

Sirsho Bandopadhyay

## The Virus

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“Look how strange the guava tree is – it’s delicate and soft but also sturdy at the same time. Go on, try breaking off a branch. You won’t be able to do it easily!”

5 As he spoke, the man ran his hands across the guava tree, caressing it with utmost affection and murmuring unintelligibly under his breath. Then he tied two pieces of rope around the tree. Holding the other end of the rope, he turned in the opposite direction to the one towards which the tree had swayed. He pulled hard. The veins in his hand began to swell and pop.

10 He didn’t need to exert too much strength – a firm tug was enough to straighten Subodhbabu’s favourite guava tree. Tying the rope tightly to the base of a coconut tree, the man stood with his hands proudly on his hips, beaming up at the tree. As if fascinated by his own accomplishment.

Subodhbabu smiled slightly. “What were you telling the tree?”

The man looked embarrassed. “Well, all this business of tying ropes and so on – so I thought – well, that I should speak to the tree.”

15 “Oh!” Subodhbabu let out a high-pitched roar of laughter. “You took permission from it!”

The man replied with innocent sincerity, “These trees, the birds – they’re all like humans to me, sir. Now look at this guava tree. It was in such great distress; it was unable to bear the brunt of the disastrous storm and almost gave way. But a bit of tugging was all it needed, look how it’s standing tall and erect again! People only ever need a little bit of such support. Like you, sir – you pushed me to do my work.”

20 Subodhbabu appeared uncomfortable now. Quickly he said, “Clean up these broken branches quickly. It’s almost noon.”

“Yes sir, your bath and meal are getting delayed. I’ll finish up right away, it’ll be done in a jiffy.”

25 There was no axe at home; just a short machete for coconuts that Subodhbabu had handed over. The man deftly chopped off the broken branches and removed them as Subodhbabu looked on. It was difficult to ascertain who was providing support to the other.

When they awoke that morning after last night’s terrifying storm, Subodhbabu’s wife nearly cried when she caught sight of their destroyed garden. Of course, it could only be imagined to be a garden, it didn’t comprise much more than some periwinkle and marigold shrubs on either side of the back gate, and a solitary jasmine tree next to the main entrance.

30 The remaining portion of the land was occupied by scattered rows of gourd, eggplant, tomato and a patch of spinach. The other end of the garden boasted of a pair of guava trees, a water-apple and a pomelo tree. A crowd of coconut trees pressed against the fences.

35 The storm had left the gourd trees and the spinach patch completely demolished; branches had broken off and were strewn across the ground. Subodhbabu had been standing in his balcony, eyebrows knitted together in concern, surveying the ruins in dismay and wondering how he would possibly clean up the mess.

It was at this time that the man appeared to lift him out of his anguish. He approached Subodhbabu with a familiar friendliness. "Oh no, I see there's been quite some damage! Do you want to get some of these broken branches cleaned up, babu?"

40 Subodhbabu peered down at the man. No, he did not recognise this stranger. Should he really let an unknown man enter his home? But soon after it occurred to Subodhbabu that he wouldn't really be letting the man inside the house – he'd only be allowed within the premises of the garden outside.

Cautiously, Subodhbabu asked, "How much will you take?"

45 The man seemed a bit taken aback. He didn't seem to have had much hope of finding work and looked surprised when he realised his offer had not been rejected. "Whatever you think fit," he responded, a bit awkwardly.

Subodhbabu studied him further. "Have you ever done this sort of work before?"

"I'm a poor man, sir," the man replied in a weary voice. "I do whatever work I get. It's been hard of late. I have trouble finding any work at all."

50 "Hmm. The lockdown." Subodhbabu agreed in a sombre voice. "No one is able to hold down a job. Anyway, you can start."

55 He felt a slight sense of guilt as he said this. As a teacher at a government school, he was still getting paid despite not being able to take classes. However, he reassured himself with the thought that when the school reopened he would have to work doubly hard to teach the entire syllabus, and his earnings would be justified.

The man did not take long. Clearing up the broken branches and swiftly tying them up, the man returned, his hands clasped together as if in prayer.

At first Subodhbabu reached into his pocket and took out a 100-rupee note, but he deliberated for a moment and then fished out two more 10-rupee notes.

60 The man accepted the money, his joined palms touching the money to his forehead with gratitude. Subodhbabu was overcome with sympathy at the action. The man's face was worn out, drawn from exhaustion and malnourishment, his eyes sunken. His grimy clothes stuck to his frail body, drenched in sweat. He had slaved away for a good couple of hours – and the reward for his hard work? Only a hundred and twenty rupees.

65 Lost in thought, the words slipped out of Subodhbabu's mouth before he could realise it: "It's quite late. Would you like to eat something before you leave?"

The man's lit up. Hesitantly, he said, "Could I take it with me, sir?"

"How will you pack it?" asked Subodhbabu. "You don't even have a rag. What kind of a labourer are you – leaving the house to work empty-handed! Wait, let me see."

70 Subodhbabu went back inside the house. He had blurted out his offer – but he didn't even know whether there was enough food at home to feed three.

But it seemed that his wife's elation upon seeing the guava tree recover had turned her into a saint. When he asked her if there was enough to eat for one more person, she seemed quite offended. "What kind of a question is that?" she asked furiously. "If we have enough for the two of us, what's one more?"

75 Arrangements were made. The man would eat some food, then take some back with him; they had an old tiffin carrier at home. If the man insisted on returning it, they might as well fill it with some rice and vegetables. "He must have a wife and children at home," Subodhbabu's wife said sympathetically.

80 Everything was set up in the veranda. Plates of food were placed on a table and Subodhbabu seated himself on a chair in front of it; his body had begun to feel too heavy for him to sit on the floor anymore. The man's plate was set before him – rice, dal, vegetables and paneer.

Subodhbabu had not been to buy groceries during the lockdown. Twice a week, he had someone deliver eggs, fish and vegetables.

85 The man sat solemnly in front of his plate for some time, not touching it. After a moment, he said, "What kind of a virus – no, what kind of a disease is this? We can't even afford to eat two square meals a day anymore."

He had already cleaned his hands and feet at the tap in their garden, but still he reached for the glass of water and washed his hands a second time. He had just pulled the plate of food towards himself when the chaos started.

90 A crowd of people suddenly burst into their garden. Subodhbabu looked up, shocked. Most of them were familiar faces – members of the two political groups in their area. Some of them were former students of his. But what could possibly have happened for all of them to gang up and gather here? At his home, of all places.

95 A few people emerged from the crowd. They were unfamiliar faces; Subodhbabu did not recognise them. They pointed to the man sitting in the veranda and exclaimed – "There he is!" The others joined in. "We found him!" They crowed in unison.

Subodhbabu was perplexed. He began to panic; was he harbouring a thief or criminal of some kind? And why did the man look so terrified? He had moved away from his plate and was desperately trying to shrink back against the wall, trembling and cowering like an animal about to be attacked.

100 Subodhbabu had just started to eat but he was forced to abandon his plate and stand up. He went and placed himself between the mob and the trembling man. "Wait, wait," he said, clearing his throat. "What seems to be the problem?"

Uttaran Sarkar stepped forward – one of the young leaders of their area. "Large-hearted people like you are a problem, Subodhbabu!" he said. "You let anyone into your home! Do you know who this man is? Have you any idea how dangerous he is?"

105 Subodhbabu turned to look at the man behind him; his palms folded, head bowed in a pitiful posture. His body language did not seem to belong to anyone dangerous. He turned back to face Uttaran. "No, I do not," he replied. "Enlighten me."

110 Uttaran waved his hands around agitatedly. "This man is a labourer. He got back from Telangana yesterday. He's supposed to be quarantined for 18 days; the government has arranged for everything. But he stepped off the train and made a run for it. In a rush to get back home, what else." Uttaran scoffed. "Others in the village noticed him and came after him," he continued. "He's been sneaking around since then. Imagine what a threat he is to the people in this neighbourhood! He's carrying around a deadly virus."

115 "He's a virus himself!" Bikash, the local leader of the opposition, piped up from the crowd. "Look at him! He has the same spiky hair. Ha, ha, ha." He chuckled heartily, amused by his own joke. He came up and stood beside Uttaran. The two of them seemed to be spewing their accusations in perfect harmony.

"Has anyone who arrived from elsewhere been diagnosed with the coronavirus yet?" Subodhbabu asked calmly. The question seemed to catch Bikash off guard. Uttaran hurriedly said, "That's the reason he was asked to stay in quarantine! All the tests would be conducted there."

120 "Where is it? This quarantine centre?" Subodhbabu continued to interrogate them. These were his former students. He had always asked them one question after another to assess how well they had learned.

But his words seemed to irritate Uttaran. "There have been so many announcements recently. Haven't you heard?" He demanded. "Next to the station – the government has occupied the first floor of Binodini high school. They've set up beds there."

"And the testing? That will be done there too?" Subodhbabu refused to let them off the hook.

125 Now someone else stepped out from the group. He appeared to be polite. "Sir, I'm the RMO of the District Health Centre of this area. Actually, we have been told to treat every person who has arrived from outside as a potential Covid patient. This man should be in quarantine right now, sir. But these people return and wander away at once. They don't realise what a danger it is for others!"

130 The gentleness of the doctor's tone seemed to offer some courage to the man. Warily, he said, "I had been away from home for ten months. My family back home have run out of money – they barely have anything to eat. I heard my little daughter has come down with a fever. How can I not pay a visit after being so close to my home?"

“Then why are you running around the entire neighbourhood, you little virus?” taunted Bikash.

135 “I was hungry, sir,” the man replied. “All I ate on the train was a piece of stale, dry bread. Everything else had rotted. I didn’t even get more than a couple of sips of water.” As he spoke, his voice seemed to harden in suppressed anger and resentment. He stood up straight, his spine tightened and his demeanour shifted from pitiful to protesting. The plate of untouched rice lay before him – the food that he had earned with hard work.

140 Subodhbabu fixed his gaze on the man. The starving nation was sitting right there in front of his eyes. The country’s suffering was in plain sight.

But the virus? Subodhbabu still did not know what it looked like.

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