

Hahichampa, the Girl Who Couldn't Stop Laughing

Hahichampa

(Translator's note: This story was written in adialect of Assamese, or a patois, prevalent in parts of the Kamrup district in Lower Assam. We have only translated its contents without trying to capture the original language's quaintness or rustic appeal.

Hahichampa is the affectionate name in Assamese, given to a girl who breaks easily into uncontrolled laughter at the slightest provocation. 'Hahi' is laughter in Assamese, and 'Champa' is the name of a flower, similar to Frangipani, which can also be a girl's name.)

When my daughter was just atoddler, the villagers used to say on seeing her, "What kind of girl is this? For God's sake, look how she has been flooded with toys; see howthekids are making faces at her, trying to make her laugh, but she won't even smile. Come on, kiddo, smile at us---now, now that's my girl. Look at my face—He! He!—Ha! Ha! Ha! – come on, sweetie pie, do smile at us, for God's sake, give a smile," they would say all this while fondly pinching her cheeks, making faces at her and clowning, but all in vain. The girl only kept staring blankly ahead, and if the nagging became too much for her, she would start bawling. This continued the same way for about six to eight months, and still, there was no sign of a smile on her lips. This daughter was the only child I had, and watching her sad face day after day, I couldn't help feeling awfully bad. Her father's face also remained cloudy all the time. Then, one day, when I was with her under the mosquito net, I saw a mosquito land on her body, and when I tried to kill the mosquito, one of my fingers must have strayed and touched her under an armpit, and

she suddenly broke into sudden peals of flowing laughter. I was almost knocked out of my senses for a while, and when I realised what had happened, I was in the seventh heaven. I started hollering for all to hear—"Hey, where is everybody--Come running, and see how the girl is laughing—Hey you, father of the child, why don't you come running and see for yourself..."

The girl's father couldn't believe his ears and, refusing to take me at my word, came running at breakneck speed from the cowshed where he was working. I again tickled her under the armpit, and she again started giggling merrily. The girl's father was soon laughing from ear to ear, and he, too, started tickling her. The girl went on a giggling spree, and we couldn't stop our laughter. The whole house resounded with her rippling giggles. Her father would keep tickling her all over her body, not sparing even her arms and hands, and with the child giggling away, the father, too, kept going Ha! Ha! And I, too, couldn't stop laughing with them, and soon my eyes were overflowing with tears of joy ...

From the next day onwards, everybody in and around our house came and started tickling her and on hearing her giggles, broke into merry laughter themselves, "He! He! Let's also see you laugh, sweetie pie. Come, smile at us! Oh! Look! Look! How she is laughing, how she looks, how her whole face is lighting up, how it is glowing! After all these days, she has turned into a real Hahichampa. Why don't we call her just that from today? Yes, that should be her name, Hahichampa, nothing else." So, by repetition from mouth to mouth, the name Hahichampa stuck with her. And the kids in the neighbourhood? They found in her something to play with, and however much I told them, "All right kids, enough is enough, now stop tickling her and make her laugh, or she will choke, and her tummy will start aching, so stop; I say" – but who would listen to me? They would run away after my scolding, but whenever I was not around, they would come stealthily in and, after tickling her once, would take to their heels even before her giggles brought me to her side from wherever I was. When her father left for the field every

morning, I massaged mustard oil all over the child's body and put her to sleep on a cane mat under the sun in the open courtyard. Only then did I attend to my household chores. On those days when I had to go to the nearby town to winnow the rice in somebody's house or go and get some paddy from some family to de-husk it for a price and give it back to them after de-husking, her father would lift her onto his lap and sit with her. Before leaving, I would tell him, "Don't tickle the child, or she will die of choking." But I might as well have talked to a wall for all he cared because when I came back, I saw what I thought I would —the child was constantly tickled and made to giggle, and the father was laughing with glee, glowing happily. On seeing me, he would try to hide the laughter, and I would also make a show of not noticing anything. The father would often say, "Hey you, mother of the child, how would you ever give her out in marriage? Tell me?" "What else can you do," I would reply. "When she grows up, you have to give her up in marriage whether you like it or not." He would say, "But I can never bring myself to do that—wouldn't we somehow find a son-in-law who would stay with us? Stay at our home, and give you a helping hand occasionally. Who knows, anything may happen to me today or tomorrow, and such a boy would be a godsend to you. So you better look around for someone like that --." I would then scold him, "Why do you bring up such vile thoughts,"—and not allowing things to go further, I would go off from his side in a huff, leaving him to pick up the child and caress her some more. But that, too, did not last long. One day, after winnowing the rice in the home of Pincipaal Saheb, I came back home and found that instead of giggling as usual, the child was lying on the mat crying, and her father was lying motionless by her side. Oh my God, I thought, what happened, and my heart gave a sudden lurch—

-- It seems his heart had failed him. God only knows why his heart had to give up on him at such a young age. Only then did I realise that he might have had some inkling of things to come, and maybe that's why

he talked about something happening to him 'today or tomorrow'. But a nagging doubt started bothering me as if a fishbone had gotten stuck somewhere in my mind – did he choke on his laughter by any chance? Then I thought, oh, no, that would be like pointing a finger at the child. Oh my God, why are these vile thoughts passing through my mind? Why, that would make my child carry the burden of sin all her life, and she would never be happy... So far, we have made ends meet by tilling other people's land and sharing the crop, but now, who will do the tilling? The land belonged to a Brahmin, Bajra Gosain, of our nearest town. Taking pity on me for having lived in his land for so long, he did not drive me away from his land where our house stood but gave away half the land to a new tenant farmer, one Gobin Medhi from Keotpara village. A fence now divided the land, and a new cottage also came up in that half. Gobin Medhi had a family: two daughters, both of whom had attained puberty and a boy child, about six years older than our Hahichampa. Now, there was no more tilling of land, so I earned what I could by winnowing rice for families living in the town or by bringing paddy home to give back after de-husking on our mortar, and when I was gone, the Medhis looked after Hahichampa. Their son was quite good-looking, and his name was Piyanath – or was it Priyanath? – I could never get his name right, so I called him just Piyanath—and this kid never tired of tickling Hahichampa, and it was the same with his sisters and his mother—they would set aside for a while whatever they were doing... one of them might have been the husking-shed, de-husking rice with the foot-operated mortar called *dhenki*, another might have been taking out the de-husked rice from the mortar, and Gobin Medhi's wife could have been applying a fresh layer of clay on their earthen courtyard, and they would drop whatever they were doing, to come and have a look at Hahichampa before going back to work –and Piyanath, the moment he was back home from school, would dump his slate and pencil in their home and rush to her side. Their mother would scold him, "Oh, there you go again, harassing the kid. Can't you leave her alone?" But Piyanath was a real brat; he never paid any heed to

anyone, went right in, and tickled Hahichampa whenever he got a chance. His mother would again holler, "Hey, you rascal, can't you leave her alone? You would choke her to death, you scamp!" But once they heard the child's giggles, they too would dump whatever they were doing and break out in gleeful laughter, and oh, the fun they would have in doing that! I, too, couldn't check my laughter, and soon I would be quite a sight, with tears of laughter welling up my eyes and rolling down my cheeks –

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The girl thus grew up, mainly in the Medhi household, one can say, got up on her knees, began babbling ma-ma da-da and slowly took her first steps. Meanwhile, Gobin Medhi perished in Cholera, the daughters were married off and Piyanth, when about to pass out from primary school, fled home one day to go and join a *Yatra party*, a drama troupe that roamed the countryside showing dramas, as an extra. After that, only Medhi's wife and I remained to look after Hahichampa. The fence separating our two households was razed to the ground, and the two households merged into one... Slowly, Hahichampa could play games, run around with other kids, play hide-and-see and 'Touch-the-pole' with them. The other girls, when they couldn't beat her at the games, would resort to tickling her to make her lose. She would then break out in fits of laughter and implore, "Don't, don't – don't touch me, for God's sake, don't—or I'll die of laughter," and she would then roll and tumble on the ground, and all the others would also roll with her and laugh their guts out—and we two old hags would leave aside our chores to watch them from the earthen verandah of our hut and we too would burst out in fits of laughter and my eyes would swell up with tears from the laughing...

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By and by, Hahichampa started going to school. As for us, the two old women, our hair started turning grey, one or two of our teeth started becoming wobbly, our skin began wrinkling, and I often had headaches. Hahichampa, on the other hand, started blooming; her body started to fill up, her features turned womanly, and she was no longer wearing a singleone-piece cloth wrapped around her body, but the same one-piece cloth had to be stitched into a tiny skirt, she would no longer stay bare-bodied but started wearing blouses we made for her, she put on ear-rings, and her hair had to be made into ponytails. She also started asking for coloured ribbons that she saw other girls wearing, and we had to get them from Sambhu's stationery shop. Gradually, everyone forgot about tickling her, and she no longer came running to me sobbing and complaining, 'I won't play again with Kusum and the rest; they all play foul and starttickling me whenever they are losing.' The schoolteacher also changed her name, and everybody called her simply Champa. Once in a while, Piyath came on a few days' leave from the *Yatra*. He, too, gradually forgot her earlier name, Hahichampa. He would suddenly appear one day and vanish again after staying with us for a couple of days. Every time he dropped in, he looked bigger than the last time and more handsome. He, too, gave up wearing half pants and wore either dhotis or long pants. He stopped parting his hair down the middle but brushed his hair back and wore shoes, and one could hear the rattle of match sticks coming out of his shirt pocket. Piyath's mother told him, "Enough, son, enough. How long will you stay away from home doing drama? You should now finish school or return to stay with me." He would say, "All right, all right, oncethis season is over, I will come back," and would fleeaway again. So many seasons went by, but he continued to stay away. We two old hags didn't like his wayward life, his mother was sick with worry about the kind of life he was leading, and like his mother, I too was sick with worry...

That's right; the worry gave me a headache once in a while. No, I thought, things must not be allowed to drift like this; nothing good

would come of it, and who knows what he ended up doing—some rumours were already going around the place...But where would I find a lad like him again? Champa, by then, completed her primary school, no one tickled her anymore, and she too didn't run around as before—didn't climb up the roof of the house to bring down gourds from the creeper that reached the roof-top, didn't go out to the riverside pool to play and swim in its dirty water with her friends and bring the sky down with hearty shouts, but stayed at home doing household chores. She gave up wearing make-shift *mekhelas* but wore some of my old regular ones, pounded the *dhenki* with her feet, attended to the mortar, and moved around with a grim face. One day, she was squatting on the kitchen floor, trying to rekindle the fire in the earthen oven by blowing into the log through a hollow bamboo tube. I was seated behind her on a *pira*, a low seat made of wood plank and placed on the floor. I waited for an opportunity, and, pulling my *pira* closer, I asked from her back, "Look here, my girl, I want to ask you something." I don't know what she understood, but she gave up blowing on the logs and stopped with the bamboo tube in hand. "Your father, before he passed away, asked me to see if we can keep you with us forever. But how can I do that without asking you?"

I then narrated in detail all that her father had said. She stood up and listened with her back to me, all the while looking at the ground and scraping the earthen floor absent-mindedly with the nails of her toes. Then she said without raising her head, "If Father had said that, maybe that's what you should do," and without waiting for my answer, she rushed out of the kitchen. In the evening, when we two old women were sitting on the earthen plinth of our house pounding hard areca nuts in a small mortar of wood to make them chewable by our old teeth, I said without any ceremony, "Hey you, mother of Piyath, why don't you make Champa your daughter-in-law, that way he won't be wayward anymore." Piyath's mother stopped pounding with the pestle and said, "Oh, you have said it. I wanted to discuss it myself, but

you have already said it. I am so tickled to hear it. If I don't set up his house for him, he will ruin himself. And who is going to offer him a girl like your Champa?"

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One day, around sunset, the sky became dark, heavy rains were about to fall, and the cattle in the fields were hurrying home. Piyanath's mother and I were hurriedly trying to gather the firewood scattered in the courtyard and carry it to a safer place. Then I suddenly noticed Piyanath with a tin suitcase in hand, hurriedly walking towards us through the fields, glancing up at the sky now and then. I told his mother, 'Hey, look there. That's your son on his way back home.' Piyanth's mother glanced towards her son once and said, 'Let him come. Now hurry up and carry these logs inside.' When I did not hear Piyanath's voice even after collecting all the logs, I wondered where he had gone and came outside to find out. I saw that he had put the suitcase on the ground and was standing on the earthen plinth, open-mouthed, and Champa, with her back to him, was still pounding the mortar. It would rain any moment, and the sky was becoming menacingly dark. She had to complete de-husking the rice before the rains came. Champa had grown into a supple, lissome maiden, and every time she was pounding the mortar, her whole body was shaking and jiggling; he was looking at her from behind with a hungry look. Still, she was unaware of his presence, the pounding of the mortar drowning all sounds of his footsteps. Suddenly, it started raining heavily, and as she stooped down to pick up the long stick-like pestle of the mortar, she saw Piyanath, his face indistinct in the darkness. She hastily gathered her dishevelled clothes around her body and said..."Oh, it's you, *dada!* I got such a fright! When did you come?" He laughed once and, coming closer to her, said, "Yes, it is me. I was only watching you...and seeing

you after a long time; I suddenly remembered one thing...: now tell me, Champa, do you still get tickled?" Saying that, he extended his hand towards her, and she giggled and said, alarmed, "Oh, *dada*, what are you doing--- don't touch me, don't." But he thrust out his hand all the same and put it under her armpit, just as he did when they were kids...It was so dark, I wasn't quite sure if that's what he did. But she jerked and shuddered and giggled like she did as a kid. I thought enough is enough; this can't be allowed to go any further, and I shouted, "Hey Champa, have you finished...?"

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From that day, I became a little wary. Maybe all those rumours about Piyanath's flings with other girls were not all wrong. Everybody in the village was always whispering about him and Mandal's daughter (no one said anything to the two of us, but just because we were old, did they think we lost our eyes and ears too?)— Luckily, God saved Mandal's daughter...saved Piyanath too...before anything wrong could happen. Piyanath said he had returned home this time to stay; the Yatra party had gone bust, so he would not go away anymore but would stay home and till the land. His mother was happy, and I, too, was delighted; maybe I could give my girl in marriage now. Those two seemed to be a good match...What's more, if allowed to become wayward, a young lad will surely try to have flings now and then; what good will come from harping on that all the time? --Anyway, things should not be put off anymore; it is better for everybody if it is done and got over with sooner than later, and we two old women could then die in peace...

And we did just that; we got them married. Piyanath's mother's happiness knew no bounds, and listening to people, I also felt like

laughing...because it was true: both daughter and son-in-law would now be staying with us. We got them married all right, but something kept pricking my insides like a fish bone getting stuck somewhere in my innards. We let the newlyweds live in the tiny house on the other side of our courtyard. We two old women did not go that way, and we were unaware of when Piyanth went out or came in. On the afternoon of the tenth day, Piyanth's mother and I went to the village prayer hall to take part in the prayers, but suddenly, my head started aching again, so I came back home alone. It was already dusk, and it was very quiet everywhere. I could hear Champa moving around in her new house, but I did not call out to her. I went straight to bed, and my head started feeling somewhat better after a while. A little later, I could hear the rustle of Champa's clothes and the shuffling of her feet, and a few moments after that, rays of light came in through the reeds of the walls; Champa must have lit the clay lamp under the holy Tulsi shrub in the courtyard. I thought of calling Champa over to get my forehead massaged a little, but just then, I heard shoes squeaking, and Piyanth came in by opening the gate. So, I did not call Champa. "Today you have come home so early; it is still early evening," I heard Champa say, "Who have you come to meet?" I heard Piyanth reply, "Who else? Who else stays in this house?" Champa was saying, "Why? Were you not allowed to stay there today?" Piyanth was saying, as if startled, "What...? What do you mean I wasn't allowed to stay? What are you saying?" I didn't hear what was said after that, as they walked away towards their house. My headache returned, and I thought I could hear them shouting at each other, but I could not make out the words. Then I heard Piyanth say, "Oh, how can that be ---How can you now say that you married me only to stay back in your home? Otherwise, you would not have married me at all. ---Nothing doing; how can you behave now as if you are not my wife---?" Then suddenly, I heard Champa giggle as she did as a kid, saying, "Don't touch--- I get tickled--- , and I will die--. Oh, I will die--- even my hands get tickled---." Again, she was giggling and seemed to be running from one end of the house to the other and

saying, "No, don't-- my chest also tickles-- and here too, also there --- yes, yes, there too —don't touch me anywhere-- it tickles everywhere—don't touch, don't--- "and the jerky sound of her laughter was heardgoing out of the house and moving towards the courtyard---

I didn't get up from my bed in the dark. I could not see how far Champa had gone into the courtyard, nor could I know what Piyanath was doing—whether not being able to do anything, he was standing and looking at her angrily with his mouth agape or doing something else. From the direction of the courtyard, I could hear my daughter giggling very hard; she was shuddering so much while giggling —, and I thought, oh, so this is what it has finally come to, and thinking of the dazed face of Piyanath with his mouth agape, I also felt like laughing, and without making any sound, my chest seemed to be heaving and shuddering with unstoppable giggles. My eyes, too, started watering from the held-back laughter...

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