

# TROUBLES

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Translated from the Bangla "Jhonjat" by Rebecca Haque

What constitutes troubles? Sarkar Sahib tried thoughtfully to broach the subject, but before he could do so, ten china plates fell from the hands of the servant and broke into a thousand pieces. At once, with the shattering din of the broken plates, came the sharp voice of Sarkar Sahib's wife, 'You have done it now. Is this your common sense, to utter early in the morning the inauspicious word "trouble"?' She shouted at the servant, 'Shameless idiot, good-for-nothing, layabout'. Dumbfounded, Sarkar Sahib tried to twist the ears of the servant, but the servant cried out, 'Oh mother, oh father, you are killing me.' Fortunately, this was the city and no one came to interfere. But the real problem remained. Sarkar Sahib withdrew his hand without touching the servant, but the servant put together his belongings and found this an opportune time and excuse to go. Nobody could prevent his going. Sarkar Sahib's wife collected the fragments of the plates and said, 'Very good; you have done well. No one works, but everyone increases the amount of work to be done. No one brings in the slightest amount of money, but everyone can destroy. I want my ten plates by the afternoon. And furthermore, give that bastard his salary and send him off so that he can never set foot in this house again.'

The eldest daughter was married. The youngest daughter came and said, 'He has broken so many plates, why are you giving him money?' The wife said, 'No, why should he? Go on, create more trouble. I have said so many times, no one should mention the word "trouble" early in the morning, or bring out money before the house has been cleaned. But no one listens to me. You are all like your father.' Before the wife could turn on her husband, somebody knocked on the door. The wife said, 'It is the washerman early in the morning.'

'Washerman? Are there washermen these days?' asked Sarkar Sahib, setting off another barrage from his wife.

She said, 'Where can you find washermen, when you have turned them all away? You are all busy serving society; when do you have time to help in the house? The servants have all become gentlemen and the sons have become nawabs. No one takes soiled clothes to the washerman.' The elder son meekly replied, 'Where are there washermen these days? I take the clothes to the laundry.' His mother taunted, 'Laundry or foundry. I have managed to keep the washerman, paying him with great difficulty, at double the usual rate.'

Sarkar Sahib sighed, 'Then you must be happy at seeing him. No wonder I can hardly make ends meet.'

He opened the door to see not the

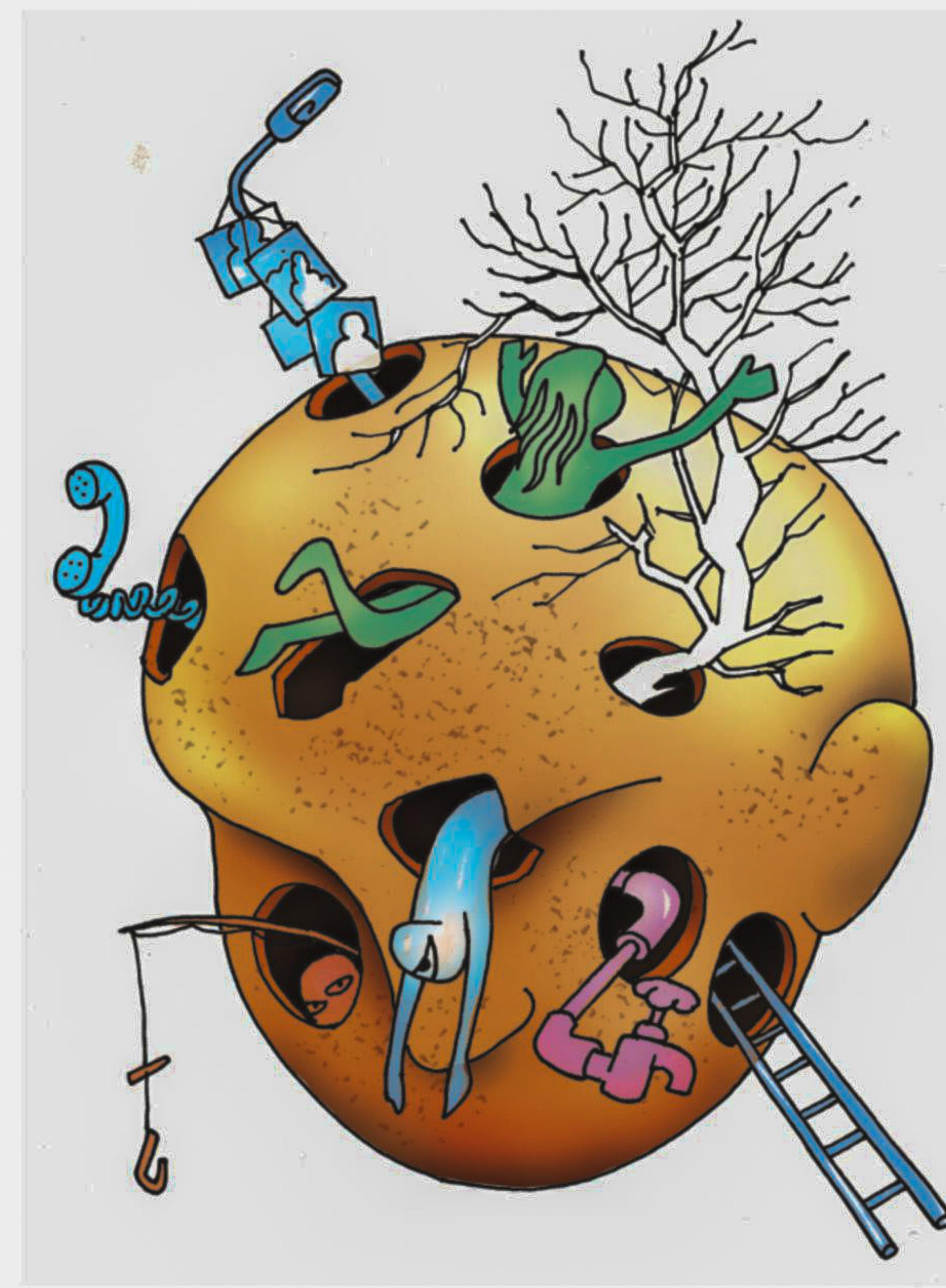


ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

washerman Rajab, but Rajab Ali, his nephew who lived in the next flat. He had in his hands a yellow and a white paper.

Sarkar Sahib asked, 'What is the matter, Rajab Ali, what has happened?'

'Why should anything have happened?'

'He must have come to telephone, another trouble,' said the wife. 'Last night, at midnight, the telephone rang. I hurriedly got up to take the call. A good-for-nothing young boy said, "Have you seen the beautiful moon in the sky?"'

Sarkar Sahib said, 'When did this happen? Which scoundrel? I would have given him half of the moon. Why did you not call me?'

His wife said, 'Rubbish, you could not have done a thing. You couldn't have thrown dirt on his face through the wires of the telephone.'

'Well, since you have come, go on, use the telephone. Where are you calling?'

Don't call your girlfriend and cause us trouble.'

'No, I have not come to phone,' said Rajab Ali in a soft voice. As he said this, he blushed, because Shumi, the youngest daughter of the house, had appeared. And Rajab could not help but stare at her.

'Then what?' said Sarkar Sahib's wife.

Rajab Ali replied, 'Chachi Amma has sent me to check your electricity bill.'

'Our electricity bill? Why?' The wife became furious.

'There's nothing wrong with you. It's just that our electricity bill has somehow jumped from thirty-five to forty-five.'

The wife said, 'If you use more electricity, then it will jump.'

Rajab said, 'But in flat number six, the bill comes to only ten taka. That's why Chachi Amma is angry. She says there is something fishy about it.'

Shumi said, 'Ma, our bill has come as well.'

Her mother replied angrily, 'It has? Then why did you not give it to me? The rebate date has probably expired. I don't know what to do with all of you grown-up children.'

Sarkar Sahib said, 'Oh, why are you scolding her so much so early in the morning? So what if she forgot? Bring it to me, dear.' Sarkar Sahib was an important man, an important social worker, respected and heeded by the people of his neighbourhood. He had a cool head on his shoulders. He had to be cool, and no, for this he did not need any special herbal oil.

The bill was brought.

But what did his wife see? She could not believe her eyes. Eighty-five taka! 'Look, dear, isn't that eighty-five?'

Without looking at the bill, Sarkar Sahib said in an extremely irritated tone, 'What did you say? Can't you say it in Bangla? Eighty-five!' He couldn't quite seem to understand.

'That is what I said,' replied his wife. 'Eighty-five taka.'

'Today is the last date,' said Shumi.

Her mother's fury fell upon Shumi, and the girl turned away her face in the nick of time to escape the slap that was meant for her cheek.

'Stupid girl,' said her mother, 'you hid this trouble from us. Just wait and see. I am sure there's some mistake. Calculate the bill again. Correct it and pay the bill.'

Sarkar Sahib went out immediately. He understood that the morning's trouble would not end all day. He had not had a chance to explain to his wife that he was himself in trouble. And he did not feel at ease without telling his wife everything. After all, he was a peace-loving man. He was not in the habit of doing anything thoughtlessly or haphazardly. He did everything after due thought and deliberation. No matter how many faults his wife had, she was the pilot of the ship of their marriage. Without her steering the ship, Sarkar Sahib could not have managed things on his own. Why he alone? It was the same with all men. Other men were cowards and did not admit it as openly as Sarkar Sahib did.

Meanwhile, a handsome man turned up at this moment to create more trouble. 'In whose name is this house?' he asked.

'Whose name?' The wife turned to look at her oldest son for assistance. But where was he? Only once had he shown his face and then gone back to sleep again. It was impossible to keep him awake the whole day. She turned to the man. 'What does it matter in whose name this house is? Who are you?'

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