

## 4. Drought

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee

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### About the writer

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee was a prominent Bengali novelist and short story writer of the early twentieth century. Most of his works deal with the lifestyle, tragedy, struggle of the village people and the contemporary social practices that prevailed in Bengal.

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The village was called Kashipur. It was a small village, its Zamindar was smaller still. Yet his tenants dared not stand up to him. He was so ruthless.

It was the birthday of his youngest son. It was noon. Tarkaratna, the priest, was on his way home from the landlord's house, where he had been offering prayers. It was nearing the end of May, but not a patch of cloud could be seen in the sky. The rainless firmament poured fire.

The field in front, stretching out to the horizon, had broken up into tens of thousands of fissures in the burning blaze, and it looked as though the life-blood of Mother Earth was unceasingly flowing out through them as smoke. If one gazed long at its rising, flame-like sinuous movement, it left him, as it were, dazed with drunkenness.

At the end of the field, beside the road, there stood the house of Gafur; the weaver. Now that the mud walls were in ruins, the courtyard touched the public highway, and the inner privacy was thrown on the mercy of the passers-by.

"Hey! Gafur! Is anybody in?" called out Tarkaratna, standing in the shade of a tree by the roadside.

"What do you want? Father is down with fever," answered Gafur's little daughter, aged ten, appearing at the door.

"Fever! Call the scoundrel!" Tarkaratna shouted.

The noise brought Gafur out, shivering with fever. A bull was tied to the old acacia that leaned against the broken wall.

"What do I see there?" demanded Tarkaratna, indicating the bull. "Do you realize that the landlord will not tolerate this?" His face was crimson with indignation and the heat

of the sun. It was to be expected that his words should be hot and harsh. But Gafur simply looked at him, unable to follow the import of his words.

“Well,” said Tarkaratna, “I saw it tied there in the morning and it’s still there. If the bull dies your master will flay you alive!”

“What shall I do, Father? I’m helpless. I’ve had fever for the last few days. I can’t take him out to graze. I feel so ill.”

“Can’t you let him graze by himself?”

“Where shall I let him go, Father. People haven’t threshed their paddy yet. It’s still lying in the fields. The straw hasn’t been gathered. Everything is burnt to cinders... There isn’t a blade of grass anywhere. How can I let him loose, Father? He might start poking his nose into somebody’s paddy or eating somebody’s straw.”

Tarkaratna softened a little. “But you can at least tie him in the shade somewhere and give him a bundle of straw or two to munch. Hasn’t your daughter cooked rice? Why not give him a tub of boiled rice water? Let him drink it.”

Gafur made no reply. He looked helplessly at Tarkaratna and a deep sigh escaped him.

“I see you haven’t even got that much? What have you done with your share of straw? I suppose you have gone and sold it to satisfy your belly? Not saved even one bundle for the bull! How callous you are!”

At this cruel accusation Gafur seemed to lose the power of speech. “This year I was to have received my share of straw”, said Gafur slowly after a moment of hesitation, “but the master kept it all on account of my last year’s rent. ‘Sir, you are our lord and master,’ I implored, falling at his feet. ‘Where am I to go if I leave your domain? Let me have at least a little straw. There’s no straw on my roof, and we have only one hut in which two- father and daughter- live. We’ll patch the roof with palm leaves and manage this rainy weather, somehow, but what will happen to our Mahesh without food?’”

“Indeed! So you’re fond enough of Mahesh! This is a joke.”

But his sarcasm did not reach Gafur. “But the master took no pity on me,” he went on. “He gave me paddy to last only two months. My share of straw was added to his own stock- Mahesh didn’t have even a wisp of it.”

“Well, don’t you owe him money?” said Tarkaratna, unmoved. “Why shouldn’t you have to pay? Do you expect the landlord to support you?”

“But what am I to pay him with? We till four bighas of land for him, but the paddy has dried up in the fields during the droughts in the last two years. My daughter and I have

not even enough to eat. Look at the hut! When it rains, I spend the night with my daughter huddled in one corner we can't even stretch our legs. Look at Mahesh! You can count his ribs. Do lend me a bit of hay for him so that he can have something to eat for a day or two." And Gafur sank down on the ground at the Tarkaratna's feet.

"No, no! Move aside! Let me go home, it's getting late." Tarkaratna made a movement as though to depart, smiling. "Good God! He seems to brandish his horns at me! Will he hurt?" he cried out with fright and anger, stepping hurriedly back from the bull.

Gafur staggered to his feet. "He wants to eat a handful," he said, indicating the wet bundle of rice and fruit in Tarkaratna's hand.

"Wants to eat? Indeed! Like master, like animal. Hasn't even a bit of straw to eat and must have rice and fruit. Take him away and tie him somewhere else! What horns! He will gore somebody to death one of these days." Edging away, the priest made a quick exit.

Looking away from him, Gafur silently watched Mahesh, whose two deep, brown eyes were full of pain and hunger. "Didn't even give a handful," he muttered, patting the bull's neck and back. "You are my son, Mahesh," he whispered to him. "You have grown old and served us for eight years. I can't even give you enough to eat- but you know how much I love you, don't you?"

Mahesh only stretched out his neck and closed his eyes with pleasure.

"Tell me," went on Gafur, "how can I keep you alive in this dreadful year? If I let you loose, you will start eating other people's paddy or munching their banana leaves. What can I do with you? You have no strength left in your body- nobody wants you. They ask me to sell you at the cattle market..." At the very idea his eyes filled with tears again. Wiping his tears on the back of his hand and looked this way and that, he fetched a tiny bunch of discoloured old straw from behind the hut. "Eat it quickly, my child, otherwise..." he said, softly placing it before Mahesh.

"Father..."

"What is it?"

"Come and eat," answered Gafur's daughter, looking out of the door. "Why, have you again given Mahesh straw from the roof?"

He had feared as much. "It's old straw it was rotting away," he answered, ashamed.

"I heard you pulling it, father."

"No darling, it wasn't exactly..."

“But you know. Father, the wall will crumble...”

Gafur was silent. He had nothing left but this hut. Who knew better than he that unless he was careful it would not last another rainy season. And yet what good was it really?

“Wash your hands and come and eat. I have served you food,” said the little girl.

“Give me the rice water; let me feed him.”

“There is none, father, it has dried up in the pot.”

Nearly a week had passed. Gafur was sitting in the yard, sick of body and anxious. Mahesh had not returned since the day before.

He himself was helpless. Amina had been looking for the bull everywhere from early morning. The evening shadows were already falling when she came home. “Have you heard, father, Manik Ghose has sent Mahesh to the police pen”, she said.

“Nonsense!”

“Yes, father, it’s true. His servant said to me, tell your father to look for the bull at Dariapur...”

“What did he do?”

“He entered their garden, father.”

“At the end of three days, they say, the police will sell him at the cattle market.”

Amina did not know what the “cattle market” meant. She had often noticed her father grow restless whenever it was mentioned in connection with Mahesh, but today he went out without saying another word.

Under the cover of night, Gafur secretly came around to Banshi’s shop.

“Uncle, you’ll have to lend me a rupee”, said he, putting down a grass plate under the seat. Banshi was well acquainted with this object. In the last two years he had lent a rupee at least five times on this security. He made no objection today either.

The next morning Mahesh was seen at his usual place again. An elderly man was examining him with very sharp eyes. Not far away, on one side, Gafur sat on the ground, all hunched up. The examination was over, the old man untied a ten-rupee note from a corner of his shawl, and smoothing it again and again, said: “Here, take this, I shan’t take anything off. I’m paying the full price.”

Stretched his hand, Gafur took the money, but remained silent. As the two men who came with the old man were about to take the rope round the animal’s neck, he

suddenly stood bold upright. "Don't touch that rope. I tell you. Be careful, I warn you!" he cried out hoarsely.

They were taken aback. "Why?" asked the old man in surprise.

"There's no why to it. He's my property- I shall not sell him: it's my pleasure," he answered in the same tone, and threw the note away.

"But you accepted the deposit yesterday," all three said in a chorus.

"Take this back," he answered, flinging the two rupees across to them.

Gafur begged for rice water from the neighbours and fed Mahesh. Patting him on the head and horns, he whispered vague sounds of endearment to him.

It was about the middle of June. Nobody who has not looked at an Indian summer sky will realize how terrible, how unrelenting, the heat can be. Not a trace of mercy anywhere. Today even the thought that some day this aspect of sky would change, that it would become overcast with soft, moisture-laden clouds was impossible. It seemed as though the whole blazing sky would go on burning day after day endlessly, to the end of time.

Gafur returned home at noon. He was not used to working as a hired labourer, and it was only four or five days since his temperature had gone down. His body was still weak and tired. He had gone out to seek work, but in vain. He had had no success. Hungry, thirsty, tired, everything was dark before his eyes. "Is the food ready, Amina dear?" he called out from the courtyard.

Without answering, his daughter silently came out and stood leaning against the wall.

"Is the food ready?" Gafur repeated without receiving an answer.

"What do you say? No? Why?"

"No rice? Why didn't you tell me in the morning?"

"Why, I told you last night."

"I told you last night," mimicked Gafur. "How am I to remember what you told me last night?" His anger grew more and more violent at the sound of his own voice. "Of course, there is no rice!" he growled, with his face more distorted than ever. "What does it matter whether your father eats or not? But the young lady must have her three meals! In the future I shall lock up the rice when I go out. Give me some water to drink-I'm dying of thirst....So, you haven't any water, either!"

Amina remained standing with bowed head as before. Realizing that there was not even a drop of water in the house, he lost all self-control. Rushing at her, he slapped her face noisily. "Wretched girl! What do you do all day? So many people die – why don't you?"

The girl did not utter a word. She took the empty earthen pitcher and went out into the afternoon sun, quietly wiping her silent tears.

The moment she was out of sight, her father was overwhelmed with remorse. He alone knew how he had brought up that motherless girl. He knew that this affectionate, dutiful, quiet daughter of his was not to blame. They had never had enough to eat even while their little store of rice lasted. It was impossible to eat three times a day. Nor was he unaware of the reason for the absence of water. Two of the three tanks in the village had all dried up. The little water that there was still in the private tank of Shibu Babu was not for the public. A few holes had been dug at the bottom of the other tanks, but there was such crowding and jostling for a little water that this chit of a girl could not even approach them. She stood for hours on end, after much begging, if somebody took pity on her, she returned home with little water. He knew all this. Perhaps there was no water today or nobody had found time to take pity on her. Something of the sort must have happened, he thought, and his own eyes, too, filled with tears.

"Gafur! Are you in?" somebody cried out in the yard. The landlord's messenger had arrived.

"Yes, I'm in. Why?" answered Gafur bitterly.

"Master has sent for you. Come."

"I haven't had any food yet. I will come later," said Gafur.

Such impudence seemed intolerable to the messenger.

"It's master's order to drag you to him and give you a good thrashing," he roared, calling the man ugly names. Gafur lost self-control for the second time. "We are nobody's slave," he replied, returning similar compliments. "We pay rent to live here. I will not go."

But in this world it is not only futile for the small to appeal to authority, it is dangerous as well. Fortunately the tiny voice seldom reaches big ears or who knows what might happen? When Gafur returned home from the landlord's and quietly lay down, his face and eyes were swollen. The chief cause of so much suffering was Mahesh. When Gafur left that morning, Mahesh broke loose from his tether, and, entering the grounds of the landlord, had eaten up flowers and upset the corn drying in the sun. When finally they tried to catch him, he had hurt the landlord's youngest daughter and had escaped. This was not

the first time this had happened, but Gafur was forgiven because he was poor. If he had come round, and, as on other occasions, begged for the landlord's forgiveness, he would probably have been forgiven, but instead he had claimed that he paid rent, and that he was nobody's slave. This was too much for Shibu Babu, the zamindar, to swallow. Gafur had borne the beatings and torture without protest. At home, too, he lay in a corner without a word. Hunger and thirst he had forgotten, but his heart was burning within him like the sun outside. He had kept no count of how time passed.

He was suddenly shaken out of his listlessness by the shriek of a girl. She was prostrate on the ground. The pitcher which she had been carrying tumbled over, and Mahesh was sucking up the water as it flowed on the earth. Gafur was completely out of his mind. Without waiting another moment he seized his plough-head he had left yesterday for repair, and with both hands struck it violently on the bent head of Mahesh. Once only Mahesh attempted to raise his head, but immediately his starving, lean body staggering to the ground. A few drops of blood rolled down from his ears. His whole body shook once or twice and then stretching the fore and hind legs as far as they would reach. Mahesh fell dead. "What have you done, father? Our Mahesh is dead!" Amina burst out weeping.

Gafur did not move nor answer her. He remained staring without blinking at a pair of motionless beady black eyes.

Before two hours were out, the tanners living at the end of the village came crowding in and carried off Mahesh on a bamboo pole. Shuddering at the sight of the shining knives in their hands, Gafur closed his eyes but did not speak.

The neighbours informed him that the landlord had sent for Tarakaratna to ask for advice. How would Gafur pay for the penance which the killing of a sacred animal demanded?

Gafur made no reply to these remarks, but remained squatting with his chin resting on his knees.

"Amina, dear, come, let's go," said Gafur, rousing his daughter at the dead of night.

She had fallen asleep in the yard. "Where, father?" she asked rubbing her eyes.

"To work at the jute mill at Fulbere," said the father.

The girl looked at him incredulously. Through all his misery he had declined to go to Fulbere. "No religion, no respect, no privacy for womenfolk there," she had often heard him say.

"Hurry up, my child; we have a long way to go," said Gafur.



Amina was going to collect the drink bowl and her father's brass plate. "Leave them alone, darling. They'll pay for the penance for Mahesh," said Gafur.

In the dead of night Gafur set out, holding his daughter by the hand. He had nobody to call his own in the village. He had nothing to say to anybody. Crossing the yard, when he reached the acacia, he stopped stock-still and burst out crying loudly. "Allah," he said, raising his face towards the black star-spangled sky, "punish me as much as you like- Mahesh died with thirst on his lips. Nobody left the tiniest bit of land for him to feed on. Pray never forgive those their guilt who never let him eat the grass nor drink the water you have given."

### About the story

In 'Drought', the writer has drawn a graphic picture of drought. Drought takes the form of a natural calamity in many parts of India, in Rajasthan frequently. In the present story, Gafur, the main character, is under stress. The writer has successfully depicted social and psychological aspects of human nature under stress.

### GLOSSARY

ruthless (adj)	:	merciless, cruel
patch (n)	:	piece
firmament (n)	:	sky
fissures (n)	:	cracks
unceasingly (adv)	:	constantly
sinuous (adj)	:	winding
crimson (adj)	:	deep red
indignation (n)	:	anger
import (n)	:	meaning
flay (v)	:	to take out the skin
thresh (v)	:	separate grain from corn
cinders (n)	:	partly burnt wood, coal etc.
munch (v)	:	chew
callous (adj)	:	without feelings
domain (n)	:	kingdom



wisp (n)	:	small bundle
bigha (n)	:	a measure of land
brandish (v)	:	to wave about
gore (n)	:	wound with horns
crumble (v)	:	to fall
pen (n)	:	a small enclosure for cattle, sheep etc.
hunched up (v)	:	sat with a hunch
chorus (n)	:	singing, shouting in group
flinging (v)	:	throwing
unrelenting (adj)	:	severe
mimicked (v)	:	imitated
overwhelmed (v)	:	moved greatly
remorse (n)	:	regret
chit of a girl (n)	:	small girl
impudence (n)	:	rudeness
tiny (adj)	:	small
tether (n)	:	rope
prostrate (adj, v)	:	lying flat
fore (adj)	:	front
hind (adj)	:	back
tanners (n)	:	persons collecting animal skins
shuddering (v)	:	shaking
incredulously (adv)	:	unbelievably
stock-still (adj)	:	motionless
star-spangled (adj)	:	studded with stars

## COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS :

### A. Choose the correct alternative:

1. Who killed Mahesh?  
(a) Tarakratna (b) Shibu  
(c) Gafur (d) Amina
2. Who was Amina?  
(a) Tarakratna's daughter (b) Shibu's daughter  
(c) Gafur's sister (d) Gafur's daughter
3. The story took place in .....  
(a) April (b) December  
(c) May (d) June
4. Shibu is the name of the.....  
(a) bull (b) zamindar  
(c) priest (d) tanner
5. Why did Gafur go to Fulbere at the end?  
(a) to sell Mahesh (b) to attend a funeral  
(c) to work at the jute mill (d) to befool Amina

### B. Answer the following questions in 30-40 words each:

1. 'Many a time Gafur was forgiven by the landlord.' Why?
2. Describe the two times when Gafur lost self-control.
3. What is penance? Why did Gafur think of doing it?
4. What kind of life did poor Amina lead right from her childhood?
5. Why was there so much scarcity of water in the village?
6. Why did Gafur lose his temper and kill Mahesh?
7. Write a character-sketch of Tarakratna.

### C. Answer the following questions in 115-125 words each:

1. Giving examples from the story, comment on the relationship between Shibu and Gafur.
2. Draw a graphic picture of the Indian summer as depicted by the writer.
3. Describe the attitude of Shibu Babu towards the villagers.
4. Draw a character-sketch of Gafur.

**D. State True/False:**

1. Gafur tilled eight bighas of land for the landlord. (True/False)
2. It was Zamindar's elder son's birthday. (True/False)
3. Amina informed Gafur that Mahesh was at Dariapur. (True/False)
4. Gafur left the brass plate behind as a payment for penance. (True/False)
5. All the three tanks in the village had dried up. (True/False)

**E. Creative Writing :**

Imagine you have been invited to participate in a discussion on how to face scarcity of water during drought. What suggestions would you give?