having come to see the truth about his second wife and his stepdaughter. 'It serves them right,' he said and blessed Kahbi and the king, 'May both of you live together happily ever after.'

Jāmāi-mārani

Once upon a time, there ruled in the hill country overlooking an extensive length of the Bargāng a king whose name our *kadhagis* have not cared to remember. Now, this king had a daughter so beautiful that the fame of her beauty spread far and wide, and many young men and worthy princes aspired to win her hand in marriage. The king loved his daughter so dearly that he wanted her to marry a prince who was bold and handsome, and possessed excellent qualities of head and heart.

So, one day, the king spoke to the princess and asked her to name the prince whom she considered worthy of her hand. But the princess said, 'O king, I've made a vow this year to marry no man other than the one who'd dare to leap from the precipice of Chitmaran into the Bargāng and swim across the water to the other bank.'

The king was shocked to hear that his daughter has made such an absurd vow. He cried, 'O princess, do you know what you say? One may dare to make a drop from that precipice but he'll not survive to see another day!'

He tried to dissuade his daughter from her vow, saying that it was madness but neither words nor persuasion prevailed. Then he asked her *chalā-mā* to try to persuade the princess against the idea. Poor woman, she tried and tried

but on seeing that nothing in the world would move the princess away from her determination, she went back to the king and told him that his daughter would rather die than break her vow. And so with much reluctance, the king gave in to the wishes of the princess. 'Then, let it be so,' he said, sighing deeply, for he loved his daughter very dearly.

And he immediately sent the royal drummers out to have his daughter's wish proclaimed in every part of his kingdom.

Soon suitors began to arrive one after another. They were young and they were also bold. They feared not to take the dangerous leap into the waters of the Bargāng but, sadly, not one of them survived. Each one of them fell into the water and perished. In fact so many of them died that the infamous precipice came to acquire the name *Jāmāi-mārani* ('the husband-killing cliff').

As time passed, the king's concern for his daughter began to grow. 'Who'll marry my daughter?' he asked himself in deep anxiety. He thought and thought but found not a means by which his daughter's vow would be kept and, at the same time, no one else would lose his life for her sake. He even consulted his Chief *Chege* and his many *Dewans* but none of them could satisfy the king with their replies. And the king became more and more wistful everyday.

Then, one day, a very fair young prince came to the court and expressed his desire to marry the princess. He said, 'O king, I'm aware of the princess' vow and I volunteer now to take the leap.'

This prince was so handsome that the princess fell in love with him at first sight, and she began to weep, inwardly, 'How luckless I'm to see him come to die for my sake! I wish I hadn't made that foolish vow!' The king also felt pity for him and tried to dissuade him, saying, 'O young man, go back to your people. I do admire your bravery, now that you come to attempt an ordeal, which has caused the death of many a young man before you. Yet, I'd advise you, as your father would, to go back, for if I'd a son I'd wish he was as brave and handsome as you.'

But the prince refused to take heed of the king's advice. Even the gentle words of the king moved him not. 'O king,' he cried in bold terms, 'I've come here of my own accord and hold none responsible, should I perish in the attempt, but I can't go back to my people with a shamed face. So, grant me this permission to take the leap, leaving all consequences to my fate.'

Having heard the prince speak thus, the king remarked, sadly, 'I can only pray for the life of one who is already wedded to death. But be my guest for tonight. Tomorrow, early in the morning, as soon as Bel takes charge of daylight, we shall go to Chitmaran.' Actually, he wanted to give the prince time to do some rethinking.

That night, the king saw a dream in which a *Chān-mukhi buri* ('old woman with a moon-face') came into his room and sat by his bedside, speaking these words of comfort: 'Worry not, O king, verily the young man who sleeps in your house tonight shall be your son-in-law.' Then she advised him to tie four balloons around the prince, so that he might not get drowned after he falls into the Bargāng. She also asked the king to give the young man an umbrella, which will help him go down gently.

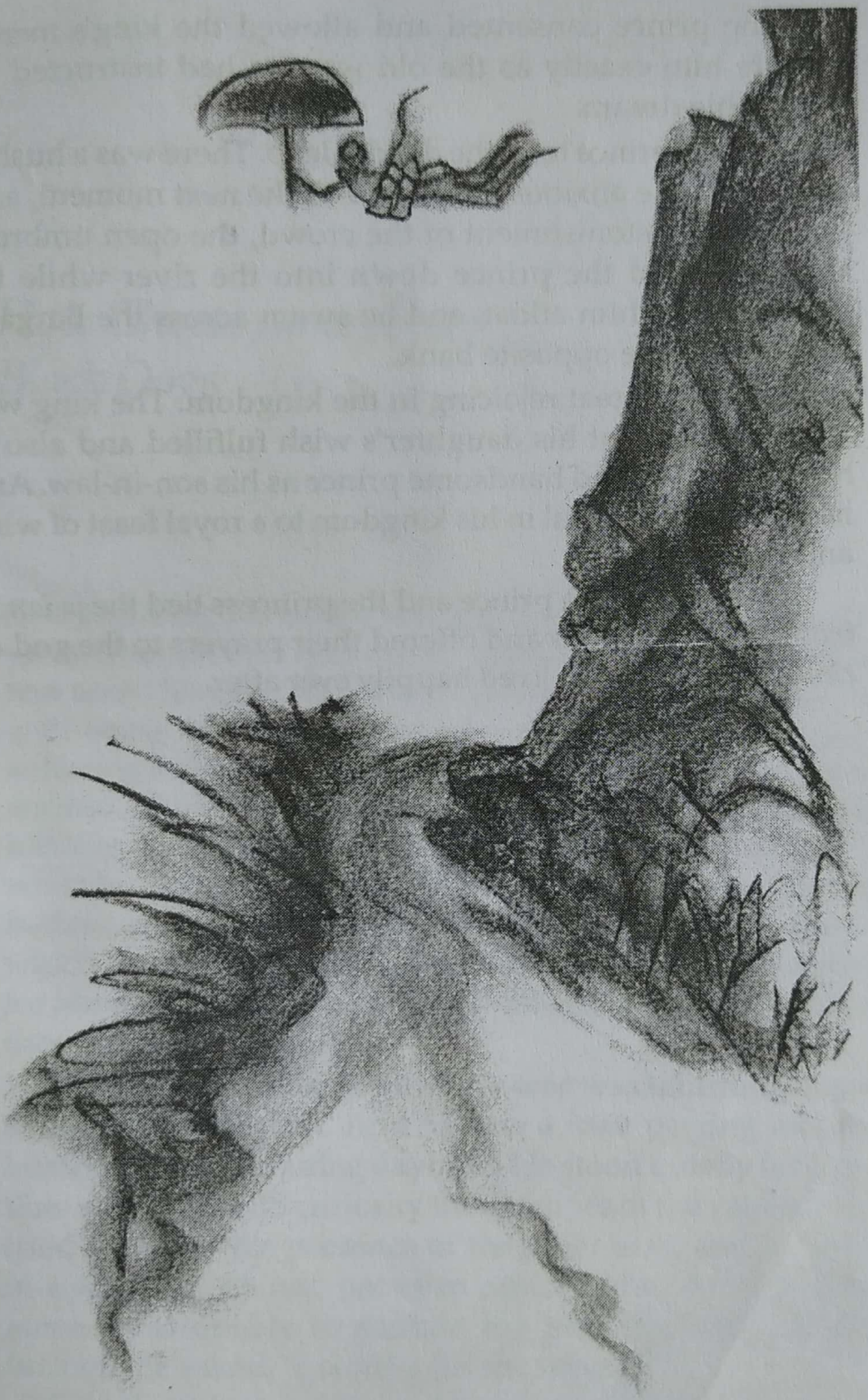
And having advised the king, the old woman disappeared.

At daybreak, the king tried, once again, to deter the prince from his resolve but on seeing that he was bent on taking the leap, they went out together, accompanied by the princess and the king's men. When they reached Chitmaran, they saw there a huge gathering of hill-folks who had taken the day off from the *jum* and come to witness the event.

Again, the king asked, 'Do you still wish to jump?'

'Certainly.'

'Then, I pray you tie these balloons around you and hold tight to this umbrella as you drop,' said the king. He then instructed his men to firmly secure the four balloons around the prince's waist. The prince at first objected but when the princess came up to him and spoke to him in kind terms and besought him to do, for her sake, at least, as her father bid



The prince took the deadly leap into the Bargāng.

him, the prince consented and allowed the king's men to prepare him exactly as the old woman had instructed the king in his dream.

Then the prince took the deadly leap. There was a hushed silence for one anxious moment. But the next moment, and, to the great astonishment of the crowd, the open umbrella slowly wafted the prince down into the river while the balloons kept him afloat, and he swam across the Bargāng to safety on the opposite bank.

There was great rejoicing in the kingdom. The king was happy to see that his daughter's wish fulfilled and also to have the brave and handsome prince as his son-in-law. And he invited every soul in his kingdom to a royal feast of wine and pork.

The next day, the prince and the princess tied the *jadan* in front of elderly folks and offered their prayers to the god of *chunglāng*. And they lived happily ever after.

How Ghosts came to fear Black Dogs

One day, a certain *vaidya* was going to an *ādām* that was far away from the one he lived in. The *kārbāri* of that *ādām* had had asked him to come down to perform a *bhut-karam* for the well-being of his daughter who was for quite sometime suffering from a strange disease. He had got up early and walked all the way from his *ādām*, up and down numerous hillocks. He had almost reached the place he was destined to when he suddenly discovered, on searching his bag, that he had not brought with him the leaves certain parasitic plants, which would be required if he were required to make *dāru* for *bāndar-bhut- kerengā*. So he had entered the forest, to collect those plants.

At precisely the same time, a *jummo* was returning home, along the forest path. And he saw a man peering into the bushes against a waning daylight. He stood quietly for some time watching with curiosity the activities of the vaidya, who tried to ignore the presence of the other man, and behaved in a way as if he had not even noticed him. At length, the *jummo* was unable to contain his growing curiosity any further. He asked, 'Looking for something?'

'Oh, don't bother.' The *vaidya* was not humoured by the intrusion and he thought that an evasive reply would send the man away, discouraged.

But the *jummo* advanced a few steps, towards the *vaidya*, and stood again, quietly observing activities of the *vaidya* with increased interest.

After some time, he ventured to speak again, asking, 'May I help you?'

'Oh, never mind, I've already found what I wanted.'

'Whate'er did you find?'

'That I cannot tell you.'

'Then you must be a *vaidya*, for who else would be so possessive about secrets,' said the *jummo*, now gleaming contentedly with this awakening of wisdom.

'That I'm,' replied the other man, non-chalantly. Then he ventured to ask, 'Whither are you going?'

'To the *ādām* that lies along the straight line of the nose.'

'I'm going there too.'

And they began to walk together.

Now, it so happened that this *jummo* had been fancying for some time about the wonderful things he could have achieved in life if he had learnt some magic charms. Poor *vaidya*, little did he know that the *jummo* would be so insistent in learning charms from him. At first, he tried to shrug off the *jummo*'s curiosity, failing which he tried to put reason into the latter's head. He said, 'A charm not properly applied could be harmful.'

The *jummo* would not listen. 'I must learn some mantras,' he said, and he coaxed and pleaded and begged of the *vaidya* to teach him some of the charms he knew. But the vaidya warned him, 'It could be dangerous.' Yet the *jummo* insisted on learning the same and spoke in the same tone but slowly scaling down his demand from a few charms to a single one. And when coaxing and pleading and begging prevailed not, and the vaidya remained unrelenting, he grabbed the latter's *chālum* and cried out, threateningly, 'Unless you teach me one charm, I'm not letting you go anywhere from this place. I'd bind you to a tree and leave you to the mercy of the animals of the forest.'

Then, much against his will, the *vaidya* agreed to whisper a charm into his ear. 'Fine, I'll teach you a very powerful one but remember never to utter it in the presence of others.' So he whispered a magic formula into the ears of the *jummo* and said, 'You've only to utter it three times to see a ghost appear before you, ready to execute whatever you may wish for. But pay heed to this piece of advice: keep the ghost forever busy with some work. If you give him a while off, he'll not hesitate to break your neck. That is how this ghost is.'

And the *jummo* went his way, happily, after having shown to the *vaidya* the way to the house of the *kārbāri*.

Some time passed after this.

Then, one day, the *jummo* thought that he should try the charm to see if it really worked the way the *vaidya* had said. And he slowly uttered the charm three times to see what happened. Suddenly, there was heard a loud crashing noise, like the branch of a tree being broken. His black dog barked loudly, in the yard.

The next moment he found himself confronted with a terrible creature of monstrous built. And as soon as that awful creature appear-ed, he spoke in a deep resounding voice, 'O master, what is your command?'

The *jummo* trembled at the sight of creature so horrendous but he remembered the words of the vaidya. Immediately, he send the ghost out on an errand: 'Go to my *jum* and clear the weeds that have grown there.'

'As you command, master.'

And the *jummo* heaved a sigh of relief. 'For some time, the weeding will keep him occupied. In the meantime, I can think of some very difficult errand that'll keep him busy for the next few months,' thought the *jummo*.

Then he pulled a blanket over him and was about to doze off, when the door opened with a slam, and the terrible creature walked straight into the *pinā*. The poor *jummo* could hardly believe his eyes. And before he could utter a word, the ghost announced, 'O master, the weeding is done.' Then he went on to ask, 'What am I to do next?'

The *jummo* fell to thinking what task he could give to the ghost. And as moments passed, the ghost started to grow restless. 'Quick, master, give me some work or I'll break your neck,' he cried, impatiently.

The *jummo* quickly said, 'Go and make a path connecting my house to the *jum*. Make it level so that I don't have to walk up and down everyday. Also remove the stones and pebbles that prick my feet as I walk.'

So out went the ghost only to return a few moments later to announce, again, 'Master, your work is done. What am I to do now? Tell me quickly or I'll break your neck.' The horrendous creature was becoming more and more short-tempered, grinning and gnashing his teeth between deep breaths. The *jummo* sat speechless, trembling in fear and knowing not what to do.

But, at that moment, his black dog barked outside. And the *jummo* sprang to his feet and yelled at the ghost, as if he were very annoyed, 'Get you out this moment to the yard and straighten the tail of that dog that'll not allow me a peaceful sleep.' Then he added, solemnly, 'Beware! This creature you'll now deal with is very surly and of so evil disposition that he is wont to take offence at the slightest thing. So if you fail to straighten his tail, he'll surely bite you, perhaps even tear you into pieces with his sharp fangs.'

The ghost who was beaming with confidence after having accomplished two tasks in no time, said, 'O master, have no worry. I'll return shortly, for the task you've now given me looks easier than those which I've already accomplished.'

And he went out straight to the yard to straighten the tail of the *jummo*'s black dog. He caught hold of the tail and pulled it lightly and, believing that it had straightened, let it loose. But the next moment, it twirled as before. The ghost was surprised. Then, presuming that he had not held the tail long enough to keep it straight, he caught it again and kept pulling it a harder than before. The dog whined and yapped a few times, and tried to free the tail but the ghost

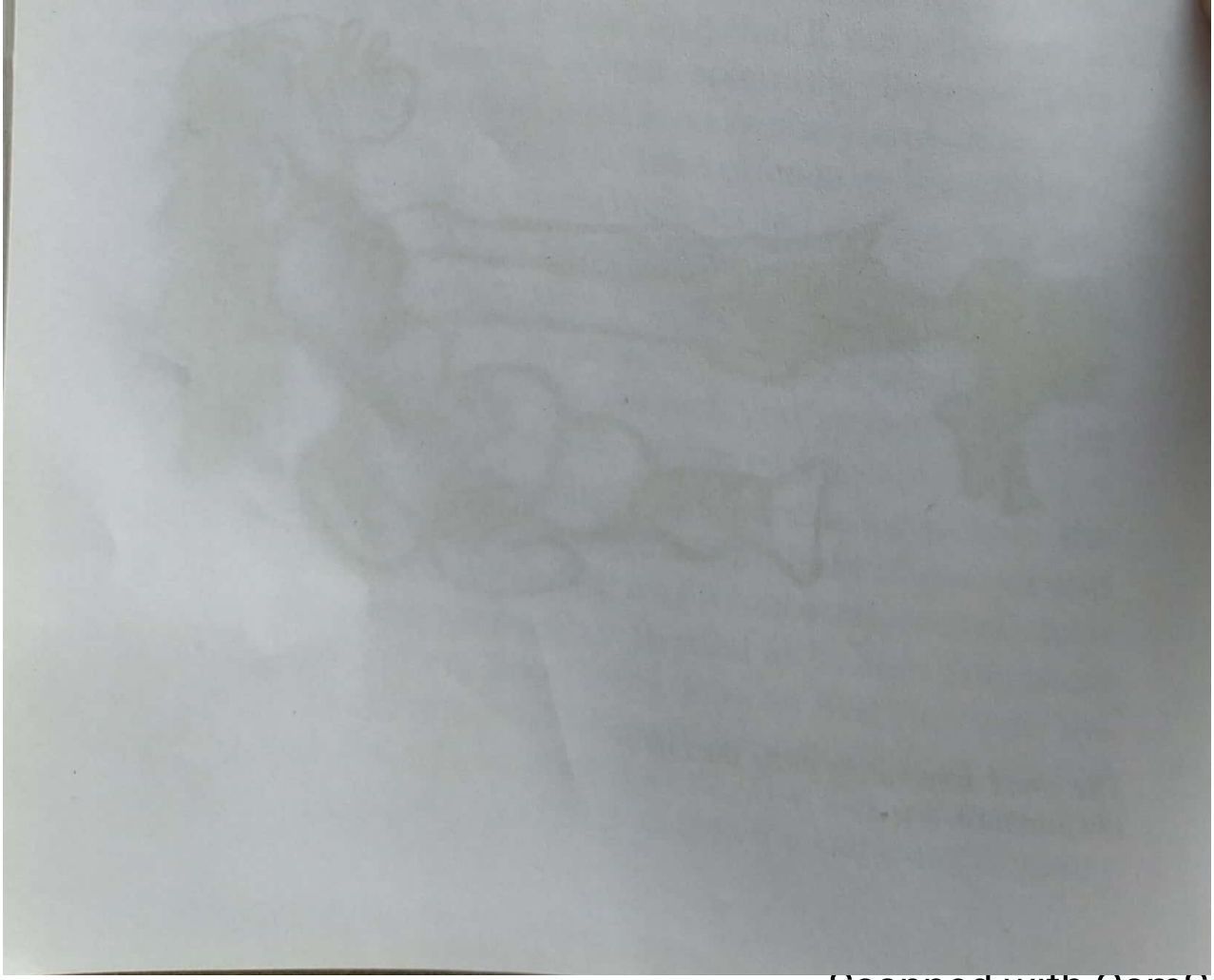
held it tight and straight. Yet, no sooner did he let it go out of his hand than the tail wagged and became as before.

Now the ghost was really very worried and he began to perspire in anxiety. He was muttering curses at the dog, grinning and gnashing his teeth between his words. Also, one could see his hands trembling as he reached out for the dog's tail for the third time. And this time, he pulled and pulled it so hard that the dog started to yelp in pain, frantically gyrating. The ghost also gyrated with the stretched tail in his hand, to avoid the sharp fangs. The ghost remembered the words of the *jummo*, and suddenly letting loose of the dog's tail, made a frantic dash for life, screaming as he went, 'O mother, O father, help!' After all, who wants his body to be minced into pieces by the sharp fangs of so surly a creature? The dog also pursued him, barking madly.

The ghost desperately pulls the tail of the jummo's dog.

The *jummo* had all the while kept an amused eye on the happenings in his yard. When he saw the ghost thus fleeing, he hollered, 'Come back this moment. You cannot run away thus, leaving the wok undone. Come back I command.' But the ghost would not stop and he ran and ran.

And since that day, the Chakmas believe, all ghosts came to fear black dogs.



How Animals failed to become Jum Cultivators

In those days when animals could speak like human beings, a great friendship prevailed among a tiger, a jackal, a boar and a fowl. It was a time of peace and happiness, and the four friends spent hours together in gossiping and frolicking and wandering about the forest. One day, they were in a different part of the forest, confecting weird tales in course of their peripatetic stroll, when they chanced to notice some people clearing the *jum*.

The tiger, who did not know what a jum was, now asked his friends, 'What are those men doing in the forest?'

The jackal, who, because of the habitual stealing he did from the *ādām* on the outskirts of the forest, knew more about the ways of man than any creature of the forest did. He said, 'They are clearing the *jum* to grow crops there, so that might sit at home and leisurely eat the produce.' Then, at the instance of the tiger and the fowl, he proceeded to elaborate on the method in which *juming* is done.

And when the jackal had finished with the description, the tiger, the boar and the cock thought that they could try out for some sort of cooperative juming.

'I'm tired of hunting. It wearies my limbs,' cried the tiger.

'I'm tired of foraging around for food,' the boar grunted.

'And I don't like doing the same rounds in search of grains,' complained the fowl.

'Bah, I must be the worst of the lot,' cried the jackal, 'for I've to snatch what belongs to others and live in the constant fear of being either beaten or chased to death.'

And so, it was collectively decided that *juming* would be the best option for each of them.

Then, on an auspicious day, the four friends went out in four directions, and, after some searching, each one of them selected a site he or she considered suitable. Then the fowl went round and put *āngs*, which she had stolen from the house of a *vaidya*, in the four corners of each site to keep mischievous spirits away from the jum. When the tiger, the jackal and the boar saw the good thing that the fowl did for them, they were indeed very happy, and they thanked her. And, they sat in council, the four friends, to deliberate on the ways in which the cultivation would be undertaken.

After a lengthy discussion, it was unanimously decided that work in the *jum* fields would be done in turns, as collective endeavour. Each one of them would have a day off and, on that day, he would do the cooking at home while the others would go to work in his *jum*.

On the first day, the team comprised the jackal, the boar and the fowl, and they all agreed to work in the site the tiger had selected. The tiger happily volunteered to accompany them to his *jum*-field. So the four friends started out early in the morning, and they arrived at the place in no time. Soon they began to fell the bushes and cut down the trees that grew there. The tiger stood there for a while and then said, 'Good luck, my friends. I must be off to hunting now, and I'll make a dish so delicious that you'll keep licking your fingers even after you have reached home.'

So the tiger went out into the forest and killed a buck. He then dragged it home and made a delicious meat curry of it.

In the evening, the four friends sat together and each one of them savoured to his heart's content the delicious food

the tiger had cooked. Then, having eaten the food, the jackal, the boar and the fowl thanked the tiger and went home.

And in the evening of the first day of cooperative *juming*, the four friends slept peacefully.

The second day was the day off for the boar. The tiger, the jackal and the fowl made the second team and out they went to the site the boar had selected. There they worked through the day, felling the bushes and cutting down the trees. And the boar left his friends working in his field and returned to pull out potatoes and make a dainty dish of it. The three friends returned to relish food the pig had prepared with potatoes.

And in the evening of the second day of cooperative *juming*, the four friends once again slept peacefully.

The third day was the day off for the jackal but he sought to be excused on the ground that there was some problem in his house and he would not be able to provide them a square meal. He then added, 'But I could you in the jum field, if the fowl to would do us the favour of taking the day off and cooking the food.' The fowl was not prepared for this. But she thought, 'Shouldn't I help a friend in trouble?' And she said, 'If you must work in my field, I'll certainly have to go home now and prepare something for you to eat.'

So, when it was agreed that the three friends – the tiger, the jackal and the boar – would work in the *jum* of the fowl, she left them and went to the houses of other fowls to borrow some eggs, because she had laid just one egg that day. As this was quickly managed, she returned home early to make a fine egg curry, which the four friends ate with great relish.

And so in the evening of the third day of cooperative juming, the tiger, the boar and the fowl slept peacefully. But the jackal was at great unease and he slept not well. By rotation, it would be his turn on the morrow to cook food.

So the fourth day became the day off for the jackal, who most unwillingly allowed his friends to work in his *jum*. And while they were busy working in the field, he went

into the forest, intending to hunt a buck, as the tiger had done. But the buck turned on him and chased him out of the forest. Then he thought, 'What a fool I'm. Picking potatoes would have been easier than trying to kill a buck.' But he had not the skill of the boar and could not pull out even a single potato, and in the process, he only injured his teeth and wounded his paws. And he was so annoyed that for sometime he did not know what to do. Then suddenly, he remembered that he had so long ignored his natural talent at stealing. He stealthily sneaked into the bushes, intending to steal the eggs the wild fowls but, sadly for the jackal, one fowl was on the alert. No sooner did she see a jackal enter into the bush where her neighbour laid some eggs to hatch them than she began to crow, 'O sisters, come quickly. A jackal has intruded into our territory.'

Suddenly a hundred fowls swooped down and started to peck the jackal who cried out in pain, 'O mother, O father, help! The fowls are killing me!' And he sprinted fast to save his dear life.

When he entered his house, the jackal was still panting. 'What a narrow save I had today,' he heaved a sigh of relief and sat down in the corner to do some thinking. At length, an idea occurred to him. He remembered seeing the fowl lay eggs and he said to himself, 'Why don't I sit down and lay eggs as the fowl does. With it I can easily cook a curry.' And he took an earthen vessel, and, sitting on it, bent forward and pressed his belly so hard that a solid lump of excreta dropped into the vessel with a light thud. Soon a vile smell filled the entire house, and the jackal, realising that he failed to lay even an egg, despaired, knowing not what to what food to serve to his friends when they returned form the *jum*. So he covered the detestable lump with a plantain leaf and lay down in a cot in one corner of his house, covering himself with a blanket, feigning to be seriously ill.

In the evening, the tiger, the boar and the fowl returned but, on seeing that the jackal was nowhere around, they cried, 'Brother Jackal, where're you? Is food ready? We're

very hungry.' And thrice did they call his name and sought to know his whereabouts. But when no reply came, the three friends went inside. The vile smell almost repulsed them but they thought that the jackal had prepared something special for them. They bore with the stifling repugnance. 'Where are you my friend?' they called out, severally. But the jackal replied not. He lay down quietly, observing their activities through a hole in the blanket.

When they saw the jackal lying down on his bed, they asked him, 'Whatever is the matter with you?' And the jackal replied, in a feeble, almost inaudible voice, that he was unwell. Then he told them that he could not cook any food for them, but he spoke so feebly that his friends thought that he asked to them eat the food he had cooked. So they let him sleep and began to peer into utensils and tumblers, pitchers and

The jackal tries to lay eggs.

earthenware. 'Surely, our friend must've cooked something very special for us,' they now said to one another. 'You can certainly smell the difference.'

And it so happened that the tiger first saw the vessel, which the jackal had covered with a plantain leaf. He was so hungry that he did not waste time in removing the leaf nor looking into the contents, but hastily put his mouth into the vessel and bit the jackal's excreta. No sooner had he done that than he yelled out and began to eruct violently. The jackal took no chance and, springing out of his bed, he ran away as fast as his legs could carry him out of the reach of the tiger. And the tiger, having disgorged the particles he had swallowed in hunger now roared so loudly that the boar and the fowl were terrified and they ran away far away into safe shelter.

And so in the evening of the fourth day, the four animals went their separate ways, dumping forever their efforts at *jum* cultivation.

The Cat and the Tailorbird

Once upon a time, there was a cat and a tailorbird. The cat wanted to make the tailorbird his friend but the tailorbird trusted not the friendship with a cat. She knew that the cat was eyeing up for her little nest. So she stayed away from the cat but the cat always called her his 'Friend' and spoke to her in gentle terms.

Then, one day, the cat saw the tailorbird flying towards a bush and he called to her– 'Friend, have you made your nest?'

By this time, the tailorbird had already finished making her nest but she told the cat, 'I've just found a suitable tree in which I'll make my nest.'

And away she flew giving not the cat the real clue.

After sometime, the cat saw her again, flying towards the bush, and he called to her – 'Friend, have you finished making your nest?'

By this time, the tailorbird had laid a couple of eggs but she told the cat, 'I've just found a suitable tree and I've made my nest among the leaves.'

And away she flew giving not the cat the real clue.

After sometime, the cat saw her again, flying towards the bush, and he called to her – 'Friend, have you laid the eggs?'

By this time, the tailorbird had hatched the chicks but she told the cat, 'I found a suitable tree and I made my nest among the leaves. And I've also laid in it a couple of eggs.'

And away she flew giving not the cat the real clue.

On hearing that the tailorbird had laid eggs, the cat's mouth began to water, and he licked his whiskers, thinking, 'In a couple of days, the tailorbird will hatch the chicks and I'll have a meaty meal.'

A couple of days later, the cat saw the tailorbird again, flying towards the bush, and he called to her – 'Friend, have you hatched the eggs?'

By this time, the chicks had already learnt to fly but the tailorbird gave him a different reply. 'I found a suitable tree and I made my nest among the leaves,' she said. 'Then I laid in it a couple of eggs. And I've now hatched the eggs.'

And away she flew giving not the cat the real clue.

The cat could not wait any longer. 'Hush,' said he to himself and stealthily followed the tailorbird into the bush. He saw the nest and he heard the chicks. His mouth watered and he licked his whiskers thinking of the feast. Quickly, he climbed the tree and quickly opened his mouth and leapt towards the nest. But the chicks flew away to weal while the cat fell down and lived not another day to eat the meaty meal.

Wisdom's Fowl

Once upon a time, there lived a sow with her only son, a pretty little piglet whose complexion was as fair as a peeled potato. The mother and the son always stayed together, and time passed happily. Every morning, the little piglet would accompany mother sow to the forest, and while she pulled out wild potatoes, the little one would frolic around. At about noontime, they would wend their way to the swamp to roll about in the gluey mud. And at night, mother sow would tell him a *pachchan* or intone an *ali* and put him to sleep.

One day, when they were wandering about in the forest, the sow busy in pulling out potatoes, the piglet suddenly began to jump in excitement. When his mother asked what it was, the little one cried innocently, 'O mother, I want to play with the little brother there.' And he pointed to a tiger cub, which was crying and trying to suckle a tigress that lay down listless. Mother sow stopped her work and said, 'Come, let's go now.' She was very much alarmed, for she knew how dangerous a tigress could be.

'But I want to play with little brother,' insisted the piglet.

'Not now,' said his mother and poked him with her snout. She would have forcibly dragged him away when she noticed swarms of flies around the tigress. Mother sow advanced slowly towards the tigress, taking great caution as she moved,

and saw that the great cat was dead. She was so focused on the tigress that she noticed not when the cub toddled up to her and started to sniff her milk. Moved to pity the hungry cub, she lay down on her side and let him suckle her.

The piglet did not mind the tiger cub sucking his mother's milk but he was growing very restless with excitement. He cried, 'O mother, when will little brother play with me?' The sow saw her son's excitement at having a playmate, and she thought, 'Wouldn't it be an excellent idea to take the poor cub home, now that his mother is dead and none there is to take care of him.'

And so the tiger cub became a member of the pig family.

As time passed, the cub and the piglet grew up into strong adult males. And all this while, mother sow took good care of both of them.

Then, one day, she became seriously ill. Days passed by but her condition did not improve, and she realised that time had come for her to leave the world. So one night, she summoned her sons, the boar and the tiger, to the bedside and said to them, 'Children, I've lived the full course of life god granted me and have no regrets. As I die, I bequeath unto you this piece of advice. Live always as brothers and allow not quarrels or violence to come between you.'

They said, 'O, mother we'll do as you bid.'

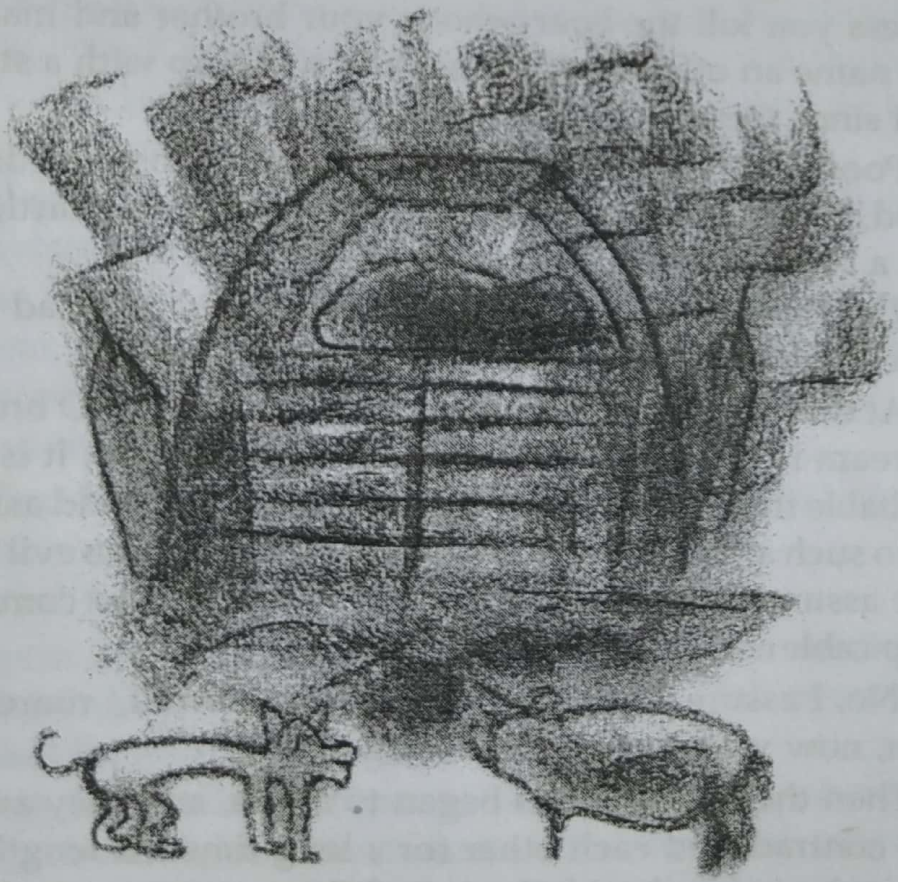
Sometime after this, mother sow died. The two brothers, the boar and the tiger, wept and consoled each other. It is natural that one who is born must perforce die, and nothing can change this. So the brothers collected firewood and piling up the assortment in seven layers, as the Tangchangyas do, one placed above the other, they made the *rubākhur* and cremated her. Then they observed a seven-day mourning, during which period they touched neither fish nor flesh.

Time passed slowly. The two brothers lived happily, eating together the food they brought home and sleeping under the same roof. Then, one day, the tiger failed to hunt. He returned home and told the boar that he could not find a creature in the forest. The boar smiled and said that there

was nothing to worry and he would be more than happy to share his own platter of potatoes with the tiger.

The next day the same thing happened and again the tiger ate potatoes.

When the same thing happened day after day, the tiger began to grow tired of eating potatoes. His craving for flesh increased. And it came to pass that, one night, while the boar was snoring peacefully, the tiger greedily eyed his fat belly and licked his whiskers. A desperate desire arose within him and he felt tempted to pounce on the boar and tear asunder the belly that heaved up and down in sleep. But he could not kill the boar as he killed other animals, because the boar was his brother. And he spent a sleepless night, thinking of a means by which he could kill the boar.



The boar and the tiger cremate their mother in a rubākhur comprising seven layers of wood.

In the morning, the boar woke and saw the tiger sitting outside, lost in contemplation. So he asked, 'What makes my brother so pensive?'

'Oh, nothing in particular. I'd a dream visitation last night,' replied the tiger and let go a deep sigh. 'I shudder to recall what the visitation told me.'

'Was it our mother?' asked the boar.

'No.'

'Was it a goblin?'

'Not a goblin either.'

'Then it must have been someone very sombre,' cried the boar. 'Come on, brother, tell me all about it.'

And so the tiger told him, feigning to be greatly grieved as he spoke, 'In my dream Gozen came to my bedside and said, "O tiger, a great calamity awaits you. You'll surely die unless you kill the boar who is your brother and make in my name an offering of his ham." I woke up with a startle, and since then I had not a wink's sleep.'

Poor boar, how terrified he was to hear those words! He cried, 'How is that possible? Could Gozen be so heartless to ask a brother to eat his own brother?'

The tiger replied, 'I know it makes you very sad but I dare not put my life in peril by ignoring Gozen.'

At this, the pig cried out in great annoyance, 'O brother, a dream is a dream. Don't you see that? Besides, it is least probable that Gozen, the sire of all creatures, would ask you to do such a thing! Surely, it must have been some evil spirit that assumed the form of Gozen to trick you to commit a despicable act.'

'No, I assure you that it was Gozen himself,' roared the tiger, now vexed at the boar's argument.

Then the two brothers began to argue, and they argued and contradicted each other for a long time. At length, the boar relented and said, 'Let's find three creatures to decide my fate. The condition is that all of them must say that you've right to obey Gozen. Only then, you may eat me.

However, should one of the three creatures say that the things you see in your dreams never come to pass, then you must abandon your intent of eating me.'

'I agree,' said the tiger.

And they went out together to find three testifiers.

After walking for sometime, they saw a deer quietly grazing on a meadow. No sooner did the deer pick up the scent of the tiger, she stopped grazing and stood with her ears raised. She would have run away but the boar hollered at her from a distance, 'Stop, don't run away, for we come in peace.' The deer stopped, nervously hesitating. 'Stop where you are,' she cried. 'Tell me what is it that you want of me.'

Then the tiger told her of the dream visitation and asked, 'Now, tell us, if I may kill the boar.'

The deer quickly saw that the tiger was playing a nasty trick on the boar but she was scared of the tiger. She thought, 'If I say "No," then the tiger will eat me.' So she took the tiger's side and said, 'Yes, you must obey Gozen.' At this, the tiger felt elated.

'There you see,' he told the boar, 'The deer has spoken in my favour,' cried the tiger, elated.

The boar who did not take much time to realise that it was fear, which had prompted the deer to side with the tiger, muttered sadly, 'We need two more testifiers.'

And they began to walk again.

After sometime, they came across a jackal. This time the tiger shouted, 'O nephew, stop for a while.'

'What is it, uncle?' asked the jackal.

Again, the tiger offered to unfold the dream visitation and, having done that, he proceeded to ask, 'Tell us now, if I may kill the boar.'

With his quick intelligence, the jackal failed not to read the tiger's mind. He was not as scared of the tiger as the deer was, though he too held the big cat in some reverence. And he pondered for sometime, during which he eyed the boar's fatness several times and salivated. He thought, 'I'm not

skilled enough to kill a boar, and this one who comes with the tiger is really fat. If I say "No," then the boar escapes and I'll be left biting my own paws. But if I take the tiger's side, I stand a chance to get a share of the pig's fat.' And so he told the tiger, 'Yes, uncle, you must obey Gozen.'

'Now see for yourself! Even the jackal is on my side,' cried the tiger. His mouth was already watering.

The boar was too upset, now that another forest dweller had spoken in the tiger's favour. 'Let's find the third testifier,' the boar said gravely, after a prolonged silence.

And so they started to walk again, to find the third testifier. They searched and searched through the length of the forest but could not find a single creature anywhere. 'Is there anybody around?' roared the tiger in sheer vexation. But no one responded to the tiger's call. So they decided to retire for the night and resume the search at daybreak.

That night, for the first time since mother sow reared together, the tiger and the boar slept at different places. The tiger slept soundly, for he was too certain that he would eat the boar sometime after daybreak. But the boar tossed restlessly on his bed, devoured every moment by his growing anxiety. Unable to sleep, he went out of the house into the yard and sat under a *dhup-chandan* tree, weeping. 'Every creature in the forest fears the tiger,' he thought. 'Who will dare take my side against him?'

Now, it so came to pass that an owl had perched on the same tree moments before the boar came out of his house. He saw the boar weeping and began to wonder whatever the matter was with him. So he flew down and perched on the lowest branch right above the boar and stared at him inquiringly. He then ventured to ask, 'O brother, what ails you so much, that you must come out to weep at this odd hour when most creatures are wont to sleep?'

The boar looked at him but replied not to the query. By now, he had taken for granted that every dweller of the forest would take the tiger's side. And he continued to weep.

'Do you weep for a friend who is dead?' inquired the owl.

The boar sadly shook his head, 'No.'

'Has a near relative expired?'

'No.'

'Then you must be in great trouble, and you weep because you know not of a way to come out of it.'

This time the boar shook his head in the affirmative. On seeing this, the owl said, 'Tell me what it is. Who knows, I might be able to help you.' And the boar briefed the owl on the things that occurred since the tiger had seen Gozen in his dream. Then, lamenting his fate, he spoke these words: 'See! This is what you get for being compassionate to others.'

The owl easily saw through the tiger's dream. 'This trickster must be taught a lesson. But how?' wondered the owl. And, after some thinking, he assured the boar of his support, saying, 'Don't you worry, brother, I'll certainly testify in your favour. Now go inside and sleep. But wake up by daybreak. You'll find me before you find any other creature.' Then the pig went inside, and he had a sound sleep.

A short while to daybreak, the boar shook the tiger out of his sleep and said, 'Brother, let's find the third testifier.'

'Isn't it still dark outside?' yawned the tiger.

'But it'll be light very soon.'

No sooner did the tiger and the boar come out into the yard than the owl hooted from the *dhup-chandan* tree. The tiger sniffed the bird. He was not aware of all that had transpired between the boar and the owl while he slept soundly. He now suggested, 'Do we need to go any farther? The owl there could be our third testifier.'

And so the pig once again briefed the owl of the dream the tiger had seen. The owl pretended to have heard about the tiger's dream for the first time. He thought for a while and said, 'The thing you ask of me merits some consideration. Also, there must be a judge before whom I could testify. Why don't both of you come down to the king's court so that I may testify in front of the king?'

And before the tiger could utter a word, the boar said, 'We'd willingly go to the king's court, if that is what you expect of us.'

'Then come as quickly as you can,' urged the owl, and he flew away in the direction of the king's palace, leaving the boar and the tiger to cover the distance on foot.

Having arrived at the king's palace, the boar and the tiger unfolded everything from the beginning to the end. The king mused for sometime and he said, 'Hmm. Sounds interesting indeed. But where is the owl, your third and final testifier. Call him.'

So the herald cried, 'Third witness, come forward and testify.' But there was no response from the owl.

The herald cried again, louder than before, 'Third witness, the king orders you to come forward and testify.'

Again, the owl did not respond, and the boar began to grow anxious. He looked this way and that way but did not see the owl. Then the boar looked up and lo! there he was, sleeping on the beam right above the king's throne. 'There he is,' cried the boar, in joyous excitement. Every one present in the court looked up and saw the owl.

The herald cried out again, at the top of his voice, 'Third witness, come down and testify.' The next moment, the owl dropped down on the floor right before the king. His eyes were closed, and he seemed to be still asleep. But to the astonishment of the king and his court, the owl started to dance – tra-la–la–la, tra-la–la–la. Everyone was surprised. At first, the king was also amused but when the owl responded not to his several inquiries, he became angry. He said, sternly, 'Impudent creature, mind your behaviour. You're in front of the king of the land.' But the owl continued to dance as before. Tra-la–la–la, tra-la–la–la.

'Catch that insolent bird and give him a good shake,' hollered the king to his guard.

Then the guard caught the owl and gave him a series of jerks, at which the owl seemed to wake up with a start and say, 'Where am I? What is this place? It doesn't look like the

king's garden!' and he began to peer at every one present in the court.

The king grew inquisitive at the mention of his garden, and he asked the owl, 'What garden did you say?'

'Why? The king's garden, of course!'

'I don't get you.'

At this, the owl let out a deep sigh. 'Oh, never mind! I must have been dreaming.' Then he pretended to speak to himself but spoke so loud that the king might hear him. 'Oh, how I wish my dream came true.'

'What dream did you see?' asked the king, with curiosity.

'A most extraordinary dream but I'd dare not unfold its contents before your majesty.'

Now the king became more curious to know what the owl saw in his dream. He commanded, 'Speak without fear, for I grant you immunity from death.'

'Since you grant me immunity from death, I speak without fear.' the owl said. 'Your majesty, I dreamt that I made my nesting in the *nāksā* tree that stands in the centre of your garden. The princess came to cull flowers but on seeing me, she fell in love with me at first sight and expressed a strong desire to marry me. I couldn't but be happy at the proposal of becoming the king's son-in-law and the inheritor of his kingdom, and I decided that I'd go up to the king immediately and seek the hand of the princess. When I told her of my intent, she became so happy that she embraced me and asked me if I'd love to dance with her. I was more than obliged and we began to dance together in your majesty's garden. And I'd have still been dancing with her if that killjoy hadn't jerked me out of my dream.'

On hearing the words of the owl, the king felt a strong temptation to have the owl flogged to his senses but he remembered that he had granted the owl immunity from death. So he said, clenching his anger between his teeth, 'A dream is a dream; it never comes to pass.'

'Allow me then, O king, to repeat the words you spoke just now,' cried the owl. 'A dream is a dream and it'll never

come to pass. And if that be so, then how could the tiger claim it his right to eat the boar because Gozen appeared in his dream and said, "You'll surely die unless you kill the boar who is your brother and make in my name an offering of his ham."

The king was pleased with the owl's argument. He now understood why the owl told him of the dream of marrying the princess. And so he said, smiling, 'From this day, you'll be known as wisdom's fowl, for I've never seen anyone as wise and intelligent as you've proved yourself through a clever ploy.' Then he turned to the boar, saying, 'The owl is right and so is his testimony,' and he cautioned the tiger against any attempt at killing the boar.

The Tiger and the Snail

One day a tiger failed to hunt. He searched and searched the jungle for a buck or deer but could not find one to feast on. And as the day grew, he got hungrier. The growing hunger increased the accumulation acids in the tiger's stomach, which soon burning made him irate and grouchy. He roared in sheer desperation, and the wind wafted the roar through the dense forest down the gradual slope of the hill and across the river to the *ādām* on its west bank. There children stopped the games they were playing and ran as fast as their legs could carry them to the nearest *māzāghar* to hide in the safe corner of the *azaleng*. The tiger's roar also filled the heart of forest with terror. Only the monkeys that had made the banyan tree their nesting showed little interest in the tiger's activities. When they giggled from their precarious perch, the tiger thought that they were making fun of him. And that made him more angry. But the monkeys were beyond his reach.

So he moved on, searching for a prey, and he came upon a tiny stream. He was so exhausted that he sat down beside the stream and tried to drink as much water as he could. When he had rested for a while and quenched his thirst, the tiger felt a little relief. Then he looked closely at water. 'A few fishes would relieve my hunger,' he said to himself and slipped

down the bank into the water. But a single fish he found not. Instead, he saw a snail moving slowly with the current along the bed of the stream. Its movements were so awkwardly slow that the tiger could not but laugh beneath his whiskers.

When the snail saw the tiger laughing at him, he became angry. 'How dare you laugh at me?' cried the snail.

The tiger replied, 'What a lazy fellow you are! With that movement, I wonder how you manage to find something to eat, while a swift creature like me sometimes fails to hunt his prey!'

And the snail became angrier than before. He cried, 'Dare you call me lazy again? I can show you that I'm faster than you are.'

On hearing those words, the tiger could hardly contain his laughter. And he laughed louder and louder, rolling on the grass beside the stream. 'Did you say, "Dare"?' he asked

The tiger could not help laughing at the awkward movements of the snail.

and laughed with his paws pressed against the belly. 'Ha, Ha! I'd dare a hundred, nay a thousand times to call you lazy. Besides, you seem to be a vain fellow to presume that you can move faster than I do.'

The snail smarted at the insult but contained any further outburst of anger. He simply said, gravely, 'Tomorrow, at daybreak, we'll run a race.'

The tiger, who was still laughing, found the proposal preposterous. He asked, 'You fool! How could the two of us run a race? I'm a creature of the land and you live in the waters.'

So the snail replied, sighing deeply, 'Very simple, my friend. You'll run along the bank of the stream while I take the course along the bed. Having run any distance, you'll call out my name and I'll rise to the surface to respond to your call. The one who stands ahead of the other shall be the winner in that part of the race. This must be done three times, and at the end of the race, the one who wins the maximum number of times will pull the loser's ears.' The tiger was confident that he would certainly emerge the winner, and he readily complied with the condition laid by the snail. He then retired to his den for the night.

And while the tiger snored heavily through the night, the snail was busy making preparations for the morrow. He summoned the agile fish known among the Chakmas by the name of *nābālāng* and asked him to rush downstream to inform all snails living in the stream about the race. He said, 'It's a matter of great prestige to the entire snail community. Dear brother, don't waste a moment but go as fast as you can and tell my brethren to wake up before daybreak and stay on the alert. No sooner does the tiger call out my name than let the snail that is at least ten or fifteen yards further downstream to rise to the surface and say, "Here I'm." The proud tiger must be humbled.'

The *nābālāng* did as he was told. And in a few hours, the entire snail community became aware of the race between one of their brothers and the tiger. They realised how

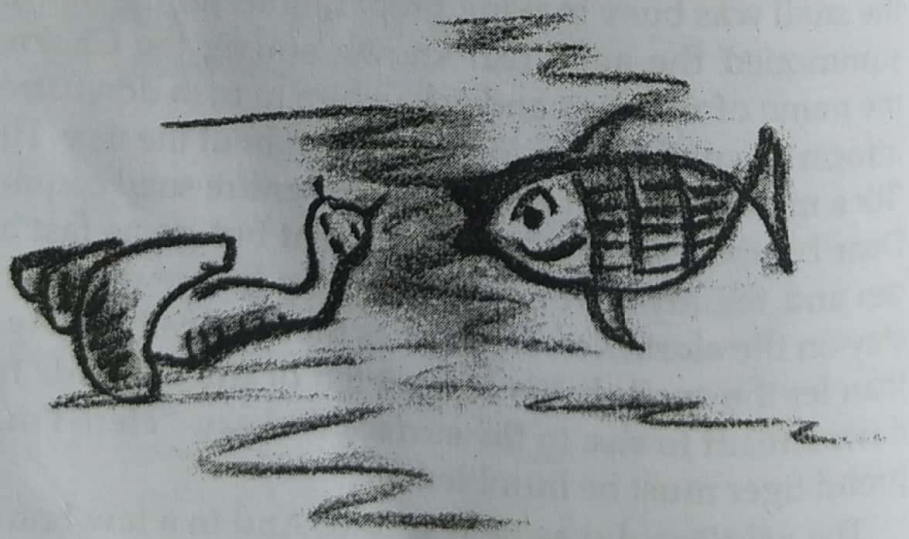
important the race was, and, long before daybreak, every one of them was prepared to respond to the tiger's call, should the occasion arise.

At the appointed hour, the race began. The tiger had seen the pace at which the snail moved. So he strolled, leisurely, some ten yards from the starting point of the race. There he stopped and cried loudly, 'Brother Snail, are you anywhere around? Come up and show yourself.' Immediately, a snail surfaced on the water about twenty yards ahead of the tiger.

'Here I'm,' replied the snail. And he also made fun of the tiger, saying, 'I'd expected the finish in the first round to be a close one but you don't seem to be as fast as I'd thought before the race began.'

'That's impossible! How did you do that?' cried the tiger. He could hardly believe what his eyes saw now. Then he remembered that he had ignored the current in the stream. 'So that's it,' said the tiger to himself, satisfied at the sudden dawning of wisdom. 'The cunning fellow must have let the water do the work for him.'

And he began to run along the bank of the stream. He had to make up for the twenty yards by which the snail



The snail asked the nābālāng to rush downstream.

defeated him. So he ran faster and faster. When the tiger had run a hundred yards, he stopped to look behind him, crying at the top of his voice, "Brother Snail, are you anywhere around? Come up and show yourself.' For he now believed that the snail was at least twenty to thirty yards behind him.

'Why do you look back? Have you lost a nail while you were running?' asked a snail that surfaced on the water about thirty yards ahead of the tiger.

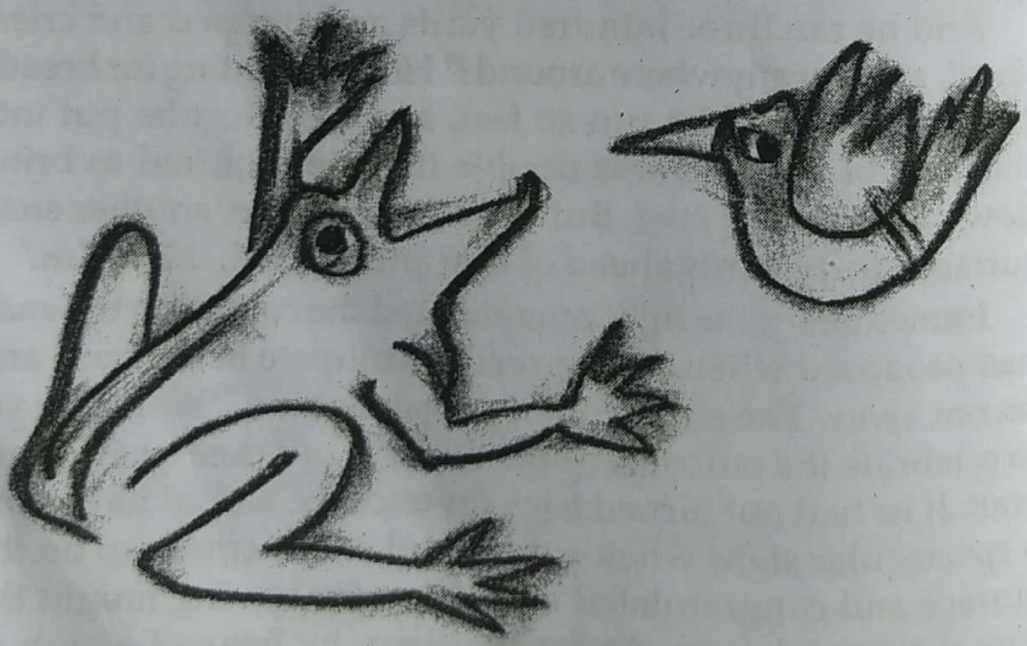
'Where're you?'

'Here I'm ahead of you once again,' teased the snail. And as the tiger looked miserably at him, he said, 'Brother Tiger, if I were you I'd have jumped into the stream and drowned myself in shame.'

The tiger now scratched the ground with his nails and roared, angrily. The second loss made him mad with fury, and the snail's words only added fuel to the fire. But he had no time to lose. So he made a frantic dash through the bushes and tall grasses that grew along the bank of the stream. He minded not the thorns that made little cuts into his hide, and he ran and ran the run of his life.

And he ran three hundred yards and stopped and cried, 'Snail, are you anywhere around?' He was panting for breath. Never before had he run so fast, and the effort he put into this part of the race was double the one required to bring down the swiftest stag. But to add to his woe, another snail surfaced forty yards ahead of him and replied, 'Here I'm.'

Immediately, the tiger remembered the condition the snail had proposed when they agreed to compete in the race, and he ran away. The snail hollered from behind, 'Wait, I'm yet to celebrate the outcome of the victory.' But the tiger did not wait. If he had but turned back for once, he would have seen a spectacular sight when a thousand snails come up on the surface and congratulated each other for having taught the proud tiger a lesson. As for the tiger, he heaved a sigh of relief on reaching his den. It would have been a thing of great shame if the snail had pulled his ears.



The toad tells the tailorbird of the great cyclone.

How the Toad became so ugly

A toad lived under a poor *jummo's māzāghar* in remote *ādām*. It was a time when toads were also pretty little creatures. And this toad whose tale our *bujyā-buris* have told us had been living in the same place for so long that he got bored with the monotony of the surrounding. So, one fine day, he hopped all the way to the city to visit a cousin who lived there, in the corner of a rich man's house.

There this toad stayed for quite some time. And he acquired the manners of the city toads and also learnt many of their wiles and crafts.

A few months later, the toad returned to his *ādām*. Having reached the *ādām*, he began to hop up the hillock, where the *māzāghar* stood, affecting an air of sagacious erudition. A little way up, he met his old friend, *Sudattubi* the tailorbird, who was very happy to see the toad back. And the formal exchanges between them over, the toad told the tailorbird of the advent of a great cyclone. He had heard the forecast during his stay in the city. 'From the moment I heard about the cyclone,' said the toad putting on an air of concern, 'I've kept telling myself, "I'd better go back and inform my friend *Sudattubi*, that he might take necessary precautions." My cousin wept and begged of me to stay with him for some more time, but I was determined to come back. And there

you are my friend, not the least aware of the danger that lies ahead.'

'Is it like the cyclones we've seen in the past years,' inquired the tailorbird.

And the toad told him that this cyclone would cause a disaster of such magnitude as no creature in this *ādām* has seen before. He said that the wind accompanying it would go berserk, stripping off the bark of one tree and tagging it to the stem of another tree. It would also rend asunder all wobbly appendages from the bodies of old hags and fling the same with such force as to stick them permanently on to the dilapidated frames of ancient *jummos*, making those men weird specimens of their gender. As for the downpour, it would be so thick that it would wash the colour of leaves and dye the hides of the tiger and the jackal green.

The little tailorbird trembled in fear. 'How could I escape this cyclone?' he asked the toad. And the toad told him to find a hollow in a strong tree and hide inside it.

Then the tailorbird asked him the whereabouts of the tree. And the toad gave this reply, after a moment of reflection: 'If I remember correctly, *Chagadā* the squirrel once told me of a tree with branches reaching the skies and piercing through the *pinon* of the clouds. He tried to climb the topmost branch but by the time he was half way up, his limbs were already tired and he was panting for breath.'

The tailorbird strained his neck forward. 'Where is this tree?' he asked eagerly.

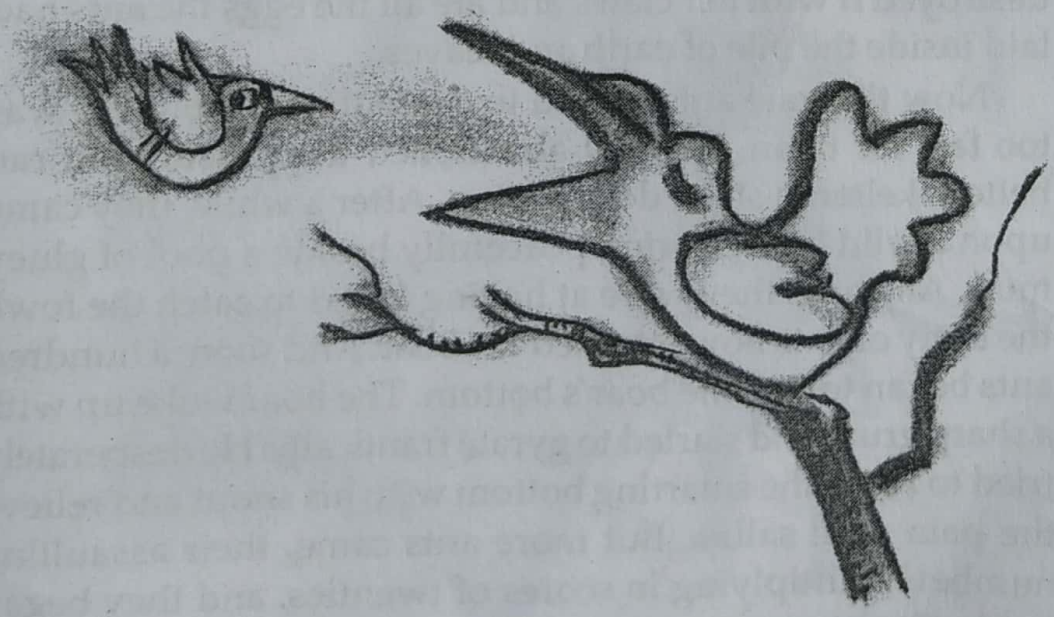
The toad replied, 'I don't think I can recall the exact place, not after so many years.' And then he added, musing like a philosopher, 'Perhaps, it stands in some hillock nearby; perhaps it is on one of the foothills of the eastern mountains that make a blue outline in an autumn evening against the slumbering sky.'

The tailorbird was disappointed at the reply. After a while, he thought that the wisest thing for him would be to go out in search of a safe haven. And off he went, a mad flutter of scared wings through a whispering thickness of leaves.

Now, at that moment, *Rangrāng* the hornbill had perched on a tree and opened her large beaks to yawn. The tailorbird mistook the widened throat of the *Rangrāng* for a hollow in a huge tree, and straightaway entered into it. No sooner did he enter the *Rangrāng*'s mouth than the tailorbird realised his mistake. He was so afraid of being digested by the acids of the *Rangrāng*'s stomach that he desperately looked for an opening to escape. At last, he saw one down the stomach and made a desperate dash for it, not knowing that it was the posterior outlet of the big bird.

And everything happened so suddenly that *Rangrāng* became confused. She fidgeted now, ill at ease, for the plumage of the tailorbird left in her throat and in the stomach and entrails a very displeasing irritation. And she belched extremely loudly, 'Rang-rāng – rang-rāng– rang-rāng.'

Close by, in another tree, a monkey was quietly savouring a *suguri-gulā*. He had stolen it from a *jum*-field. The unexpected belching of the *Rangrāng* frightened the monkey. He jumped up with a shrill cry and hastily climbed higher up the tree.



The tailorbird mistakes of widened throat of the Rangrāng for a hollow in a huge tree.

The *suguri-gulā* slipped from his hand and fell with a loud thud on the back of deer that was quietly grazing under the same tree.

Seized with terror that a tiger had pounced on her, the deer sprinted and started to run for life. 'O mother, O father, help! A tiger is upon me!' cried the deer. And she sprinted and ran for cover. She looked neither back nor to either side. In the maddening flight, her hoof struck the back of a rock-python that happened to come in the way. The wounded python hissed out in pain and began to chase the deer. But the deer sprinted over brambles and tore through thickets to disappear into the thick of the forest. Enraged with himself for having failed to stalk the fleeing deer, the python entered a thicket and gobbled down all the eggs of a wild fowl he found there.

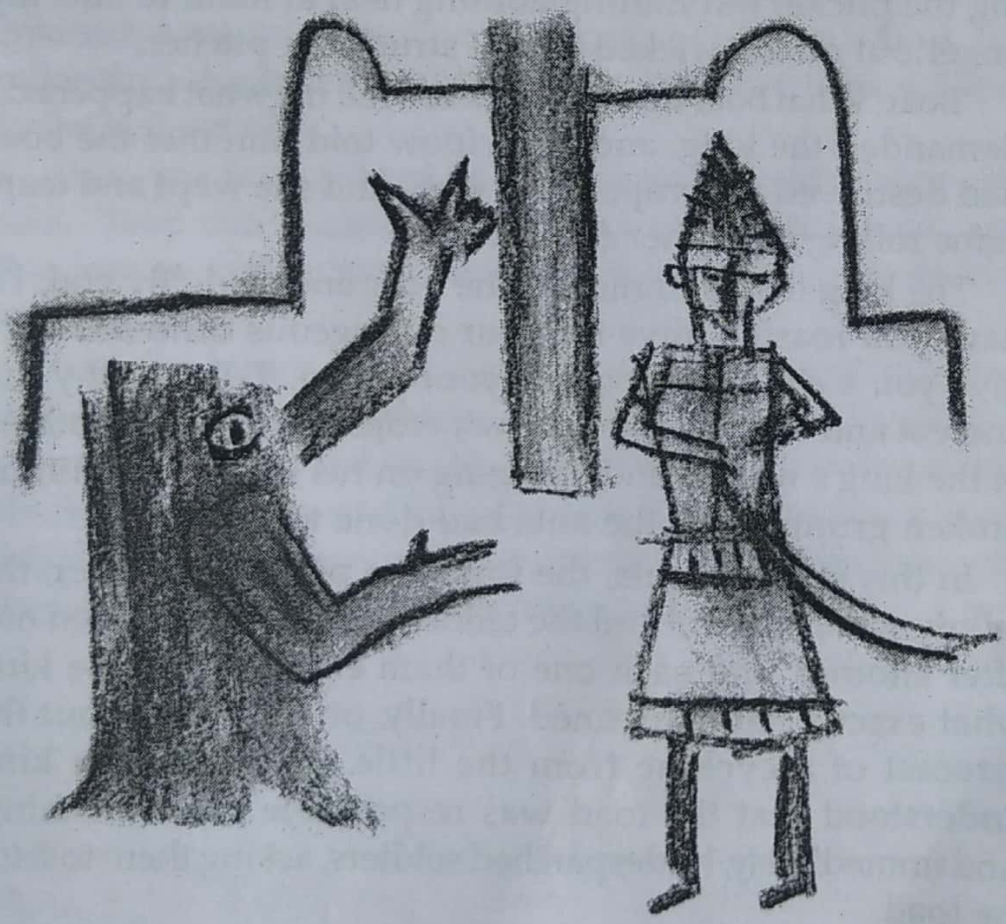
And when the fowl saw what the python did to her eggs, she became mad with grief. She pecked furiously at her bare shanks, ruffled her bright red and yellow plumage, and pulled out the few fluffs she prided on possessing. Then she ran, crowing and crowing, and madly fluttering her wings. On the way, she came across an anthill. She immediately destroyed it with her claws and ate all the eggs the ants had laid inside the pile of earth and leaves.

Now the irate ants started to chase the fowl but she was too fast for them. So, they abandoned the pursuit and ran helter-skelter in sheer desperation. After a while, they came upon a wild boar snoring peacefully beside a pool of gluey mud. Angry as they were at having failed to catch the fowl, the army of ants now attacked the boar. And soon, a hundred ants began to bite the boar's bottom. The boar woke up with a sharp grunt and started to gyrate frantically. He desperately tried to reach the smarting bottom with his snout and relieve the pain with saliva. But more ants came, their assaulting numbers multiplying in scores of twenties, and they began to bite the boar everywhere – on the legs, the shoulders and the snout. He scampered desperately down the hill and waded across the *sorā*. From there, he ran straight into the *jum*-field

of a widow and devoured the gourd and the *mārmāh*, and also destroyed the ripe paddy, brinjal and other vegetables that the widow had grown there with much hard work.

When the widow saw the damage the boar had done to the crops, she picked up a cudgel and chased him, cursing him with swine fever and his offspring with piglet influenza. But the boar ran away and she could not catch him. So she took her anger out on the stump of a tree she found in front of her and clobbered it with the cudgel in her hand. The blows staggered the stump. And he cried out in agony, 'O *buri*, whatever have I done to deserve this?'

Then the stump decided to go to the king and lodge a complaint against the widow.



The stump complains to the king against the widow.

Having arrived at the palace, the stump walked straight into the court and stood before the king. When the king saw him, he asked, 'Wherefore do you come? What is your mission?'

'O king, wisest of judges, I come to seek justice,' cried the stump, and recounted the whole incident.

On hearing what the widow had done to the stump, the king immediately sent out his men to bring the window to the court. When she was brought in, the king upbraided her and sought an explanation. He spoke sternly, asking her, 'Why did you clobber the pitcher with a cudgel.'

The widow made obeisance to the king and said, 'O king of kings, mighty Chief of the hill folks, call me, a poor woman of the *Selachyā* clan, a *gui*-eater if I had any intention of striking the pitcher but finding nothing near at hand to take my anger out on the wicked boar, I struck the pitcher.'

'Boar! What boar do you speak of? Tell me what happened,' demanded the king, and the widow told him that the boar had destroyed the crops in her *jum*. And she wept and tears came rolling down her cheeks.

The king then summoned the boar and said, 'By god, I'd have you roasted alive for your outrageous conduct. But I give you a chance to explain your action. Tell us, why did you eat and destroy the widow's crops?' The boar trembled at the king's words, and, cringing on his knees, told him in broken grunts what the ants had done to him.

In this way, the ants, the fowl, the python, the deer, the monkey, the hornbill and the tailorbird were summoned one after another, and each one of them explained to the king what exactly had happened. Finally, on learning about the forecast of a cyclone from the little tailorbird, the king understood that the toad was responsible for everything. And immediately, he despatched soldiers, asking them to fetch the toad.

After some time, the guards returned with the toad. The king cast a furtive glance at his Chief *Chege*, and then turned to the toad and spoke in a tone of simulated earnestness,

'Master Toad, would you kindly tell your ignorant king and his equally ignorant court more about the great storm that is approaching.'

The toad stood awkwardly silent, turning pale.

'Speak, Master Toad.'

Again, the toad replied not. He stood with drooped shoulders, his eyes fixed to the ground.

Now the king was not able to contain his annoyance any further. Suddenly he renounced the play-acting he had so long persisted in and thundered angrily, in unambiguous terms, 'Speak out, you vile trickster, or I'll have you skinned alive this moment.'

The toad trembled. 'Mercy, O King,' he dropped suppliant on his knees and pleaded, tearfully, 'Have mercy on a foolish creature that intended no harm save having fun at the tailorbird's expense.' And he told the king everything down to the last detail.

Then the king turned to his perpetrator-of-justice and said, 'Take this wicked creature out of my sight now and flog him so that he may never again tell another lie as long as he lives.'

And the king's men bound the toad to a jackfruit tree. They flogged him so severely with sticks that his body swelled up at many places. Also, the latex of the jackfruit tree got stuck to his body, making the skin foul and sticky. So, to this day, the Chakmas associate the ugliness of the toad with the severe flogging it received from the king's men.

Glossary

Self-explaining terms occurring in the tales have been excluded from this word list.

ādām	village
āhlcharā	necklace made of silver, called *āhlchuli* or *ālchuli* by certain sections of the Tangchangyas.
ali	lullaby
āng	a magic formula
azaleng	back portion of a Chakma house, used for various purposes. The Tangchangyas call this portion the *āslāin* or *āsyāin*.
bāppa	someone's father, such as 'Kahbi-*bāppa*' in p.52.
bāreng	a large bamboo basket for storing paddy seeds and other food grains
bei	elder sister, also grandmother
Bel	Sun
bhuji	sister-in-law (wife of elder brother). Also *buji*.
bujyā	old man (see Prefatory Note, p.10)
bujyā-buri	old folks
buri	old woman (see Prefatory Note, p.10)
chāmmoyā	small, usually box-shaped bamboo basket
Chān	Moon
chāngu	a crude ladder made of a log of wood on which steps are cut
chān-mukhi	moon face
Chege	minister
chindirā	green melon (*Cucumis melo*)
chul	rice
chunglāng	ritual associated with marriage. In the Chakma-Tangchangya society, a marriage is formalised only after the *chunglāng* is performed.

dange	form of address, meaning 'precious one'; derived from *dhan* or wealth
dhup chandan	sandalwood (*Santalam album*)
dulan	cradle for babies
dur	tortoise
gābur-mile	an unmarried maid servant
gilā	*Endata scandens*
gudi	room for children in a *jummo* household
gui	iguana
hlei	a round basket for keeping paddy seeds
jadan	bridal knot
jaganā	fig tree (*Ficus carica*)
jagarā	a variety of liquor, usually very intoxicating
jedai	aunt (the wife of father's elder brother)
jum	shifting cultivation
jummo	a shifting or *jum* cultivator
jumor	a hat-like head cover made of palm leaf
izar	part of extended bamboo-platform (of the typical Chakma *māzāghar*) in which washing and bathing is done.
kadhagi	storyteller
kākki	aunt (the wife of father's younger brother)
khāgārā	A kind of tall reed that grows along riverbanks and on the edges of swamps
kum-dhāgani	a earthen lid to cover a pot
kurum	a small basket made of bamboo strips or rattan. The Chakmas use it while sowing paddy in the *jum* field.
ladi-beriye	a taboo word for 'snake.' A Tangchangya or a Chakma who is threatened by a snake avoids using the word *sāp* ('snake'); instead, he speaks of the *ladi-beriye*, which is literally translated as 'a creeping plant that coils round something.'
mārmāh	cucumber (*Cucumis savitas*)
māzāghar	a bamboo house on a raised platform, the roof being thatched with *sunn* or bamboo leaves.

me-me-chāgli	a small bird of the genus *Orthotomus*
mile	woman, girl
mile-bua	the girl. The term is also used to address a maiden, as in p.51.
muzi	aunt on the mother's side
nāksā	a variety of flower (*Mesua ferrea*) popularly known as *nāgkeshar* in various parts of the Indian sub-continent
nābālāng	a small variety of fresh water fish
olansāl	place for cooking inside a typical Chakma *māzā-ghar*
pachchan	tale. The Tangchangyas pronounce it as *pasan*.
pāni	water
pāni-kutti	container for water
pinā	room in a *jummo* household for the householder and his wife. Important guests also may stay here.
pisāng	the bamboo platform in a typical Tangchangya house, forming an extension of the main house with or without an extended roof. Chakmas, and some Tangchangyas, call it *chānā*. It is used for purposes of sitting and gossiping, especially with visitors.
pulyāng	a kind of large cylindrical basket made of rattan and bamboo slips
rangrāng	the pied Indian hornbill (*Anthracocerous coronatus*)
rubā-khur	funeral pyre comprising seven layers of wood for women and five for men
sābālā	*Nymphaea nouchali*
Selachyā	a Chakma clan that strictly prohibits consumption of iguana meat.
sidal	dry-fish
sudattubi	tailorbird (*Orthotomus sutorius*)
suguri-gulā	pumpkin (*Cucurbita maxima*)
sunn	coarse grass to thatch roofs (*Saccharum cylindricum*). It can also be spelt as *chan*.
tāgal	a chopper made of iron