

Tears in God's Own Country

Cliff Anthony

1

CROSS-TOED AMMU was the first to notice Chenda's body. Initially, the strange object on the northwest bank of the Alumaram River looked like a buffalo carcass.

She saw the dark object during her obsessive spitting from the bridge onto the river on her way to the market at the Alumaram Village junction to sell vegetables. She ignored it because it was not unusual for the river to dump tree branches, debris, and animal carcasses on its banks. But the continuous loud barking of a stray dog at the object prompted her to look again. Confused, she screwed up her eyes, studied it closely, and still couldn't figure it out. She pointed out the object to her niece Kamala, who accompanied her to the market, and asked, "Edi, what is that? A buffalo?"

"No. It definitely is not a buffalo," Kamala replied. "It's difficult to see clearly from here. But I'm sure it's not a buffalo."

So, they slowly walked from the bridge down the slope to the riverbank to check it out. Their bare toes provided a firm grip, like a bird's claws on the steep slope, preventing them from slipping and rolling into the river.

"Ayyo, Dhyvamey! Pretam. A dead body," screamed Cross-toed Ammu as soon as she had a closer view of the object. She trembled with trepidation and grabbed her niece for support. Kamala covered her mouth with her hand in horror. They looked closer.

"This is our Chenda!" Cross-toed Ammu screamed again.

"Oh, my God! Oh, my Amman Devi!" Kamala whimpered and held Cross-toed Ammu's hand tightly for support.

"We've to tell Big-legged Appu and astrologer Guru," she told Kamala.

They rushed from the riverbank onto the bridge and then to the junction, the heart of Alumaram Village. Driven by adrenalin and gripped by fear and confusion, they walked the one-mile unpaved street within half the time it would otherwise take to reach her destination. On the way, in trembling voices, they told whomever they met about their gruesome discovery.

"Our Chenda is dead. His body is under the bridge," Cross-toed Ammu told Appu.

He listened carefully, but suspiciously, and asked, "Are you sure it was Chenda? Our Chenda?"

"I swear it was our Chenda," she asserted, annoyed at Appu for doubting her. "I'm going to astrologer Guru's house to tell him. He should know this."

"Tell Guru I'm on my way to the river," Appu said. His hands and the scissors worked feverishly to finish clipping a customer's hair, told a waiting customer to come later, and closed the barber shop. He took his bicycle, made sure the pedal didn't chafe his right leg with elephantiasis, and rode like a maniac to the Alumaram River.

ON THEIR way to the make-shift market at the junction, the duo took a detour to Guru's house. They gave him a rapid-fire description of what they saw. Guru sat dazed on his verandah as if he had been hit by lightning. He wiped his face with his hands, put on a white shirt, and told loudly to his wife Leela in the kitchen, "I'm going out. I heard that something had happened to Chenda. Please light the oil lamp in the pooja room and say prayers." He took a deep breath, tucked his umbrella under his armpit, and left before his wife could come out of the kitchen and ask for details. With a combination of running and walking, Guru went to the river.

By then, the news of Chenda's death had spread like the monsoon waters. Customers at the Brahminal Hotel and the Military Hotel at the junction gobbled up their food and hurried to the river. As soon as they left, Kuttan, owner of the Brahminal Hotel, and Kader, who owns the Military Hotel, half-shuttered their eateries and set toward the river. And tailor Gopi followed them. The Amman Devi temple and the Juma Masjid were deserted as the worshippers had already left to see Chenda's body. The make-shift market at the junction, which bustled with vendors, haggling customers, and crows, was eerily silent.

"Edi, there's not even a single soul to buy vegetables," Cross-toed Ammu told Kamala. "I think the whole village is at the river. I feel sad. Depressed. Scared. Let's go there."

Young men ran, middle-aged men and women walked in haste, and some rode their bicycles. They passed by huts and shops charred from the fire set off by rioters a week earlier.

Sivan, who was on his way in his bullock cart to see the body, didn't mind when a couple of teenagers jumped on the cart for the free ride. It was like going to a carnival; they didn't want to be late.

A crowd had already formed around Chenda. The crowd was big, much bigger than Comrade Doctor Vijayan's first election rally. Cross-toed Ammu and Kamala squeezed through the crowd for an unobstructed view of the body, like teenagers vying for front-row seats in a drama theater.

Thick, sad monsoon clouds hovered over the village like a huge gray umbrella.

APPU LOOKED aghast at the body and trembled and waited for Guru. Chewing a paan, Guru came a few minutes later, stared at Chenda in horror, and chewed the paan vigorously.

The body under the bridge was an anomaly, like a splotch of paint that slipped from an artist's brush onto the canvas while capturing the mesmerizing landscape of the Alumaram River. Chenda's face was turned sideways, half submerged as if trying to hide in the water. His right leg was still on the riverbank, reluctant to leave the village. A hand-woven, checkered red lungi was wrapped around his waist. Visible through the wet lungi was his blue underwear that had ballooned with water and air.

"This is shocking," Appu said.

Guru nodded his head in affirmation and exclaimed, "Unbelievable! My God!"

“Is he really dead?” asked Appu, folding his mundu up from his knee, exposing his swelled right leg, and entered the water and gently nudged the body with a twig. “Eda Chenda, wake up. Wake up! This is not funny!”

The body didn't move. It was like poking at a cold, wet tree trunk.

Guru also folded his mundu from the knee up, entered the water, and gasped, “Oh, my God! There's a big gash in his stomach. Look here, Appu. There's a stab wound. Somebody stabbed him.”

Appu studied the spot pointed out by Guru, nodded in affirmation, and said, “There's another gash. He had been stabbed several times. Who will do such a horrendous thing to him?”

Confused, Guru looked at Appu, chewed the paan, and coarsely spat the red paan juice in a vain attempt to hide his quivering lips. The paan spit landed on the riverbank like a splatter of coagulated blood.

“I didn't know this was going to happen to him,” Guru mumbled. “I offered a special pooja to Amman Devi for his safety.”

“Did you say something, Guru?”

“No, I didn't say anything,” Guru said and continued, “He always talked about going to America. Look at him. There are cuts and bumps on his head. Did he get into fights?”

“You know him. He never gets into fights,” Appu said and wiped the tears with the back of his hand. “Who will do such a horrible thing to him? I gave him a haircut yesterday. Just yesterday! He seemed fine. He didn't complain about any threats or enemies.”

The crowd of onlookers grew as nearby villagers poured into a stream, like ants traversing to and from their colony.

Kamala was the first to sob. Initially, in hushed sobs, gradually, they became loud and uncontrollable, even though she covered her mouth with her hands. Soon, a few other women wept and covered their mouths with the tip of their sari. When a woman's sobs died down, another would burst out sobbing, then another, taking turns to mourn in waves.

Men sat on the embankment as if waiting for the curtain to rise in an open-air theater. Hungry crows perched on trees and cawed loudly, eyeing Chenda's body, hoping for a sumptuous non-vegetarian buffet.

Appu and Guru moved closer to the body, guarding it against the crowd. Murmurs of rumors percolated. An old man, who wore a blue-checked lungi and a handloom towel wrapped around his head, said, “Chenda may have been killed at some other place and dumped here by Muslims.”

Another man disagreed. “He's not a Hindu; he is a Muslim. I'm sure Hindu extremists might have tossed him from the bridge.”

The old man took a deep puff from his beedi and interjected, “Thrown off the bridge? It can't be because his head is intact like a coconut. It would have been shattered into pieces if he had been thrown from the bridge.”

An eerie silence descended. The water lugged by the undercurrent in the middle of the river made rippling noise, like the muffled wails of a grieving mother.

The old man took another puff from his beedi and said, "He must have been killed by the CIA. The Criminal Instigators of America. He often talked about playing *chenda* music at Carnegie Hall. I know the CIA doesn't want him there. Who wants a parayan? That's why we need the support of the Kind Government Bureau. The KGB. We need the Soviet Union's KGB."

There was no empathy or grief in the conversation. Annoyed, Appu hollered, "Will you people shut up? We've to notify Chenda's relatives. Does anyone know his amma or achan? His brothers or sisters? Cousins?"

No one replied.

While Appu was concerned about locating Chenda's relatives, Guru was worried about whether to cremate or bury the body. "I gave him the name Narayanan after the Hindu God. So we can cremate him," Guru said. "What if his parents showed up, and they turned out to be Muslims or Christians?"

"Don't worry about it now. Perhaps, our MLA Comrade Doctor Vijayan might know Chenda's parents," Appu said.

Cross-toed Ammu, wiping her tears, said, "He may be related to Patti-Amma. He lives on her back porch."

"I don't think he is related to Patti-Amma," Appu replied. "Patti-Amma is a Brahmin. If Chenda were a Brahmin, he would have finished high school or gone to college. And he would be working as a clerk in a government office or a bank, not chopping firewood. Perhaps he may be related to Mani, the bootlegger."

Meanwhile, Guru, unconvinced that Chenda was dead, was about to put his finger near Chenda's nostrils to check whether he was still breathing.

"Don't touch him," Appu said as Guru moved toward the body. "This is a police case. We shouldn't tamper with the body."

"Yes, you're correct," Guru said quietly. He wanted to scream and wail, *Why Chenda? First, Sita died. Now him. Why?*

2

"WILL SOMEONE inform the police and Comrade Doctor Vijayan about Chenda's death? Please?" Appu asked the crowd. "You can borrow my bicycle."

No one came forward because they simply didn't want to miss if, by a miracle, Chenda got up and played the kettledrum. Appu told Guru that he couldn't ride long distances. "The strain will aggravate the pain in my swollen right leg. I hope someone else would report it to the police," he said.

Guru responded he never rode a bicycle and asked for volunteers from the crowd.

Appu looked around and, not seeing anyone coming forward, jumped on his bicycle and set out on the seven-mile ride to the police station at East Fort. Shards of glass, stones, and debris were still littered on M.G. Road near the banyan tree at the junction. Numerous stones, pelted by the rioting mob a week ago, were strewn among broken tiled and a thatched roof. The acrid smell of smoke from burned houses made Appu cough a few times as he rode the bicycle.

Sweating, Appu found himself standing in front of the police station—a brick edifice with urine stains on the rear wall and a medieval arched entrance, a remnant of the British Raj. Until then, he didn't realize he could ride the bicycle as fast as a scooter. Inside the police station, a few constables with cone-shaped khaki turbans, which resembled the tip of match sticks, stared at Appu. One of them puckered his eyebrows, questioning the purpose of his visit.

“There's a dead body under the bridge,” Appu said. “Under the Alumaram River bridge.”

The constable gestured Appu toward a Sub-Inspector who was busy rearranging a stack of documents on his teak table with coffee stains.

“What's the problem?” the Sub-Inspector asked, still rearranging the documents, without looking at Appu. What the Sub-Inspector meant was, “*Why are you bothering me?*”

Appu repeated what he told the constable.

“We already heard something about it,” the Sub-Inspector said. The news of deaths travels faster than the news of births. Yet, no constable or Sub-Inspector showed up to investigate.

“Your name?” the Sub-Inspector asked and took a blank police complaint form from his desk drawer. In bold letters, the top section of the form boasted “Main Police Station, Trivandrum, Kerala (God's Own Country), India.”

The Sub-Inspector didn't ask Appu to sit, though two wooden chairs were in front of his table. Finally, the Sub-Inspector raised his head, looked at Appu, and said, “We need the person's name reporting the case.”

“Appu.”

The Sub-Inspector wrote it down with a blue fountain pen on the form and asked, “Appu? No initials?”

“No initials. Just Appu.”

“Your profession?”

“Mine?”

“Yes. We need to include the details of the person filing the report.”

“Barber.”

The Sub-Inspector looked at Appu for the first time, then at his right leg. Unlike other men in the village, Appu never folded his mundu from the knee up and let it down to hide the bulge in the right leg. “I carry my worries on my right leg, not on my head,” he would say and chuckle. But he was not always successful, like trying to brush off the remnants of the clipped hair of customers that clung to his shirt.

Pointing to the swollen leg, the Sub-Inspector asked, “When did you get elephantiasis?”

“When I was young, saar. Sometimes, it is painful. Very painful.”

“Sorry about it,” the Sub-Inspector said and wrote in the First Information Report form:

Complainant: *Barber Appu (Big leg).*

“Are you the dead person's relative?”

“No, saar. We are not related. He was a great help to me. I cut his hair. For free.”

“Your address?”

“AV 23 Alumaram Village.”

“What’s his name?”

Appu hesitated.

“The dead man’s name?” the Sub-Inspector repeated.

“Chenda,” Appu replied.

The Sub-Inspector stared at Appu and said, “Chenda? Kettledrum? Is this a joke?”

“No, saar. I’m not joking. That’s his name. Everyone in the village called him Chenda because he loved to play the kettledrum,” Appu explained and scratched his head as if apologizing for not knowing Chenda’s real name.

“No initials? No surname?”

“I don’t know, Inspector.”

The Sub Inspector’s demeanor changed from a business-like attitude into a friendly one when Appu addressed him “Inspector.” A promotion. He gestured for Appu to sit on a chair in front of his desk.

“His address?”

“I don’t know, Inspector. He doesn’t have a permanent home.”

Noticing the confusion of the Sub-Inspector, Appu clarified: “Most of the time, he is near the banyan tree at the junction, playing the *chenda* music.”

“No address? Did he fall from the sky or what?” the Sub-Inspector asked. He tapped his finger on the table, wrote “*Alumaram Village*” in the address column in the FIR, and fired another question, “Do you know his age?”

“I think he is twenty-six.”

“Good! At least you know something,” the Sub-Inspector said and filled out the age column in the FIR. “Any birthmarks? A mole on his face, forehead, or anything like that?”

“We couldn’t see the pretam’s face. When Chenda was alive, I never paid special attention to his appearance. He was a strong man. He delivered and chopped firewood to homes. And played the *chenda*. A terrific *chenda* musician.”

“I think I have heard about him,” the Sub-Inspector said as he took down the report. “What’s his religion?”

“I don’t know.”

The Sub-Inspector marked a dash in that column and continued, “Caste?”

“I don’t know, Inspector.”

The Sub Inspector slammed the pen on the desk, stared at Appu, and raised his voice, “All you are saying is ‘I don’t know, I don’t know.’ What’s this? How can we prepare an FIR, that too a death report, if we don’t have the basic details?” He took the pen, drew a dash in the Caste column in the form, and asked, “What else do you know? What’s his complexion? His skin color?”

“Dark. Black.”

The Sub-Inspector wrote “*Black*” in the color column, then paused for a second, crossed twice the dash he drew in the Caste column, and wrote: *Harijan/Parayan*. Then he underlined the sentence so others would know that Chenda was at the rock bottom of the caste totem pole.

“Is there any wound or blood?”

“There are gashes in his stomach, on the right side. I didn’t see any blood. And a few cuts and bumps in his head.”

“Did he get into fights?”

“No, Inspector. He wouldn’t hurt even a mosquito. He is harmless.”

“Do you have any suspects?”

“If we had any suspects, we would have dragged them out of their homes, beaten them to the pulp, and have brought them here,” Appu said. “Maybe you might catch them during your investigation. You should do it soon, before they erase the evidence.”

The Sub-Inspector stared at Appu, presumably not pleased with his insinuation that the police should quickly probe Chenda’s death.

“We have a long backlog of cases,” the Sub-Inspector said as a matter of fact. “These parayans are real headaches. They beat up and kill each other. Trouble makers. We have other important pending cases to investigate. We are understaffed, and I need more constables.”

But Appu tried to infuse a sense of urgency. “Inspector, his body is still there. Under the bridge. He was a good man, and the villagers loved him. He was always helpful.”

The Sub-Inspector appeared agitated, like a teenager who was given an additional house chore. “I’ll send a constable whenever one is free,” he told tersely, signed the FIR, underlined his signature, put two dots next to it, and wrote the date:16-4-1965.

Appu gently bowed, thanked the Sub-Inspector, and left the police station perplexed over his lackadaisical attitude. To make up for the time wasted there, Appu jumped on the bicycle, carefully placed his swollen right leg on the pedal, and pushed it as fast as he could to the Secretariat, the Statehouse of Kerala, to inform Comrade Doctor Vijayan about Chenda.

The bicycle ride to the Secretariat would have been easier for Appu but for his depleted energy and gradually increasing pain in his right leg. His initial surge of vigor was sucked out of him by the Sub-Inspector’s indifference. The bicycle didn’t move fast, as if the air had leaked out of its tires. His every push to the pedal became laborious. The bicycle wobbled like Chenda’s struggles to get an Indian passport and a U.S. visa.

CHENDA DIDN’T need liquor to unleash his imagination and draw vivid pictures of Carnegie Hall and the Empire State Building in the air. However, a few gulps of the illicit arrack sold by Mani near the marshland on a narrow lane, five streets north of the junction, or a glass of rasayanam from Krishnan Good Health Herbal Medical Store didn’t hurt either. The liquor kicked his creativity to full throttle like the heavy monsoon downpour. His description of New York would become sprightly, like the music on the *chenda* he played under the banyan tree at the junction.

“The buildings in America are huge and tall. Very tall,” Chenda would describe to anyone who had a minute to listen. “The Empire State Building is the tallest in the world. It’s in New York City, the biggest city on the whole wide planet. The building is so tall that if we stacked all the thatched huts and homes with tiled roofs in our village on top of each other, we wouldn’t reach half of its height. It has one hundred and two floors. Can you believe it?” Chenda would fold his blue checkered lungi and wrap it around his waist as if he was preparing to climb the one hundred

and two floors. He would point toward an imaginary tower of the Empire State Building in the air for a visual clue. “It is that tall. If you stood on top of it, you could touch the clouds. When I go to New York, I’ll climb the Empire State Building and touch the clouds. Maybe I could touch the moon and the stars.” Then, with bare hands, he would animatedly tap the kettledrum to add a special sound effect to his description of New York City.

3

EVERY MORNING, Chenda delivered firewood in a handcart from the lumber yard to homes and chopped them. A few taps on the kettledrum, which he carried along with the firewood, alerted the housewives about his arrival. The “dum...dum...” taps attracted the children from the house with a tiled roof where he delivered firewood. They squatted on the cement verandah at a safe distance from Chenda to watch him chop firewood as if it was live entertainment—a welcome change from catching tadpoles from the pond at the marshland.

Often children from neighboring homes with thatched roofs and dried mud-verandahs joined the spectators.

Children eagerly waited for the show to begin like an audience in a movie theater. Chenda took off his white banyan, exposing his broad chest, folded his blue checkered lungi from the knee up, and tucked it around his waist. He took the red hand towel from his shoulder, wrapped it around his head, and stood straight on his bare feet, their soles thick with a white coating of leathery callus gifted by gravel streets. Then, he lifted the twenty-pound ax high above his head, stretched his body as much as possible, and struck the firewood with a heavy thud. In the impact, the lumber broke into two pieces. He chopped the two pieces into four, four into eight, eight into sixteen until they were thin enough to fit in small clay stoves.

“Look at his muscles. Huge!” A boy, wearing a navy-blue knicker and no shirt, whispered to a girl sitting next to him. “Watch, when he lifts the ax, his biceps bulge as if bunnies were hiding in them. His abdomen is strong. If you punch him there, nothing will happen to him. You will break your fist.”

The girl, in a frock with floral designs, agreed. “You’ll have to eat a lot of mutton. This much mutton to build such strong muscles,” she said and stretched her hands wide for emphasis.

The boy nodded and said, “When I grow big, I’ll have strong muscles like his. I’ll eat a ton of mutton, eggs, fish, and chicken.”

The girl whispered to the boy, “He is strong, but he is dark. Black. I don’t want to be black. My mother says no one will marry a black girl.”

The boy looked at her and whispered back, “I know. I won’t get a job if I’m black. My mother would yell at me if I played in the sun because it would make me dark. Then, people will think I’m a parayan like him. That’s why my mother gives him water in a tin cup, not in a steel tumbler.”

Chenda, without paying attention to the children’s chatter, focused on chopping the firewood. After finishing his work, he removed the red towel from his head and wiped the sweat on his chest, shoulder, armpit, and back. Looking at his little admirers, he asked, “Want to play the *chenda*?”

They smiled and coyly nodded as if saying, “Yes, we would love to play the instrument.” They took turns tapping the kettledrum with their tender fingers. They giggled and laughed with the exhilaration of making their own music. However, it lived only for a fleeting moment.

“I played better than you,” the boy claimed.

“Mine was louder,” the girl argued.

“All of you are talented musicians,” Chenda complimented them.

Hearing the drumbeat, an elderly woman came out of the house to see what was happening. When she smiled, her lips pursed—a remnant of the woman’s lost teeth and lost youth.

She asked Chenda the same question she and other elderly women and men had asked him, “Eda, how old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

“Why aren’t you married? You are young and strong. Should I find a bride for you? A pretty girl?”

“No ammachi. Who will marry me?” He would repeat the same reply he had told many elderly women and men who had asked the same question. Then, he would explain, “First, I want to go to America and play the *chenda* music at Carnegie Hall. It’s an enormous hall...bigger than our village. It has special lights and sound system, a thousand times better than our Stephen’s Lucky Sounds and Lighting. Let’s see what God has planned for me.”

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