

ESSAY

FOLK LITERATURE

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NURSERY RHYMES THAT BEGUILE CHILDREN: I

For some time now I have been occupied in collecting the feminine rhymes current in the Bengali language for the beguiling of children. These rhymes may possess a special value for the study of our language and the history of our society, but what has seemed to me more precious than this is the simple, natural poetic sweetness that dwells within them.

I am afraid to begin a critical discussion by stating merely what pleases or displeases me. For those who are accomplished critics regard such writing as an offence, calling it egotism.

To them I would humbly submit that, upon reflection, they will see that this is not egotism but rather its very opposite. Those who are qualified critics possess a settled standard; they have established a fixed measure for literature, and along with it many rules of judgment; whatever work is placed before them, they can, without hesitation, stamp it with its proper mark and value.

But those who, through incapacity and inexperience, have not attained that standard, must, in the seat of criticism, rely solely upon their own likes and dislikes. It is therefore presumptuous for such persons to attempt to lay down universal maxims regarding literature. Rather than pronouncing which writing is good or bad, it becomes them to confess only this much: "such-and-such writing pleases me, or displeases me."

Should anyone ask who wishes to hear such a thing, I shall answer: in literature, everyone has always listened to precisely that. What is called literary criticism is indeed called criticism, but the greater part of literature is merely a critique of nature and of human life. When, regarding nature, regarding humanity, regarding

events, a poet expresses his own joy, sorrow, or wonder, and seeks merely, through feeling and the artifice of composition, to convey that same state of mind into the minds of others, no one holds him culpable for this; the reader too, with equal self-assurance, observes only this much: "does the poet's word accord with my own mind, or does it not?" And if a critic of poetry, setting aside the path of logical argument and classification, undertakes to offer readers merely the feeling born of reading poetry, he ought not to be blamed for this either.

Especially in what I am about to confess today, some portion of autobiography must necessarily enter. The relish I taste in these child-beguiling rhymes I find impossible to separate from the memory of my own childhood. How much of the sweetness of these rhymes depends upon my own memories of boyhood, and how much upon the enduring ideal of literature itself — to determine this requires an analytic power which the present writer does not possess. It is best to confess this at the very outset.

The rhyme "Rain falls pit-a-pat, the river is in flood" held for me, in childhood, the charm of an enchantment, and that enchantment I have not been able to forget even now. Unless I recall that rapt state of my own mind, I shall not be able clearly to understand what the sweetness and usefulness of the rhyme consist in. I shall not understand why so many epics and lesser poems, so many discourses on philosophy and moral preaching, so much strenuous human effort, so much toil and sweat, fail and are forgotten day after day, while these disconnected, meaningless, haphazard couplets go on flowing eternally in the memory of the people.

There is a certain eternal quality in all these rhymes. For none of them is there any record of who composed it, in what age, or in what land; nor does the question ever arise in anyone's mind as to on what date, in what century, any particular one was composed. By virtue of this natural eternality, they are, even if composed today, ancient; and even if composed a thousand years ago, ever new.

Looked at closely, nothing is so ancient as the child. According to the country, the age, the customs and education, the grown man has undergone so much novel change, but the child, exactly as it was a thousand years ago, remains so today. That unchangeable ancient thing is born again and again, taking the form of a child, in the homes of men; and yet, on that very first day, it was as new, as tender, as innocent, as sweet as it remains today. The reason for this eternal newness is that it is the creation of Nature. But the grown man is, in large measure, man's own self-made construction. Just so, these rhymes too are child-literature; they have sprung up of themselves in the human mind.

There is a particular significance in saying that they have sprung up of themselves. Naturally, the reflection and reverberation of the world scatter about within our minds in disjointed fragments. They assume varied shapes and pass suddenly from one occasion to another. Just as, in the air, the dust of the road, the pollen of flowers, countless scents, varied sounds, scattered leaves, sprays of water, the vapour of the earth — these diverse, tossed-up, flying fragments of the revolving world — are forever wandering about purposelessly, so it is also within our minds. There too, within our perpetually flowing consciousness, how many colours, scents, sounds, how much vapour of imagination, how many hints of thought, how many broken fragments of language, how many hundreds of discarded, forgotten, displaced particles of our world of daily use float about, unnoticed and unneeded.

When we consciously fix our attention upon some particular object and think, all this humming ceases, all this cloud of dust flies away, all these shadowy mirages are dispersed in a moment, and our imagination, our intellect, begins to flow in a single, unified stream. This thing called our mind is so overwhelmingly powerful that when it comes forth fully awake, most of our inner and outer world becomes overshadowed by it — under its rule, its ordinance, its word, its train of attendants, the whole universe becomes thronged. Consider: in the sky, the cries of birds, the rustling of leaves, the tumult of water, the mingled din of human habitation, ceaseless sounds of every kind, great and small, are perpetually resounding — and all around us how many tremors, how many stirrings, how much coming, how much going, what a restless play of waves of light and shadow is continually whirling about.

And yet how very little of it comes within our ken. The chief reason for this is that, like a fisherman, our mind casts its net of unity and takes only as much as it can grasp in a single sweep; all the rest escapes it. When it looks, it does not hear well; when it hears, it does not see well; and when it thinks, it neither sees well nor hears well. From the path of its purpose it can remove, to a great extent, all unnecessary matter. By this very power it has been able to preserve its own precedence, its own self, amid the boundless diversity of this world. It is read in the Puranas that in ancient times certain great souls attained the power to choose the time of their own death. My mind has the power of wilful blindness and wilful deafness, and because it must employ this power at every step, from birth until death most of the world passes beyond its consciousness. Whatever it of its own accord takes up, and shapes according to its own need and nature, that alone it perceives; of what is happening, what is arising, all around it, even within the realm of its own mind, it keeps no proper account.

If, in our ordinary waking state, the shadows and sounds that drift like dreams through our mental sky — driven now together, now apart by some invisible current of air, into varied shapes, ceaselessly changing colour and form, building cloud-formations one after another — if these could leave the trace of their reflected procession upon some insensible surface, then we would see in it much resemblance to these rhymes we are considering. These rhymes are but the shadow-images of our ever-changing inner sky, like the shadow of cloud-play upon the moving firmament, cast on the still, clear surface of a lake. That is why I said: these have sprung up of themselves.

By way of illustration, before quoting one or two rhymes here, let me beg the reader's indulgence. First, the tender, simple, sweet voice that has forever resounded together with these rhymes — how strangely it must issue forth from the pen of a grave, decorum-fearing, sober-natured grown man such as myself! Readers will gather for themselves, from their own homes, from their own memories of childhood, that nectar-sweet strain. The affection, the melody, the picture of beauty lit by the evening lamp, that has forever been mingled inseparably with it — by what

spell shall I bring that before my readers and present it to them! I trust that within these rhymes that very spell resides.

Secondly, to make these homely, unlettered, unadorned feminine rhymes stand in the midst of a properly bound, formal essay in refined language is to do them something of a violence — like summoning the household bride to appear as a witness in the dock of a courtroom for cross-examination. But there is no help for it. The court must proceed by the court's rule; an essay must be written according to the rules of essay-writing; a certain harshness is unavoidable —

Jamunavati Saraswati, tomorrow is Jamuna's wedding day.

Jamuna shall go to her husband's home, passing by Kajitala.

Gathering kajiflowers I got a garland.

Hand a-jingle, foot a-jingle, Sitaram's play.

Dance, O Sitaram, bending your waist.

I shall give you rice-and-curry, filling your bowl.

Eating the rice-and-curry, my throat went dry as wood.

There is no water here — the Tripurni ghat.

At the Tripurni ghat two fish came floating up.

One was taken by the Guru-thakur, one taken by whom?

His sister he shall wed, giving orphul-flowers.

Gathering orphul-flowers, the day grew late —

His sister he shall wed at the very hour of noon.

That there is no logical connection between the images here must be admitted even by the most partisan critic. A number of disjointed pictures have arrived, following the merest trifling thread of occasion. One thing is at once apparent: there is no

discrimination whatsoever. As though, at the very gate of the palace of poetry, some sentinel had, in the sweet warmth of a silent autumn noon, stretched out his legs and fallen fast asleep — and the words, the images, without waiting for any introduction, without seeking any pretext, effortlessly step over him, even, now and then, twisting his ear with a light touch, roam at will through the cloud-piercing pleasure-dome of imagination — had that sentinel, turning in his sleep, chanced to wake with a start, one could not have said where they would all have fled.

Whoever Jamunavati Saraswati may be, it is plainly stated that her wedding is to take place the very next day. Of course, that in due time after the marriage she must go, by way of Kajitala, to her husband's home — this point, though it need not have been raised at present, is nevertheless not entirely irrelevant. But of any preparation for the wedding, or of anyone's least eagerness on that account, we are given no glimpse whatsoever. The realm of the rhyme is no such realm as that. There, everything may happen with equal ease, or may just as easily not happen, and no one need feel the least anxiety or haste about anything on that account. Hence, though the day of the illustrious Jamunavati's wedding has been fixed for the morrow, not the slightest importance is given to that event. Nor is anyone in haste to account for why the matter was raised at all. What sort of flower the kaji-flower may be, I, a city-dweller, cannot say for certain, but I can guess plainly enough that this flower-gathering has no connection whatsoever with the impending marriage of the maiden called Jamunavati. And why, in the very midst of it, Sitaram suddenly began to dance, jingling his bracelets and anklets, we cannot show the least cause. The temptation of the rice-and-curry may be one great cause, but that cause diverts us from Sitaram's sudden dance and brings us suddenly to the Tripurni ghat. That two fish should be seen floating up at that ghat is nothing very wonderful in itself, but what is especially delightful is that though there is no indication whatsoever of which fish took whom away, our resolute author suddenly became fixed in his determination to marry that very person's sister, and, wholly disregarding the customary rites of marriage, considered the mere gathering of orphul-flowers sufficient preparation for the auspicious ceremony — and even the lagna, the propitious hour, that he fixed is not sanctioned by any almanac-maker, old or new.

Such, then, is the fabric of the verse. Had the task of composition been in our hands, we should doubtless have contrived some device by which the aforementioned Jamunavati would appear, in the final chapter of the book, as the unknown sister of that person at the Tripurni ghat, and by which the marriage-by-mutual-consent, effected at midday through the exchange of orphul-garlands, would have given every warm-hearted reader complete satisfaction.

But in the nature of a boy, the dominion of the mind is far weaker. The world and his own fancies strike him in disconnected fashion, one after another arriving in succession. The bondage of the mind is, to him, a source of pain. To pursue a thing, holding fast to a well-linked chain of cause and effect, from beginning to end, is difficult for him. Sitting on the shore of the outer sea, the boy builds houses of sand; and on the shore of the inner sea of the mental world too, he sits with equal delight and goes on building houses of sand. Sand does not join to sand, it does not hold together — but it is precisely because of this lack of cohesion in sand that it becomes the most excellent material for the architecture of childhood. In a moment it can, by mere fistfuls, be raised to a great height; if not to one's liking, it can be effortlessly corrected, and the moment one feels weary, the playful creator can, with a single kick, level it to the ground and return home light of heart. But where work must be done by patient, link-by-link building, there even the master must follow, without delay, the discipline of the task. The boy cannot follow discipline — he has only just arrived from that heaven of undisciplined, wilful joy. He has not, like us, grown accustomed to the long servitude of rule; and so, according to his small power, he builds houses of sand on the seashore, and builds the pictures of the rhyme within his mind, at his own sweet will, imitating in the mortal world the divine play of the gods' universe. This is why, in our scriptures, the play of the gods has always been compared to the sport of a child — in both there is a resemblance of wilful, self-delighting joy.

In the rhyme quoted earlier there is no continuity, but there is picture. Kajitala, the Tripurni ghat, and the events of the orphul-flowers are strange as a dream, yet, like a dream, true.

Let readers not doubt, on my saying "true as a dream," the wakefulness of my judgment. Many philosophers have dismissed the world of direct perception as a dream. But that very philosopher could not dismiss the dream. He says: there is no direct truth — then what is there? Why, there is the dream. It is thus apparent that by forceful argument it is easy to deny the real, but there is no way to deny the dream. This holds true not only of the waking dream but also of the sleeping dream. Not even the sharpest-witted philosopher has the power, while in a state of dreaming, to disbelieve the dream. While awake, they do not cease to doubt even the possible truth, but while dreaming, they accept the most utterly impossible thing without the least demur. Thus we see that the quality called credibility, which ought to be truth's foremost virtue, exists nowhere so fully as in the dream.

By this the reader will understand that, however true the world of direct perception may be to us, the dream-world of the rhyme is, to the child who is a perpetual dream-seer, very much more true than that. This is why we so often reject the true as impossible, while they accept the impossible as true.

Rain falls pit-a-pat, the river is in flood.

Shibu Thakur's wedding took place, three daughters were given.

One daughter cooks and serves, one daughter eats.

One daughter, without eating, goes to her father's house.

Hearing this rhyme at that age, one probably feels, at first, that of the three daughters whom Shibu Thakur has married, the middle daughter is the most intelligent of all. But there was an age when I had no capacity for such elaborate discrimination of character. At that time these four lines were like the cloud-messenger of my childhood. In my mind's eye a picture would appear of a rain-darkened, storm-swept day, and a swollen, turbulent river taking visible form. Then I would see, on a sandbank at the edge of that river, a couple of small boats moored, and Shibu Thakur's newly-wed wives having descended onto the sandbank, cooking their meal. To tell the truth, imagining Shibu Thakur's life to be one of great

happiness, my heart would grow somewhat restless. Even the sight of the third wife departing in mortal wrath, hurrying towards her father's house, could not in the least disturb this picture of happiness in my mind. This foolish child could not then understand what a heart-rending, tragic outcome that one single line had foreshadowed in the ill-fated Shibu Thakur's life. But, as I have said before, at that time my mind was bent more toward picture-composing than character-analysis. Now I can understand that the dull-witted Shibu Thakur's youngest wife's sudden departure for her father's house was not, in fact, so charming a picture as I once took it for.

Whether this Shibu Thakur ever existed at some time, this thought too occurs to me now and again. Perhaps he did exist. Perhaps within this rhyme lies a tiny broken fragment of some old, forgotten history. In some other rhyme, perhaps, another fragment of it may remain.

Ganga on this bank, Ganga on that, and a sandbank in between.

In the midst of it sits Shiv the merchant.

Shiv went to his father-in-law's house, was given a low stool to sit on.

For refreshment he was given puffed rice of the shali paddy.

Not puffed rice of shali paddy, but the parched rice of binni paddy.

Fat plantains of the sabri kind, and curd in an earthen bowl.

By this stage my suspicion is growing that Shibu Thakur and Shiv the merchant must be one and the same person. Both have a certain particular predilection where conjugal matters are concerned, and, it would seem, no negligence regarding food either. Moreover, the spot chosen in the very midst of the Ganga is a most fitting place for the newly-married couple's first exchange of love.

At this point readers will observe, watching closely, that first, by an oversight, "shali-paddy puffed rice" was mentioned as the refreshment for Shiv the merchant, but in the very next line it is corrected to say, "not shali-paddy puffed rice, O — binni-paddy parched rice." As though there is no possibility of the slightest error where the truth of the matter is concerned! And yet, by this correction, whether some particularly refined distinction has been achieved in the feast described, or whether the glory of the father-in-law's house, in the matter of honouring the son-in-law, has been made to shine forth more brilliantly — that too I cannot say. But in this instance, the poet appears more concerned with preserving the honour of truth than the honour of the father-in-law's house. Nor can I be certain of that either. Probably this too is like a dream. Probably, even while gazing at shali-rice puffed grain, in the very next moment it became binni-rice parched rice. Probably even Shibu Thakur himself, at some unnoticed moment, became transformed into Shiv the merchant — who can say?

It is said that between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter there exist a number of fragmentary planets. Some say that one whole planet has broken and scattered into pieces. These rhymes too seem to me to be, in like manner, fragmentary worlds. Many fragments of ancient history, ancient memory, lie scattered within these rhymes; no antiquarian can any longer join them together into one, but our imagination attempts, amid these ruined remains, to gain some distant yet intimate acquaintance with that forgotten ancient world.

Of course, the imagination of the child is not eager to construct this historical unity. To him everything is present, and to him the glory of the present alone matters. He desires only the direct picture, and does not wish to blur that picture with the mist of reflection.

In the rhyme quoted below, the disjointed pictures fly past like a flock of birds. By the sheer independent swiftness of each of these, the child's mind is struck again and again, blow upon blow, and kept in constant motion.

The little pigeons have folded their beaks.
The big sahib's memsahibs have come to bathe.
On either bank two rui and katla fish have floated up.
Elder brother had a pen in hand, he threw it and struck them.
On yonder bank two girls have come down to bathe.
Jingling their bangles, they have begun to shoo away the crows.
Who kept it, who kept it, elder brother kept it.
Today it is brother's plaything, tomorrow brother's bride.
Where shall brother go, to the bakul-tree grove.
Gathering bakul flowers I got a garland.
The bow resounds, Sitanath's play.
Sitanath says, brother, I shall eat parched grain.
Eating and eating the parched grain, my throat went dry as wood.
Here, there — I shall find water in Chitpur field.
In Chitpur field the sand glitters bright.
The sun burns on the golden face, blood breaks out and falls.

Not one of these pictures holds us fast, nor can we hold fast to any one of them. The little pigeons with their folded beaks, the big sahib's memsahibs, the two rui and katla fish floating on either bank, the two girls bathing on the far shore, the elder brother's marriage, Sitanath's play with the resounding bow, and, in the midday sun, the parched, sunburnt bloody face in the sandy field — all of this is like a dream. The two girls sitting down to bathe on the far shore, jingling their bangle-laden wrists as they shake out their hair — these, as pictures, are directly true, but as sequence, they are an incomparable dream.

Readers should also bear in mind that composing a dream is a very difficult thing. It may suddenly occur to one that a rhyme can be written by scribbling down whatever comes to mind. But to attain that "whatever comes to mind" quality is not easy. We have grown so habituated, in every worldly task, that the deliberate, effortful mode of thought has come to seem easier to us than the natural, spontaneous mode. Even uncalled, restless, businesslike effort presents itself, uninvited, in the midst of every task. And wherever it lays its hand, there the thought abandons its own light cloud-form, binds itself into a knot, and rises up, losing thereafter all power to fly upon the wind. That is why a rhyme is, for one to whom it comes naturally, the very easiest of all things, but for one to whom it is in the least difficult, it is utterly impossible. What is simplest is hardest — this is the chief characteristic of what we call "easy."

The reader will probably also have noticed how the rhyme quoted first has become merged with this one. Just as cloud melts into cloud, dream into dream, so too do these rhymes become entangled and mingled with one another; hence no poet is accused of plagiarism, and no critic charges anyone with confusion of ideas. In truth, these rhymes are the play of a mental realm of clouds, where there is no determining of boundary or shape or ownership. There, no connection with police or law is to be seen. Consider, by contrast, the following rhyme, drawn from elsewhere.

On yonder bank there is a jujube tree, bearing very large fruit.

Eating a jujube's head, my heart feels strange.

My heart feels faint, my throat went dry as wood.

How long, O brother, before I reach Hargauri's field?

In Hargauri's field, O brother, ripe betel leaves.

I bought betel, I bought lime, and chewed it with my sister-in-law.

One betel leaf I lost, and told my elder brother of it.

"Brother, brother," I cried out, but brother was not home.

"Suban, Suban," I cried out, and Suban was home.

Today is Suban's initiation, tomorrow Suban's wedding.

I shall take Suban away, passing by Dignagar.

The girls of Dignagar have sat down to bathe.

Their thick tresses of hair they have spread out to dry.

Their fine tresses of hair they have begun to comb out.

In their hands the sacred conch-shell bangle grew cloudy.

Round their necks the sacred garland burst its thread.

If one seeks truth amid the meaning of these rhymes one will fall into grave confusion. In the first rhyme we have seen the dance-loving boy named Sitaram, having eaten parched rice, needing to go to the Tripurni ghat for water; in the second rhyme we see Sitanath, having eaten parched rice, arriving at Chitpur field in search of water; but in the third rhyme it is seen that it is neither Sitaram nor Sitanath, but rather some unfortunate sister-in-law's spiteful sister, who, after devouring jujube fruit, went thirsting to Hargauri's field to eat betel, and afterward, over the trifling fault of a careless sister-in-law, stirred up the whole neighbourhood to tell her elder brother of it.

Such, then, is the inconsistency among the three rhymes. Moreover, within each rhyme individually, no continuity of event is to be found. It becomes quite clear that most of the sayings are fabricated. But we also see this: when people set about fabricating a story, they generally, by an abundance of corroborating details, render it more credible than the truth itself; and yet in this instance there is not the least deliberate intention behind it. The sayings of these rhymes are neither true nor false — they lie beyond both. That mention, at one point in a certain rhyme, of Suban's wedding — that is no impossible event. And yet it does not seem to be truth either.

"Brother, brother," I cried out, but brother was not home.

"Suban, Suban," I cried out, and Suban was home.

The moment Suban's name came to mind, out it came at once: "Today is Suban's initiation, tomorrow Suban's wedding." That saying, too, did not endure; almost without delay, mention arose of the long-haired girls of Dignagar. This is precisely how it happens in dreams. Perhaps, by some similarity of sound, or by some other unreal, trivial association, one saying is composed out of another, moment by moment. A moment before, there was no cause whatsoever for their possibility; a moment after, they slip away, without effort, from the realm of possibility. If readers should regard Suban's marriage as an intimation of some actual event of that time and place, still, all would unanimously agree that "the sister-in-law's marriage to Tiya, given with the wet towel" can find no place, under any circumstance, within the history of that period. For though widow remarriage was current among the Tiya caste, the use of a wet towel in that connection has never, at any time, been heard of among that community. But those to whose ears these disjointed, impossible happenings are presented in sweet voice, to the beat of rhythm, neither believe them nor doubt them — they behold them in their mind's eye, as one sees a dream, as one sees direct reality.

Children too see pictures very easily, with the slightest occasion. The reason for this I have said before at one point — in the matter of the power of will, a resemblance is seen between the child and the divine. As easily as a child can create anything he wills, we cannot. Consider: to imagine a bundle of cloth tied at the top, with only a head visible, as a human child, and to nurture it as one's own offspring, is no small matter. If we must imagine an idol to be a human being, then it must be shaped exactly like a human — wherever there is the least flaw of resemblance, our imagination is impaired. We are governed by the tyranny of the external world's insensate reality; whatever falls before our eyes, we can by no means see it otherwise. But the child, taking whatever falls before his eyes merely as a pretext, can mould it in his mind into whatever he pleases; no dissimilarity between a human figure and a plaything fashioned of cloth-scrap strikes his eye — he sees before him, blazing bright, only the creation of his own will.

Yet nevertheless these effortlessly composed pictures in the rhymes are not merely the product of the child's own natural creative power; in many places they possess such clarity of outline that they present, even to our sceptical eyes, a swift picture in a most concise description.

These pictures are pictures made of a single line, a single word. As a matchstick flares up in one stroke, so too, in the child's mind, a single touch of word must kindle a whole picture in an instant. It will not do to build it up by piecing together parts.

In Chitpur field the sand glitters bright.

In this single saying alone, a vast, barren field arises before our vision in the noonday sunlight.

Round her waist her striped sari swirls and falls.

The striped lines of the sari, curling round and round like the whorls of a whirlpool, embracing her slender frame, are painted in that single line, in a single moment. In another version it reads —

Round her waist her striped cloth flutters and falls.

That picture, too, is not bad.

Come, sleep, come sleep, from the quarter of the Bagdis.

The Bagdi's child sleeps, wrapped in a fishing net.

In that final line alone, one can readily grasp how the Bagdi child, wrapped in a fishing net, sleeps carelessly, wherever it happens to lie. Nothing more is said — merely by particularly mentioning that wrapping in the net, the sleep of the Bagdi's offspring is made vividly present.

Come, O come, let us go catch fish for the boys.

With hooked feet, I press upon a boat.

The boat has six pon of cowries, I count them as I go.

This river's waters ripple gently.

This river's banks, O brother, the sand rustles softly.

The sun has struck the moon-face, and blood breaks forth.

If readers should think it a matter of little consequence that one goes counting six pon of cowries on the swing, they will nevertheless not disregard the final three lines. The river's waters rippling gently, and the sand of its banks slipping and rustling down — what more concise, simple, yet vivid picture of a sandy riverbank could there be!

Such, then, is one class of pictures. There is another class of picture which, by taking up some describable subject, awakens in our minds a whole complete scene. Perhaps the mention of some trifling matter brings the entire Bengali household, the entire Bengali society, alive and touches our heart. Such trifling sayings can never enter grand literature so easily, so unhindered, so unabashedly. And even should they enter, they would of themselves undergo transformation and change of character.

Brother, O brother, go to the city.

Earn a salary of three rupees.

Round brother's neck a tulsi-garland.

His wife shall be chosen like the moon's crescent.

O brother, I fall at your feet.

Bring home a bride, that I may play with her.

Brother's salary is not much — but by the sister's reckoning it is ample. It is by citing this example of the sufficiency of a three-rupee salary that the little sister makes her plea —

O brother, I fall at your feet.

Bring home a bride, that I may play with her.

The clever girl, for the sake of her own self-interested request, has not failed to give the brother a hint of temptation too, by way of "his wife shall be chosen like the moon's crescent." Though the sister's plaything is a far costlier prize than a three-rupee salary, still it may be said that there was no delay in fulfilling her earnest request, and that this was not merely out of brotherly affection.

Ulu, ulu, the madar flower.

The groom is coming, how far away?

The groom is coming from Baghna Para.

The elder bride, O, put the pot on to cook.

The younger bride, O, go fetch water.

In the water, wagtails play.

Flowers have blossomed, round and full.

For the flowers' price, cowries.

Cakes of the nate-shak.

The eagerness and festive joy of village women awaiting the arrival of the son-in-law's party has of itself burst into bloom. And on that occasion, the village lanes bordered with hedges of sheora trees, the woods, the ponds, the water-fetching brides, and the loosely-veiled, busy housewives, have all sprung to life as if by magic.

In almost every one of these rhymes, in almost every trifling saying, one image of Bengal's countryside, one melody of the village, one savour of home, may be tasted. But I hesitate to quote too many of these, for tastes differ from person to person.

If a picture is somewhat strange in its manner, there is no harm in that — rather, it is all the better. For novelty strikes the mind with all the more force. To a child there is nothing strange, for to him nothing is impossible. He has not yet gone and, striking his head against the outer wall marking the final limit of possibility, returned disillusioned from every quarter. He says, if anything at all is possible, then everything is possible. If one thing is not strange, then why should any other thing be strange? He says, I have accepted, without any question, a man with one head, because he has been directly seen by me; regarding a man with two heads, too, I do not wish to raise any contrary question, for I can see him clearly in my mind; and again, a headless man is equally true for me, for he too is not beyond my range of experience. There is a story of a man who came to a gathering and said: today on the road I saw a wondrous thing; in a quarrel, a man's head was cut off, and yet he walked on ten paces more. Everyone, astonished, said: what do you say, sir, he walked ten paces? Among them was one wise woman; she said: that he walked ten paces is nothing wonderful — what is wonderful is that first step he took.

So too with creation — that very first step is the great wonder. That anything at all has come to be is the first wonder, and the subject of supreme wonder; after that, what wonder is there in anything further coming to be? The child is casting his first

gaze upon that very first wonder — the moment he opens his eyes he sees that there are many things, and that there being many more things besides is nothing at all impossible for him; and so, in the land of the rhyme, there is no dispute settling the boundary between the possible and the impossible —

Come, O come, Tiya-bird,
bringing a boat laden with rice.
Not taking it away, went the boyal fish.
Seeing that, the otter dances.
O otter, turn and look —
come see baby's dance.

First, no child has ever seen, even in his father's lifetime, such a sight as a Tiya-bird arriving in a boat; nor has the boy's father either. But that very unprecedented quality is his chief delight. Especially when, suddenly, out of the fathomless water, a swollen-bellied boyal fish rises up and, without a word, without notice, carries off the boat, and the enraged, distressed Tiya, fluffing up its neck feathers and flapping its wings, begins to voice its protest in the loudest of shrieks, the delight grows still greater. Seeing the poor Tiya's misfortune and the utterly rude behaviour of the aquatic creature, the sudden, irresistible urge to dance that overcomes the otter is also thoroughly delightful. And there is abundant relish, too, in the request made to that joyously dancing, merciless otter — to restrain, for a moment, his own dancing frenzy and turn to watch baby's dance instead. Just as, on hearing a sweet rhythm, one longs to set it to a tune and sing it, so too, seeing these pictures made of language, one longs to translate and paint them as pictures in outline. But alas, an artist capable of preserving the relish of these pictures without spoiling it, capable of drawing their childlike simplicity, their bright freshness, their unhesitating confidence, their easy plausibility of the impossible, is rare — rare, I think, everywhere in our land, and perhaps everywhere at all.

Baby will go catch fish in the shallow, shallow mud.

The shrimp took the fish-hook, the crab took the bait.

What bird is this that perches, baby says, on some other's branch?

What bird is this that comes flying down at baby's call?

Was ever a stranger predicament than the one into which baby fell, going to catch fish in the shallow mud? Would it not soothe one's vexation of mind not to have drawn it out fully? Of course, of the geography of the shallow mud, baby doubtless knows far more than we; but in whatever river it may be, that he, with such elder-like patience, has sat down with utmost gravity to fish with a hook four times his own height, is comical enough; but when, on top of that, an exceedingly monstrous crab, opening its goggling eyes from the water, gives baby's fishing line a tug, and, from the other side, a kite swoops down from the shore and snatches away the fish, then baby's distressed, astonished, anxious countenance — now bending back with all his might, tugging at the line, now flinging both eager, distressed hands upward toward that flying thief — all these pictures have long been awaiting the hand of some skilled and sympathetic painter.

Again, baby's bird-form too is a fit subject for a picture. A vast marsh comes into view. Its farther shore cannot be well seen. Near the bank on this side, in a corner-like spot, tall grasses, clumps of cane, and dense arum are gathered together; in the water, moss and clusters of water-lilies; among them, mingling with a few contemplative, quiet-natured, long-legged, long-billed herons and cranes, baby-sahib, folding his wings, walks about most unconcernedly on the water's edge — this scene too is fine; and, not far from the marsh, a hut adjoining a paddy-field ripe with the wet green of Bhadra month; in the courtyard of that hut, resting her left hand on the bamboo fence and stretching her right hand fully toward the marsh, his mother, in the fading light of the afternoon sun, calls to her baby-sahib; near the fence a tethered calf, home from grazing, gazes that way with dull curiosity; and baby-sahib, in the very midst of his heron-like wandering among the moss and water-lilies, suddenly hearing his mother's call, turns alertly and looks toward the hut, flitting to and fro — that too is a lovely sight — and then a third scene, in which

the bird presses his head to his mother's breast, nestling his face against her side, half-enveloping her with his two wings, while the mother, with closed eyes, encircles him with both arms, wings soft and downy and all, and binds him close in a tight embrace of love — that too is lovely to see.

Astronomers, surveying the nebula of the Milky Way, observe that within that luminous mist of vapour, here and there, the matter is condensing at particular spots into something on the point of becoming a star. Within the nebulous mass of these rhymes too, suddenly, here and there, forms of poetry, half-condensed and shaped, fall upon our sight. Within these newly-created realms of fancy there is no complexity whatsoever; like the child-world of earliest age, it remains still somewhat fluid, not yet hardened into rigidity. Let me quote one such:

Magic, oh what a wondrous colour, magic, oh what a wondrous colour!

Show me four black things, and I shall go along with you.

The crow is black, the cuckoo is black, black the plumage of the finch.

Blacker than these, my dear, is the hair upon your head.

Magic, oh what a wondrous colour, magic, oh what a wondrous colour!

Show me four white things, and I shall go along with you.

The heron is white, cotton is white, white the royal swan.

Whiter than these, my dear, is the conch-bangle on your wrist.

Magic, oh what a wondrous colour, magic, oh what a wondrous colour!

Show me four red things, and I shall go along with you.

The hibiscus is red, the oleander red, red the kusum flower.

Redder than these, my dear, is the vermilion upon your parted hair.

Magic, oh what a wondrous colour, magic, oh what a wondrous colour!

Show me four bitter things, and I shall go along with you.

Neem is bitter, nishinda bitter, bitter the makal fruit.

More bitter than these, my dear, is a co-wife's household.

Magic, oh what a wondrous colour, magic, oh what a wondrous colour!

Show me four cool things, and I shall go along with you.

Cool is water, cool is earth, cool the shitalpati mat.

Cooler than these, my dear, is the embrace of your bosom.

Since the very beginning of the age of poetic creation, poets in every tongue have sung the praises of woman in varied metres, but so simple and natural a feeling, so simple and natural a picture, as is found in the above-quoted praise-song, is to be found in very few poems indeed. There is, unwittingly, a touch of simple humour in it. The breaking of Sita's bow, and Draupadi's contest at the mark, were certainly very difficult contests indeed. But the contest that this simple girl has set is not, it would seem, so very difficult. There is so much in the world that is black, white, red, and sweet, that to win such a maiden by showing merely four examples of each is the work of a fortunate man indeed. Nowadays, in this age of the world's decline, the fortune of every man has turned; breaking a bow, winning at an archery contest — none of this is any longer necessary — rather, men now sit for a company's paper examination and feel not the least shame of conscience for such cowardly baseness. Compared with them, it is far better that the hero of our rhyme should have had to pass such a small and simple test in order to win his bride. Though the final marks of the examination are not given in the rhyme, one may nevertheless conjecture that the boy received full marks. For it is seen that of the four answers to each verse, the fourth answer proved thoroughly satisfying each time. But we cannot say whether it was truly so easy for our hero to furnish these answers when the examiner herself stood before him in person — as though it were merely a matter of opening a book to find the answer. But I do not wish to express fruitless envy on that account. If the examiner herself was satisfied, then we have nothing further to say.

In the very first verse the bride is saying: "Magic, oh what a wondrous colour, magic, oh what a wondrous colour!" From this it appears that the examination had begun

even earlier, and that the examinee had given so pleasing an answer that the bride's desire to question further kept increasing all the more. In truth, there is no colour so wondrous as this.

However that may be, had the task of composing this rhyme fallen to us, in all likelihood we should have sat down properly to lay out its whole setting; we should never have begun so abruptly, in the midst of things. First we should have described an examination-hall, which, if not quite like Senate House, might have resembled something of an Eden garden; and to this we should have added moonlight, the southern breeze, and the cuckoo's call, making the whole affair somewhat lively and elaborate — we could have contrived all manner of arrangements — but this simple, lovely girl, whose hair is blacker than the finch's plumage, whose bangled wrist is whiter than the royal swan, whose vermilion parting is redder than the kusum flower, whose loving embrace is sweeter than children's prattle and cooler than the water of a well — that girl, who, upon hearing a few simple words of praise, stands ready, in simple faith and simple joy, to give up her very life — her, we should not have been able to hold fast, in the same way, for all time, within the bonds of our elaborate, ornate, descriptive metre.

It is not only this rhyme; if the task were given to us, we could thoroughly revise most rhymes and render them fit for a new edition. Indeed, we could construct within them a dwelling-place for universally acknowledged morality and universally comprehensible philosophy. If nothing else, we could at least elevate them to a higher class befitting our present-day education and social condition. Consider — if we ever wished to invite the moon down to our present civilised society, could we hold out to him such a trifling temptation as the following?

Come, come, uncle moon, give something and go.

On the moon's forehead, give something of a moon-mark, and go.

If you clean the fish, I shall give you the head.

If you husk the rice, I shall give you the bran.

I shall give you milk from the black cow.

I shall give you a bowl to drink the milk from.

On the moon's forehead, give something of a moon-mark, and go.

What moon is this! This is utterly and entirely the moon of a Bengali home. This is the most senior, ordinary maternal uncle-moon of our childhood society. This is the one who, familiar and gentle-smiling, has forever watched, through the wind-stirred gaps of the bamboo grove near our village pond, the play of dust-smeared naked children in the courtyard; with him our village has this bond of kinship. Otherwise, who would have dared to tempt with a fish's head, rice-bran, and a bowl of black cow's milk, that very moon-marked lord of the moon-beams, who dwells through the years in the inner chambers of the twenty-seven star-maidens, and who has, night and day, preserved in his own imperishable silver vessel the sweet essence of the entire realm of the gods? We, in his place, would probably have enumerated the honey of the parijata flower, the fragrance of the night-queen jasmine, the songs of the newly-wed bride's teasing banter, the smile of union, the hope of the heart, the dream of the young, the shyness of the new bride, and various other rare and precious things of that kind — and yet the moon, exactly where he had been, would still be there. But the folk of the rhyme did not dare offer false temptations; they did not imagine it in the least impossible for the moon, coming down, to give something to baby's forehead. They were not of so thoroughly faithless, doubting, atheistic a nature. Hence, out of the enthusiasm of poesy, they could not bring themselves to claim anything more than what was actually available in the storehouse, in the treasury. Our Bengal's own moon-uncle, receiving a thousand such invitations from a thousand cottages of Bengal, would silently laugh to himself; he would say neither yes nor no; he would give the impression that some day, without informing anyone, setting out at the break of dawn toward the east, he would suddenly appear at the corner of some house along the way, his face brimming with merriment.

We have said before that these rhymes seem to be the broken fragments of one whole world. Within them lie scattered, in disarray, various forgotten joys and sorrows a hundredfold. Just as, on the ancient shores of the primeval world, on some

muddy bank, the footprints of the birds of that age had fallen — and afterward, in the course of time, under hard pressure, that mud, footprint-marks and all, turned to stone — that mark had fallen of itself and has remained of itself, no one having dug it up with a spade, no one having taken special care to preserve it — even so, within these rhymes, many a day's many a laugh and cry have of themselves been imprinted; within these broken, worn-out rhythms, many a heartache lies easily entangled. Some fragment of some person's mind, from some far-off age, floating upon the ocean of time, has come to be cast up on the shore of this far-distant present; and the instant it touches upon our mind, all its forgotten pain, warmed once more by the heat of life, springs again into living freshness with the fluid of tears.

On that bank, black colour.

Rain falls, thom thom.

On this bank, the lanka tree glows bright red.

Virtuous brother, my heart feels strange.

"Let this month pass, sister, weeping and wailing.

Next month I shall come to fetch you, with a decked palanquin."

Bone has become fried-thin, flesh has become rope-thin.

Come, O come, let me leap into the river's water.

This inner anguish, this suppressed, gathered flood of tears — from what age, from what hidden corner of some house, from what unknown, obscure, forgotten bride's tender heart did it burst forth, that such unbearable suffering left no other trace in the world save this, dissolving like an invisible, long-drawn sigh into the current of the air! By some chance of fate, it has become bound up, whole, within a single dirge.

We could never have imagined, at any one time, in any one state of mind. It has ever been thus. Long ago, the great poet of the court of Ujjayini too said —

"...the mind of even a happy man, at the sight of the clouds, is seized with longing for those far away, though separated but by a little distance..."

What Kalidasa mentioned with but the faintest sigh, has, in this rhyme, burst forth with a heart torn open in weeping —

"Virtuous brother, my heart feels strange."

"Bone has become fried-thin, flesh has become rope-thin.

Come, O come, let me leap into the river's water."

Who shall tell the entire heart-rending story within this, the whole train of unbearable suffering? Day by day, night by night, moment by moment, how much had to be endured — until, at last, on that day, into that loveless, joyless house of a stranger, suddenly her own brother, familiar and dear from her father's home, had come to inquire after his own sister — on that day, what barrier could the deep-buried, gathered flood of tears, layer upon layer, in her heart, possibly hold against? That home, that play, that father and mother, that happy childhood, all came flooding back to mind — and what power on earth could then restrain a heart, utterly wild and desperate, for even one moment more! On that day, she could not bear, in her very soul, even the wait of one more month — especially since, on that day, the far bank of the river had grown dark with dense clouds, the rain fell thom thom, and there arose in her the longing to leap, this very instant, into that bottomless, cool river, dark-shadowed under the rain-streaked, cloud-covered banks, and quench forever the burning fire within her bones.

There is a grammatical error in this — one which the careful guardians of the Bengali language will pardon, and, indeed, will shed a tear over as well. By applying the

epithet "virtuous" to her brother, that unknown poet-lady displayed an incomparable folly. That unfortunate girl never dreamt, even in her wildest imagination, that this one day's heartrending cry of grief, together with this tiny grammatical slip, would become eternal in the world. Had she known, she would have died of shame. Perhaps the error is not so grave; perhaps it is being said while addressing her sister, and this may be so as well. Those who nowadays, in their zealous vow to purify the Bengali language, are bent on sacrificing linguistic custom and ancient beauties alike — I trust that they, too, now and then, forgetting themselves out of affection, transgress grammar and call a sister "brother," and that even when addressed by an endearing wifely term of relation, they do not instantly correct their error.

Our Bengal has one deeply painful inner grief — the sending of the daughter to her husband's home. Since an immature, inexperienced, simple girl must go to live in another's household, the face of every Bengali girl bears the imprint of this one restless, tender look, common to the entire land. That very tender, plaintive tenderness has attained a heavenly quality in Bengal's autumnal festival. This love of home, this sorrow of home, this eternal ache of the Bengali household, drawing forth tears, has been reflected, in the mind of every Bengali, in the shade of the autumn festival's foliage. This is the Bengali's worship of the Mother, and the Bengali's worship of the Daughter as well. Agamani and Bijaya are the songs of Bengal's motherly heart. It may therefore be readily assumed that in our rhymes too, this heartache of Bengal's motherhood has found expression in various forms.

Today is Durga's initiation, tomorrow Durga's wedding.

Durga shall go to her husband's home, to run a household, weeping.

Mother weeps, mother weeps, rolling in the dust.

That very mother had adorned her neck with a necklace.

Father weeps, father weeps, seated in the court.

That very father had given her a chest of coin.

Aunt weeps, aunt weeps, seated in the kitchen.

That very aunt had served her rice in a plate.

Auntie weeps, auntie weeps, seated by the cowshed.

That very auntie had given her milk in a bowl.

Brother weeps, brother weeps, holding the hem of her cloth.

That very brother had given her cloth, arranging it on the rack.

Sister weeps, sister weeps, gripping the bed-post.

That very sister —

Here, for fear of offending readers, I feel it necessary to say a word or two before ending the rhyme. This sister, who is now standing weeping profusely, gripping the bed-post, was not, in her earlier behaviour, one whose example any well-bred girl should follow. It is better that quarrels between sisters should not occur, though generally such quarrels do occur daily. But even so, such language ought not to be used by the girl's mouth as I feel some hesitation, even today, in uttering before a polite society. Nevertheless, I cannot entirely omit that verse; for though there is in it a certain vulgarity of language, there is, in far greater measure, purely tender and pathetic feeling. To translate its substance into other words, the sum of the matter comes to this: that this weeping girl had once, during a quarrel, insulted her sister, calling her a "husband-starved wretch." We have converted that abusive term into somewhat gentler language and filled out the metre below —

Sister weeps, sister weeps, gripping the bed-post.

That very sister had called her "husband-starved," to shame her.

Mother had given ornaments, father had given wealth, aunt had fed her rice, auntie had fed her milk, brother had given her cloth — I had hoped that, in so loving a family, the sister too had once done some similarly loving deed. But reading the final line, a sudden pang strikes the breast, and the eyes grow moist. There is a certain

congruity between the earlier loving treatment of the parents and the weeping at the farewell — that much is expected. But the sister who always quarrelled and used harsh words — it is her weeping, at the farewell, that seems the most poignant of all. Suddenly it comes to light today that beneath all her constant strife and quarrel, a tender love had all along been secretly stored up — and that unnoticed love, with sudden and keen remorse, strikes her today with the sharpest blow of all. She stands gripping the bed-post, weeping. In childhood, the two sisters used to sleep together in this one bed; this very sleeping-chamber had been the playground of all their quarrels and all their games. On the day of parting, coming to this room, gripping the bed-post, standing alone in solitude, the anguished, wistful weeping of this frank, outspoken girl has, in the pure flowing waters of that deep spring of love, washed away all the taint of her quarrelsome speech and rendered it pure and white.

Within these rhymes, in a single verse, in a single line, some great chapter of joy or sorrow lies concealed. In the rhyme quoted below, from beginning to end, in its two lines, is expressed the history of the grief endured, from age to age, by the mothers of Bengal.

Rock, rock, cradle.

A red comb upon her head.

The groom will come presently.

He will take her away then and there.

Why do you weep, why do you die?

Understand for yourself, whose home you shall keep.

Even while rocking a small infant daughter, the far-distant possibility of separation naturally arises in the mind, and tears come to the mother's eyes.

Then the only word of comfort is this: it has ever been thus, from time immemorial. You too, one day, making your mother weep, came away to live in another's home — the terrible pain of that day's cruel separation from that household is entirely healed now — and your own daughter, too, in due time, will leave you and go, and that grief too shall not remain forever in the wide world.

Of Punthi's departure to her husband's home there are many pictures and much occasion to be found. That particular story has always remained fixed in my memory.

Punthi shall go to her husband's home, who shall go with her?

At home there is a lame cat, its waist all bound up.

I shall give her an orchard of mango and jackfruit, to walk in the shade.

Four ministers I shall give, to carry the palanquin.

I shall give fine rice-flake for her to eat water with, on the way.

Four old maidservants I shall give, to oil her feet.

Puffed rice of the udrik-paddy I shall give, to beguile her mother-in-law.

On reading the final line alone, one can see that this supreme worry — how the mother-in-law is to be beguiled — was even then thoroughly present. But if it is credible that so difficult a matter could be accomplished merely by udrik-rice puffed grain, then, without doubt, many a modern mother of a daughter will sigh deeply, longing for that golden age. In our present day, by what device a daughter is to beguile her mother-in-law, even the girl's own father cannot fathom, not even in this lifetime.

Separation from a daughter is not the sole cause of grief; marriage to an unworthy groom is likewise a grievous thorn. And yet, often, knowingly, parents and relatives, with an eye fixed on self-interest, or wealth, or lineage, helplessly consign the girl to an unfit match. That injustice's pain society sometimes gives voice to. The rhyme

bears witness to this. But readers must bear in mind that everything said in a rhyme is disjointed, mingled with laughter and weeping and the fantastic.

In the pomegranate tree the Purbhu dances.

The taak-dhumadhum drum resounds.

Aunt, can you recognise me?

Serve two more portions of rice.

Annapurna, cream of the milk.

Tomorrow I go to a stranger's home.

The stranger's boy has struck me.

Weeping and weeping, to uncle's house.

Uncle has an old husband.

O uncle, I fall at your feet.

Send me quickly to mother's house.

Mother gave a thin bangle, father gave a sari.

Brother gave a stick, saying, "Off to your husband's house."

In those days there was no English law. That is to say, the burden of restoring conjugal rights was not in the hands of the constable. Hence, relatives had to take it upon themselves to accomplish that task as easily and briefly as possible. To my poor understanding it seems that for the discipline of a household bride, that domestic law, that elder brother's affectionate stick, was perhaps better than the constable's short baton. Today we have learned to sue in court to bring a wife back from her father's house; tomorrow, perhaps, we shall have to file an application before the Presidency Magistrate to mend our wounded pride. But whether it be the new law

or the old, whether it is any less monstrous, unnatural, barbarous cruelty to unite a helpless girl, by sheer brute force, with an unworthy match, is doubtful.

The fault of the parents society often forgets, but the old husband is the thorn in its eye. Society, with the sharpest ridicule, vents all its accumulated wrath upon him alone.

I shall cut down a palm tree, I shall carve a bat, O Gauri has come as a bride.

What am I to do with an old husband, fallen to your lot?

Breaking a conch-bangle I gave you a shell-bangle, and a jewel in your ear.

At the wedding hour I saw the old man's drooping beard.

Eat your eyes out, father and mother, eat your eyes out, uncle.

You gave her in marriage to such a groom, a tobacco-chewing old man!

The old man's hookah floated away, and the old man died of coughing.

Shaking and turning him, we find the old man lying dead.

While chewing on some parched grain, up the old man leapt again!

What greater humiliation of old age could there be!

Now the mighty emperor of the Bengali household, the smallest in age yet the mightiest in power — the topic of that most exalted khoka (baby boy) or khuku (baby girl) remains to be spoken of.

The ancient Rig Veda was composed on the occasion of hymns of praise to Indra, Chandra, Varuna; and the rhyme arose from the twin deities of the mother's heart

— khoka and Punthi. In point of antiquity, neither is inferior to the other. For the antiquity of the rhyme is not historical antiquity — it is naturally ancient. In its primal, elemental simplicity, it is the very first stage of human composition. Even amid the vapourless, harsh glare of this nineteenth century's noonday sun, it preserves the fresh dawn-glow of the human heart.

Within this eternally ancient new Veda, what love-tales, what songs of infant praise there are, their variety, beauty, and outburst of joy know no bound. Enraptured, adoring mothers, pouring their tender feeling into ever-new moulds, have established for the infant-deity how many forms — now a bird, now the moon, now a jewel, now a garden of flowers.

If I take you and go into the forest, what shall I eat there?

Sitting in solitude, I shall gaze upon the moon's face.

There is nothing so utterly beyond the bounds of creation as love. From the very beginning it has pervaded, within and without, the beginning and end of this creation, and yet it wishes to transgress every law of creation. It is like a bird of the sky within creation's iron cage. Though it has met with refutation, resistance, protest, and blow, a thousand hundred times over, its faith has never in the least wavered that it can, quite effortlessly, go on living without obeying any law. It knows within itself, "I can fly" — and this is precisely why it forgets, again and again, the iron bars. There is no need at all to take wealth and go into the forest — staying at home suits every purpose. Of course, in the forest one gains a good deal of solitude, no doubt, but apart from that, little else is to be had. Especially since she herself admits that there, an adequate supply of food might well run short. And yet love insists, obstinately: can you not think that I am able? Hearing this unhesitating, defiant statement, even we, of ripe and deliberative judgment, suddenly lose our wits; we say, well, that may be so too — why, indeed, should she not be able? If some narrow-hearted, sceptical, worldly-bound questioner asks, what shall you eat? she answers at once, with an unruffled face: sitting in solitude I shall gaze upon the moon's face. On hearing it, we feel at once that a wholly fitting answer has been

given. What, from another's mouth, would be an utterly self-evident lie, what, from a madman's mouth, would be sheer extravagance — from the mouth of love, becomes an unimpeachable, authoritative truth.

Another quality of love is this: it makes the one into the many, and the many into one. It does not wish to observe the boundary-line between different things. The reader has already seen an example of this — observed how, in one rhyme, without the least preamble, khoka was effortlessly classed among the bird family — no zoologist would come forward to object to that. And again, the very next moment, when khoka is described as an intimate relation identical with the moon in the sky, no astronomer dares raise a protest against it. But love's wilfulness is displayed most of all when, with great ceremony, it brings forth an argument, only to demolish it with a contemptuous kick at the very last moment. Below is given one example of this.

Where shall I get you a moon, my dear, my little magic-jewel?

Not a moon of clay shall I mould for you,

Not a moon of the tree shall I pluck for you,

Where shall I find a moon like you?

You are the crown-jewel of all moons.

Sleep now, my little khoka-mani.

That the moon is beyond one's reach, that the moon is not a clay figure, not the fruit of a tree — all this is sound reasoning, unassailable and unprecedented — there is no flaw anywhere in it. But when, having come this far, one must at last tell khoka that he himself is the moon, and better than every moon, then a clay moon becomes possible too, and a tree-borne moon is nothing wonderful either. Then what need was there, at the outset, of expounding all that logic?

Here, perhaps, it will not be entirely out of place to say one thing. The great deal of illogicality seen among women is no sign of a lack of intelligence. In the world they inhabit, love alone reigns supreme. Love is heaven's own person. It says: why should anything else take precedence over me? Since I desire it, why should not every obstacle in the universal order be swept away? It dreams, and even now it dwells in that very heaven. But alas, what could be more thoroughly illogical, in this mortal world, than heaven itself! And yet, whatever heaven exists on earth, it exists solely because, in woman, in child, in lover, in the visionary, it has held all logic and law fast bound to the earth, even against the counter-current. That the earth is, after all, the earth — this they often forget, and it is by that very illusion that heaven comes, at times, to alight upon the earth.

Love, on the one hand, can, effacing all distinctions of boundary, unite in a single moment the moon, the flower, and the baby-bird as one; and, on the other hand, it draws a boundary where there is none, and fashions a shape where there is none.

No natural scientist has yet classified sleep among mammals or any other class of living creature. But sleep, it seems, comes to settle in khoka's eyes, and so, upon it too, love's creative hand has always fallen, and it too has become, in some sense, a person.

The market's sleep, the ghat's sleep, wanders from path to path.

For four kaudis I bought sleep — come, jewel of my eye!

It is now late at night; there is no longer anyone at the market or the ghat. And so that market-sleep, ghat-sleep, homeless, wanders about in the dark, from path to path, in search of someone. Perhaps that is why it could be had so cheaply. Otherwise, for a whole night's worth, four kaudis is a most paltry wage by present-day reckoning.

It is said that Greek poets, and Michael Madhusudan Dutta too, described sleep as a distinct female figure, but the regarding of dance itself as a definite, distinct entity is seen only in our rhymes.

Then dances, thena. The banyan's aerial roots dance.

The bullock has eaten gram, the goat has eaten paddy.

For magic-jewel's sake, the dancer comes, dancing, bought and brought.

Not only that. To see this dance bounded and distinct within each and every limb of khoka is not achievable by the telescope or microscope of science — it is possible only through the telescope of love.

The dance of the hands, the dance of the feet, the dance of the round little mouth.

The naughty dance of the eyes, the sharp dance of the eyebrows.

The dance of the nose's little flute, the dance of the waist and hip.

What more dancing is there?

Through much toil and effort I have won this magic.

Love now sees the many as one, now sees the one as many, now makes the great trivial, and the trivial great. "Dance, O dance, magic one, let me see your dance." Dance! As though the magic-child's dance can be perceived separately, like a distinct entity in itself; as though it were, from him, one particularly cherished possession of his own. "Khoka shall go for a stroll to the quarter of the oil-vendors' wives." Here, if instead of "go for a stroll" (bedu korte) one had simply said "stroll about" (bedaite), the dignity of ordinary speech would have been preserved, but it would have diminished the dignity of khoka's strolling. Everyone in the world merely strolls about — but khoka-babu goes "a-strolling." By this, khoka-babu's stroll is set forth as a particularly distinct and beloved thing.

Khoka has come from his stroll. Give him milk, quickly cooled.

The bowl of milk is hot. Khoka has grown cross.

Khoka shall go by boat. Red little shoes on his feet.

Of course, that khoka-babu, having completed his excursion, grew cross at the sight of the hot bowl of milk — that is indeed a significant event within the domestic realm, and that he intends to set out on a boat-voyage is likewise worthy of being recorded in history. But readers should pay particular attention to the final line. Were we, in the manner of the English, to walk about, wearing on our full-grown legs from the hip down, boots that make a loud creaking sound, people would call them merely "boots" or "shoes." But those tiny, precious little red shoes of most trifling price, worn on khoka-babu's tiny, tender feet, adorned with small silver bells — these become "jutuya" (dear little shoes). It is plain to see that the honour accorded a shoe depends very much upon the dignity of the foot that wears it; its other value concerns no one at all.

Finally, in this concluding portion, there is one more matter worth noting. Wherever there is deep human affection, unfeigned love, there is worship of the divine. Wherever we love a human being, there we perceive the divine. That saying, "sitting in solitude I shall gaze upon the moon's face" — this is meditation upon the divine itself. What is there in the tiny face of a child that one should long to withdraw into the solitude of a forest, in order to gaze upon it and comprehend it fully? — one feels: the whole of the world, all its perpetual daily business and activity, is only scattering the mind away from this store of joy. The very nectar of immortality for which ascetics abandoned food and drink and sought unbroken leisure in the forest — the mother has found the trace of that divine, rare nectar-essence in the face of her own child, and hence, from the very shrine of worship in her heart, this song has burst forth —

If I take wealth and go into the forest, what shall I eat there?

Sitting in solitude, I shall gaze upon the moon's face.

This is why, in the rhymes, it is often seen that the child of Devaki has been merged, in many places, into one with one's own son. Among other peoples, such a mingling of man with god would be reckoned an offence against the divine. But to my mind, if the deity is kept aloof and distinct from the highest, sweetest, most profound, and most living human bonds, then humanity itself is insulted, and divinity too receives no true honour. In our rhymes, the mortal infant becomes, now and again, one with the divine image of heaven — and this too happens most easily, most casually — needing no distinct setting of its own. Amid the utterly strange, incoherent, meaningless setting of the child-deity, the very deity of heaven himself, unnoticed, comes at times to merge and stand together with the child.

Khoka shall go for a stroll to the quarter of the oil-vendors' wives.

Why have the oil-vendors' wives made such faces, O butter-thief?

"He has broken the pot, eaten the butter — shall I see him again?

If I find him again beneath the kadam tree, I shall snatch away his flute."

Suddenly, in the quarter of the oil-vendors' wives, when and how the tiny khoka-babu brought along the flute of Brindaban — this only those in whose ears that flute has entered, deep into the soul, can ever understand.

I have compared the rhyme to the cloud. Both are changeable, tinged with various colours, drifting at will upon the current of the air. Seeing them, one thinks them purposeless. The rhyme too lies outside the canons of the science of art; the science of clouds too has never come to be well grasped within the rules of any treatise. And yet, in both the inanimate and the human world, these two unruly, strange phenomena have forever accomplished a great purpose. The cloud descends in showers of rain and gives life to the infant crops; and the rhymes too, dissolved in the fluid of love, in a rain of imagination, enrich and fertilise the heart of the child.

The cloud, light and unbound, by very virtue of its lightness and freedom from bondage, has naturally proved fit to serve the good of the whole world; and the rhymes too, by virtue of their weightlessness, their freedom from the constraint of meaning, and their variety of picture, have forever delighted the minds of children — composed without setting before them any principle whatsoever of child psychology.

NURSERY RHYMES THAT BEGUILE CHILDREN: II

Preface

Our treatises on rhetoric make mention of nine rasas, but the particular flavour found within these child-beguiling rhymes belongs to none of the rasas named in those scriptures. The fragrance that rises from freshly-turned earth, or the milk-sweet, innocent scent of tenderness that clings to a baby's soft new body — these cannot be classed in the same category as the fragrance of flower, sandalwood, rosewater, perfume, or incense. Just as there is, amid all fragrances, one of a peculiarly primal freshness, so too is there, within these child-beguiling rhymes, a certain primal delicacy — this sweetness one might name the flavour of childhood. It is not intense, not deep-hued; it is exceedingly soft, delicate, and utterly without logical coherence.

It was solely drawn by this flavour that I set about collecting the rhymes of Bengal. Owing to differences of taste, that flavour may not be pleasing to everyone, but that these rhymes ought to be permanently preserved by careful collection is a matter, I think, on which there can hardly be a difference of opinion. For this is our national heritage. For a long age, these rhymes have been preserved in our country within the maternal store of memory; within these rhymes is bound up the very tone of our mothers' and grandmothers' lullabies; in the rhythm of these rhymes still rings the tinkling of anklets from the childhood dance of our fathers and forefathers. And yet, nowadays, these rhymes are being gradually forgotten by the people. In the

current of social change, many things, great and small, are drifting away unnoticed. It is therefore time that this ancient national treasure be carefully collected and preserved.

These rhymes have been gathered from various provinces; hence, within many of them, numerous dialects of Bengal will be observed. Of the same rhyme, several readings are also to be found; none of these deserves to be discarded. For there exists no means, nor any need, of determining any one reading of a rhyme to be the pure or original text. Over ages, passed from mouth to mouth, these rhymes have become so entangled, mingled, and altered that it is not fitting to select any one particular reading from among the various versions as authoritative. For this fluidity, this shape-shifting nature, is inherent to the very character of rhymes. They are not preserved lifelessly, like relics of a past glory. They are living, they are mobile; according to place, time, and circumstance, they are at every moment adapting themselves to fit the occasion. To display that eternally changing nature of the rhyme, it is necessary to preserve its various readings. Let one example be given below —

First version

Agdum bagdum ghoradum saje.

The drum, mridanga, and cymbal resound.

Sounding and sounding, the palanquin moved on.

The palanquin went to that Kamalapuli.

Kamalapuli's little parrot.

Suryamama's wedding.

Come, let's go to the market for fun.

We'll buy areca-nut and betel and eat.

One betel leaf is torn.

Mother and daughter quarrel.

A ladle of tender pumpkin curry.
O little one, sing along.
I am indeed Nanda Ghosh —
Cover your head with cloth.
In the turmeric grove, turmeric flowers.
In the star's name, the tagar flower.

Second version

Agdum bagdum ghoradum saje.
The dhai and the mridanga sound.
Sounding and sounding, the little basket fell.
The basket went to Kamalapuri.
Come, let's go to Kamala for fun.
We'll buy betel-and-areca and eat.
A ladle of tender pumpkin curry.
O son-in-law, sing along.
In the moonlight, precisely visible —
who is under the kadam tree?
I am indeed Nanda Ghosh —
Cover your head with cloth, O.

Third version

Agdum bagdum ghoradum saje.
The dance, the mridanga sound.

Sounding and sounding, the palanquin came.

The palanquin went to that Kamalapuli.

Kamalapuli's wedding.

Suryamama's little parrot.

Bone crunches, crunches, dark cumin.

Fresh, fresh, betel roll.

Rai Rai Rai Ravana.

In turmeric-flowers, turmeric flowers.

In the star's name, tagar flower.

One row stands the women.

One row stands the men.

Son-in-law, will you eat rice —

Here, sit and eat, Bose.

Eat plenty, plenty of jackfruit segments.

Among the rhymes quoted above, it is impossible to determine which is the original text, nor is it proper, having settled on one text as original, to discard the others. Even their variations are amusing and worthy of particular discussion. Whether "Agdum bagdum ghoradum saje" has any clear meaning at all, I do not know; or if it is a corruption of some other line, it is not easy even to guess what that line might have been. But it is plainly seen that the first several lines describe a wedding-procession. The various instruments named in the second line have become quite distorted in the different versions. Again, from elsewhere we have obtained yet another version of this rhyme, in which it reads —

Agdum bagdum ghoradum saje.

The right-side spider's crab resounds.

Sounding and sounding, the ring fell down.

The ring went to Kamalapuri.

From these rhymes one gains a direct illustration of just how language gradually transforms in shape.

Collection of Rhymes

1

Aunt and grandaunt, forest-dwellers, home at the forest's edge.

Never once did aunt say, "Take this bundle of puffed rice."

What aunt, what grandaunt, what Brindaban is this?

Only now, after all this time, have I learned, Mother, what great wealth is!

To mother I gave a palanquin of aman rice.

To father I gave a blue horse.

I myself shall go to Gaur.

I shall bring back a golden crown.

With that we shall celebrate brother's wedding.

I myself shall dance in delight.

2

Who struck, who caught, at the golden body?

I shall give half a measure of rice into your cheek.

Who struck, who caught, who gave the blow to the cheek?

Angry at him, you didn't eat rice yesterday.
Who struck, who caught, who gave the blow to the cheek?
Quarrelling with him, I'll come again tomorrow.
I didn't strike, I didn't catch, I didn't say, "Away!"
I only said, "Gopal, go graze the calf."

3

Where does little Punthi dance?
In the midst of the hundred-petalled lotus.
What does Punthi do there?
She shakes out her hair and plucks flowers.
Diving and diving, she catches fish.

4

Wealth, O wealth, O wealth of wealth.
The fan of Chaitra-Baishakh season.
Wealth is the umbrella of the rainy season.
The quilt of the cold season.
Wealth is the cord to bind the hair.
The bolt to fasten the door.
No bedding to spread and lie upon.
Wealth is rolling in the dust.
Wealth is in the stomach of life.
In which life shall I say, wealth,

go walking through the mud.

Wealth, O wealth, O wealth.

He in whose house such wealth is absent, his life is in vain.

5

Sleep-bringing aunt, grandaunt, come to my house.

I'll give you fine-spun cloth, cook rice and eat.

In my house the darling child adorns my home.

Going to another's house, the darling makes only a quarrel.

Let there be quarrel, let the churning-stick break.

With both hands I'll buy you a spicy laddoo.

Spicy laddoo, my dear, if you don't eat or touch it —

the neighbourhood boys will snatch and eat it.

From the cowherd I'll buy a milk-giving cow.

For fear of harm to my child I nearly die.

The milk-giving cow was lost to a thief.

At home there is stale milk and a plantain.

With that beguile the darling, O beguile.

6

Sleep-bringing aunt, grandaunt, go to the house of sleep.

I'll give a betel-leaf full to the brim, chew it full-cheeked.

I'll give a stone-paved ghat, smear it with unguent.

I'll give a cool mat, go to sleep upon it.

I'll give a mango-jackfruit garden, go from shade to shade.
I'll give four, four bearers, to carry you on shoulders.
I'll give two, two maids, to oil your feet.
I'll give puffed rice of the ulki paddy, parched grain of the narenga paddy.
I'll give tree-ripened plantain, a potful of curd.

7

Sleep-bringing aunt, grandaunt, come to my house.
No bedstead, no mat — sit by Punthi's eyes.
I'll give a betel full to the brim, chew it full-cheeked.
I'll open the back door, go off with a whoosh.

8

Don't go to that quarter, the friend has come.
Don't eat from the friend's plate, feelings have caught.
Feelings, feelings, the kadam flower has bloomed.
Open the lid and see — the elder bride has had a baby boy!

9

Cormorant, cormorant, rising on the bank.
Your mother-in-law said, go peel the eggplant.
Don't peel that eggplant, it has seeds left in.
Don't go into that room, the friend has come.

Don't eat the friend's betel, a quarrel has occurred.
Seeing elder brother, the kadam-leaf has burst into bloom.

10

Cormorant, cormorant, rising on the bank.
Your mother-in-law said, go peel the potato.
How shall I peel it, round and round?
Don't go through that door, the friend has come.
Don't eat the friend's betel, feelings have caught.
Feelings, feelings, the kadam flower has burst into bloom.

11

Dove, tell me true —
where's the son?
Gone to market.
Where's the market?
Burnt down.
Where's the ash?
In the cowshed.
Will you fall in the gold-heap, or fall in the ash-heap?

12

O my treasure of a son,

sitting by the road, you were weeping.
Calling "Mother, mother," you called out.
How much dust and mud you smeared yourself with!
If she who passed by had been your mother,
she would have brushed off the dust and mud and taken you in her lap.

13

Little Punthi, dear girl,
I shall choose you a groom.
From which village, the groom?
Nimai Sarkar's son — bring out the palanquin.
I've brought it out, I've brought it out, sprinkling flowers.
I shall take little Punthi past the bakul grove.

14

Dust's companion, Nandakishore, dust smeared on your body.
Brushing off the dust, I'll take you in my lap — come, Nandaray.

15

Dust's companion, Nandakishore, your body's covered in scabies.
Go to the oil-mill, fetch oil — I'll pay the price.

16

Come, O moon, tied to the enclosure, tied at the gate is the elephant.
Eyes drooping, drooping — the star-eyed one watches the moon's magic show.

17

Elder bride, younger bride, will you go to fetch water?
A flower has bloomed in the water, you shall get to see it.
Krishna wanders along the banks, will you take the loom?
For that I have taken a beating — look at my back.
Elder bride, younger bride, hear one more thing —
a thief has slipped into Radha's house, a rogue with his hair tied up.
He takes no pitcher, takes no bowl, takes not the golden ewer.
In whatever house there's a red-clad bride, in that house alone he thieves.

18

Khoka has gone to catch fish, a deity has come to the water.
O deity, I fall at your feet, let Khokon come home.
No matter about the fish, let fire fall on the fish.
Only let no mud touch Khokon's feet.

19

On this bank, boatmen; on that bank, boatmen.
I've caught tiny minnow fish.

Inside the pot, wealth.
Gauri's daughter, whom to wed?
A groom from Noakhali —
works in the mint, lives in Ghughudanga.
In Ghughudanga a dove dies eating fried rice.
I shall go see the dove's death, wearing bracelets of gold.
The bracelet broke. The little dove died.

20

Weep, O weep, a nest in the tamarind grove.
You hoped another's child would weep for you.
I'll break your hand, I'll break your leg, I'll cross the river.
Don't weep all night, my darling, sleep just once.

21

In the palm tree, an owl sits, ears like small umbrellas.
Hearing the cloud's thunder, its heart goes thump, thump.
What business have you here, coming and going?
The flying goat's father comes, didn't, dance, dance.

22

Rock, rock, cradle.
I'll give earrings for your ears.

I'll give a sheepskin wrap for your waist.
The neighbourhood folk will burst with envy.
Not a daughter, but seven sons —
I shall roll a waistband for you.
See it, more than any enemy —
how precious a daughter I have!

23

Ikri mikri cham-chikri, the record-keeper cuts the skin.
Damodar came running.
Damodar, carpenter's son.
Bind him to the hingul tree, keep him there.
Hingul creaks and crunches.
Elder brother gave, Jagannath.
Jagannath's pots and pans.
At the door sits, husking rice.
Husking rice took till noon.
Eating rice comes at midday.
A fly fell in the rice.
I scrape it off with a hoe.
The hoe grew blunt.
Eat the carpenter's head.

24

Ulu ketu dulu ketu, the reed-flute.
The reed broke — Ekadashi.
One reed, five petals.
Who'll go to the blacksmith's ocean?
The blacksmith's wife, so haughty, like a queen.
Forest of madar, forest of coconut.
Twenty households I'll go about.
Whose belly holds the elder one?
Whose belly holds the younger?
The sparrow-king declared —
in the thief's belly, fried rice and gram.
Squirrel-wife, wash the clothes.
To play hardocha, buy a little basket.
Inside the basket, ripe betel.
Fie, the Hindu woman's husband, a Muslim!
One stone of fried banana, one stone of curry.
My little darling dances — beat your drums!

25

Ulukutu dhulukutu, the reed-flute.
The reed broke — Ekadashi.
One reed, five petals.
Mother gave to the blacksmith's forge.
The blacksmith-wife's whirring wheel.
Reflection, mirror. Twenty clans of Brahmins.

26

Why has Ranu wept?
Cooked with wet wood.
Tomorrow I'll go to the town market.
I'll buy and bring dry wood.
Why should I heed your crying?
Your shelf holds no butter.
You've eaten nothing all day.

27

Little khoka, cream of milk, ghee thick as curd.
At Khoka's wedding, what shall I do?
I'll give seven maidservants to oil his feet.
I'll give seven ministers to swing the palanquin.
I'll give fine rice-flakes for the young man's play.
I'll give syrupy laddoos to beguile the mother-in-law.

28

Khoka is our gold,
corner of four ponds.
Calling the goldsmith to the house, I'll cut a coin
and shape it into grain.

None of you dare refuse.

29

Khoka is our Lakshmi.

I'll put a belt round his neck.

A shawl round his waist.

Turning and turning, I'll carry our boy about.

I'll strut about as though I were of a great man's line.

30

Wealth, wealth, wealthy one, I'll weave you cloth.

I'll put on it a diamond spot.

The neighbourhood folk will burst with envy.

31

On the trunk of the alta tree, the wedding of two dolls.

Taking so much money, Father, you gave her away far off.

Why weep now, Father, covering your face with a towel?

First mother and father weep, then the stranger weeps.

The neighbours took her to her husband's home.

The husband's home has a cane-thatched roof.

There sits Durga Bhavani, chewing betel.

Hey Durga, hey Durga, your daughter's wedding —

give your daughter in marriage, with a garland of flowers.
Garland of flowers, bunch of roses — whose fortunate bride?
Hire-dada lies withering, Thakur-dada's bride.
In one house, curd and rice; in another, flattened rice.
Such a feast you've made, in Gokshunath's honour!

32

Hey there, wandering vine,
where were you all this while?
I was long in the forest.
In the forest a Bagdi died, and I had to go.
You take the pitcher on your hip, I'll take the friend's hand.
Let's go along the royal road — the boy's mother strings her jewels.
The little boy dances a jig.

33

Khoka will go by boat, sun will strike his body.
A thousand-rupee muslin cloth, a golden shawl on his body.
On it, a red rose flower.
Every Bengali girl grows restless seeing it.
Flour from Sayedabad, ghee from Kashimbazar.
Wait a moment, I'll fry puris for Khoka.
Flour from Ulor land, ghee from Mayadabad.
Bringing kadai from Shantipur, I'll fry the puris.

34

Rain falls pitter-patter, what a flood came!
Shiv Thakur got married, three daughters were given.
One daughter cooks and serves, one daughter eats.
One daughter, without eating, goes to her father's house.
Father's oil is amla-oil, gardener's flowers —
with such things I'll bind her hair, a thousand rupees' worth.
In the market of markets I found a sickle.
With that sickle I cut the stem of the red arum.

35

Khokababu Chowdhury
got the village of Anguri.
Got fish from the Padma.
My little khoka's wife is calling.
"Come eat rice, Father."

36

Dance once more, moon's corner.
I'll bind you a flute as much as it needs of gold.
But your dance I know, though Brajangana knows it not.

37

Shiva dances, Brahma dances, and Indra dances too.
In Gokul the milkmaid dances, having found Govinda.
Milk-pudding, sweet-rice, laddoos of sweet-rice, ripe plantain —
coyly, coyly the cowherd girls eat.
To Nanda's temple the cowherd came running.
In their hands, sticks; on their shoulders, pots; they dance, swaying, swaying.

38

Where does Khoka dance?
In the midst of the hundred-petalled lotus.
There Khoka shakes out his hair —
bunches, bunches of flowers fall.
With these Khoka plays.

39

Annapurna, cream of milk.
Tomorrow I go to a stranger's house.
A stranger's son struck me with a blow.
Weeping, weeping, to uncle's house.
Uncle gave an old husband.
Hey uncle, I fall at your feet —
send me back to mother's house.

Mother gave a fine bangle,
father gave a sari.
Quickly, Mother, send me off —
the chariot is coming to the house.
Come quickly, palanquin-bearers —
the palanquin moves behind.
Wait, whose fellow is this,
let me determine my mother.
Mother, so foolish, why weep and die?
Consider for yourself, whose house you keep.

40

Khoka dances upon the breast.
A boyal fish went off with his nose.
O boyal, come back —
come see Khoka's dance.

41

Aunt, grandaunt, forest-cotton bird, sitting deep in the forest.
Aunt has gone to Brindaban, and I've been to see it too.
What aunt, what grandaunt, what Brindaban?
Only today have I learned, Mother, what great wealth is.
To mother I gave bangle and sari, to father a blue horse.
To brother I gave a wedding.

No oil in the pitcher, what a fine wedding this is!
No oil in the pitcher — I'll dance, swaying, swaying.

42

Aunt, grandaunt, forest-cotton bird, home deep in the forest.
Never once did you say, aunt, "Take this bundle of puffed rice."

43

Khoka is a jewel of wealth.
Near the house, a flower garden, and in it, Brindaban.

44

For what reason do you cry, Khoka, for what reason do you cry?
What is lacking in my house?
I'll fashion you a golden flute
strung with pearls in rows.

45

O my golden one,
why, at this late hour, do you husk unripe rice?
Three guests have come to the house.
I've cooked eel-fish, and fry of the snakehead fish.

46

Who caught him, who struck him, who slapped his cheek?
May whoever brings ill on Khoka's virtue die that very day.

47

Kajal says to Ajal, I go to the reddened face —
if it turns black, I lose my sense.

48

What shall my Khoka eat with his rice?
Prawn from the riverbank, eggplant from home.

49

Khoka will ride the chariot, the frog will be his charioteer.
Clay dolls clatter along, the ant carries the umbrella.
Atop the umbrella, a company — whose sahib's wealth are you?

50

Khoka will go to catch fish, mud will smear his body.
Go to the oil-mill and fetch oil — your elder brother will pay.

51

Khoka will go to catch fish in the Khirnodi marsh.
Not fish, but shrimp — two kites fly after them.

52

Khoka will go to graze the buffaloes, what will he eat there?
On my shelf, wheat bread and a bowl full of ghee.

53

Khoka, sleep, sleep.
In the palmyra grove the tiger roars, fiercely growling.

54

Sleep drifts, drifts, over the bark of trees.
By Shashthi's shrine the great elephant and horse sleep.
By the ash-heap the yapping dog sleeps.
On bed and shelf, lord Shashthi sleeps.
In my lap, my little darling sleeps.

55

In the custard-apple tree, the parrot; in the pomegranate, the bee.
Why don't you speak, bride? —
What shall I speak, in what manner?
To speak, my throat burns.

56

On that bank, a sesame plant,
sesame seeds rustling, rustling.
Beneath it, my mother
lights the Lakshmi-lamp.
My mother, matted-haired,
sweeps the house.
My father, old Shiva,
rigs the boat.
My brother, lord of kingdoms,
sinks the water-jar.
There comes the fan-lady
quack, quack, quack —
Look, brother, look, look!

57

My Khoka, treasure-son,
sat weeping by the road.
Dust smeared on his reddened body,

calling "Mother, Mother," he called.

58

"Khoka! Khoka!" I cry aloud.

Whose house has Khoka gone to?

Bring me, all of you, a red switch —

I'll strike Khoka and finish him off.

59

Sleep-bringing aunt, grandaunt, come to our house.

No bedstead, no couch — sit by Khoka's eyes.

Khoka's mother isn't home, sleep here yourself.

Beneath the loft there's milk, sip and drink.

I'll slip off my night-clothes, watch the tiger's dance.

I'll give a betel full to the brim, sit by the door and chew.

I'll cut open the back door, go off with a whoosh, whoosh.

60

Little girl, cream of milk, honey of the bo-tree.

The pot's rattle-drum, the courtyard broom, the wife of the corner-eater.

61

Sleep falls, sleep falls on the tree's bark.
By Shashthi's shrine sleep falls on the old grey-head.
In the thatched room sleep falls on the black dog.
In our house sleep falls on lord Khoka.

62

Harom-bibi wears wooden sandals.
Lal-bibi wears shoes.
Come, bibi, let's go to Dhaka,
go to Dhaka and eat fruit —
that fruit has no stem at all.

63

The drummers beat the drum, in field and marsh.
I married Sundari to a band of robbers.
The robber came, mother.
Wrapping her in jute cloth, they carried her off —
never let anyone see.
If I had known before, I'd have wept holding the palanquin.

64

Ita, Kamal's mother, leave the homestead —
your son's wedding, bring the musicians.

As a child I played, wiping the pebbles clean.
Mother called me plump and round.
Why do you weep now, Mother, gripping the palanquin's edge?
Another's son will take her away, beating the drum.

65

Who's there, who's there, who's there!
Hot milk, sugar-syrup —
throw down the cot!

66

Come, O parrot bird!
Our Khoka has eaten betel
tied up in a charm.

67

Come, O hanging bird!
I'll fry you fine spice-paste.
Eat and chatter away.
Rock our Khoka to sleep.

68

Shashthi, dear child, the bundle of betel-leaf —
pick it up, shake it, O.

Whichever wretched girl cannot bear to look,
let her leave the neighbourhood.

69

Grey with dust, Nandakishore,
dust smeared on your body.
Brush off the dust, take in your lap
the golden magic-lord.

70

Our Khoka says —
puffed rice floats in water.
Dried betel of the plate,
curd turned sour.

71

"Khoka! Khoka!" I call.
Khoka says, "Mother, pluck the greens."
Let the plucked greens wither and die.
Khoka shall eat milk and banana.

72

My Khoka will go graze cows,
his body's name is Hasi.
I'll bind him with gold
a flute crested with jewels.

73

My Khoka's sleepless smile —
I love it more than anything.

74

Khoka will go by boat,
red little shoes on his feet.
Five-hundred-rupee muslin cloth,
golden shawl on his body.
Who among you will call him dark?
From Patna I'll bring turmeric
and make his body glow.

75

When Khoka sleeps, I'll offer alms —
I'll get a branch of flowers.

From which ghat did you pluck flowers,
O forest-garlanded one?
The sun has struck the moon-face —
lift up the branch to shade him.
Khoka is our wealth.
At home, a grove of nate flowers.
In the outer house I've made a room —
a golden throne.

76

Come, sleep, come through the banana grove —
a heron-hued cloud has gathered.
Lokhar's mother wears a nose-ring, piercing her forehead.
Eating amani rice, my tooth broke.
How shall I wear vermilion now?

77

Little Khoka's wedding, I'll arrange in the land of Hatmala.
There they drive oxen for their cows.
There they polish teeth with diamonds.
Rui fish, spinach leaves come basket by basket.
Khoka's elder sister sits in the corner.
If anyone asks for a bit, she says, "What more is left to me?"

78

Taking so much money, Father, you sit contented in the shade of the chand-lata vine.

Why do you weep now, Father, holding a towel to your face?

We shall go to a stranger's house, becoming dependent on strangers.

A stranger's daughter will make faces, turning her mouth away.

Tears from both eyes will fall like streams of earth.

79

On that bank two jackals have smeared themselves with sandalwood.

Who saw it, who saw it — elder brother saw it.

Elder brother's staff struck and killed one.

On either side two katla fish floated up.

One went to Kiye's mother, one went to Kiye.

Dhokum-kum plays the music, some fellow's wedding.

80

There comes the lame son-in-law, jingling along.

Curd fell into the pot of cream, let it turn to ash.

In the pot lies a katla fish, go fetch it.

On either side two katla fish floated up.

One was taken by Guru-thakur, one by Tiye.

Tiye's mother's wedding, giving a red towel.

A red towel wasn't enough, bring silk.
Silk rustles, rustles — bring a sari.
Too heavy to lift, the sisters-in-law weep.

81

On potato leaves, my brother Chalu; on bhela leaves, curd.
All the sons-in-law have come — where is my lame son-in-law?
There comes the lame son-in-law, playing his little drum.
I gave him a broken house to sleep in, a rat took his ear.
Don't cry, don't cry, son-in-law, I'll give you a cow as alms.
Name that cow after the moon of the blessed lady.

Magh 1301. Kartik 1302

KABI-SANGEET

(The Songs of the Kobiwallahs)

Between the ancient poetry of Bengal and its modern poetry stand the songs of the kobiwallahs — the poet-singers. This was a new phenomenon, and, like most new things, its span of life was exceedingly brief. As one day at twilight a cloud of insects will suddenly fill the sky — invisible in the light of noon, and vanished again before the darkness has time to thicken — so too did these songs of the kobis once appear, of a sudden, in the brief twilight-sky of Bengali letters. Before that hour they had no history; and since then, no trace of them has been heard.

Lyric poetry has flowed through Bengal from time out of mind, and it is in lyric poetry that Bengali literature finds its chief glory. The padavali of the Vaishnava poets are

like the boundless flower-clusters of spring: as fragrant in feeling as they are beautiful in form. The Annadamangal songs of Raygunakar, poet of the royal court, are like a jewelled necklace upon a king's throat: as brilliant as they are intricate in workmanship. These "songs of the kobis," which now form the subject of our discussion, are songs too — but they possess neither that depth of feeling nor that perfection of form.

And there is reason enough for the lack. The songs of an earlier age were sung either before the gods or before kings — and so, of necessity, the poet's standard was exceedingly exacting. For this reason no part of such compositions bore the mark of neglect; feeling, language, metre, melody, all alike were touched with beauty and with skill. In those days the poet had unbroken leisure to compose, and his listeners unbroken leisure to attend; and it was in an assembly of connoisseurs that a poet of true gift could fittingly display his art.

But in the newly-created capital of the English there was no ancient court, no ancient standard. The poet's patron-king became now that vast, unformed personage called the Public, and the fitting music for the court of this upstart king was the song of the kobi's troupe. For how many, in those days, had the leisure, the capacity, or even the wish, for a genuine appreciation of literary savor? The newly-prosperous, labour-worn merchant community of the new capital, gathering of an evening for their sittings, wanted no more than an hour's stimulating diversion; they did not want the flavour of literature.

The kobi-troupes descended into the arena to supply that want. Taking the songs of earlier masters, diluting them with much water and a little cheap glitter, shattering their measured beauty into something wholly commonplace, they took, in the lightest of tunes and at the topmost pitch of their voices, to shouting in chorus, to the accompaniment of four pairs of drums and four pairs of cymbals, and rending the very sky. The audiences of that day were not content with the simple pleasure of hearing a song and savouring its sentiment; they required besides the excitement of combat, of victory and defeat. The strings of Sarasvati's vina must clang and jangle; and even the wooden frame of the vina must be pressed into service as a cudgel, clattering in mock battle. For the entertainment of this sudden new king was devised this singular new institution.

At first the custom was that two rival troupes would exchange questions beforehand, and come prepared with written answers and rejoinders; but in time even this failed to satisfy, and the war of words came to be waged extempore, upon the very spot. In such circumstances it was not the rival alone who suffered injury — language, feeling, and metre, all alike were laid waste. Nor did the listeners ask for more: a clever turn of phrase, a flourish of alliteration, a ready retort sufficed to set the gathering astir and the applause roaring. And over and above all this — four pairs of drums, four pairs of cymbals, and the desperate massed shouting of many throats: Sarasvati, lover of solitude, could not long endure in such company.

For those whose eye is not caught by the plain simplicity of beauty, and who have no leisure to sink into the depths of feeling, a rapid hail of alliteration will very quickly rouse the mind. When music remains in a barbarous state, however much it may lack of raga and melody, it makes up the want in the clattering din of rhythm. The untutored heart is more readily set dancing by such frequent, resounding blows than by melody itself. In one class of poetry alliteration produces just such a swift, shallow, easy excitement. There are, indeed, few devices so cheaply effective for catching the ear of the common man.

When alliteration follows in the train of feeling, language, and metre, it heightens the beauty of a poem; but when it outstrips and drowns all these, advancing merely to win the applause of the foolish, it drags the whole composition down into vulgarity.

In the songs of the kobi-troupes, alliteration in many places advances toward sheer effrontery before the listener, shouldering aside feeling, language, and even grammar itself. And yet there is no true craft in it, for it is bound by no metre and constrained by no rule whatsoever. But the listener who wishes only to be swept up in a moment's amusement does not trouble himself with such judgments, nor does he want anything that would require them.

> Gone, gone is kul, let kul go —

- > not for that am I distressed [akul].
- > The one whose kul I took has turned against me [pratikul].
- > If the Kundalini of the family [Kulakundalini] show me favour [anukula],
- > my shoreless [akul] boat shall find its bank [kul] once more.
- > Now, grown restless [byakul], shall I lose both banks [dukul], my friend?
- > Then how my rivals, every one, will laugh!

The reader will observe that in the lines quoted above it has become well-nigh impossible to find any shore — any kul — to the word kul itself, so relentlessly is it repeated. But there is no true merit in this, for it is, for the most part, nothing but the repetition of a single word. Yet the listeners exercise no judgment whatsoever; they stand ready to be enchanted by the cheapest ingenuity. Indeed, should the poet, for the sake of a flourish of alliteration, violate grammar and philology entire, no one so much as objects. For example —

- > Young in years, yet so refined,
 - > a connoisseur of poetry's savour.
 - > Sweetness, gravity [gambhīrya] — yet no "haughtiness" [dambhīrya] in her,
 - > unlike other wives, in their common way.
-
- > Seeing your impatience, dear friend, patience I too cannot keep.
 - > If the thing can be accomplished, I shall lend my aid —
 - > only tell me, speak, say all to me.

Bengali words, in themselves, bear no weight of stress; they carry no accent after the English fashion, nor do they preserve long and short syllables after the Sanskrit fashion; and since, further, the songs under discussion possess no regular metrical binding whatsoever, it becomes especially needful that frequent alliteration should stamp these carelessly-wrought compositions upon the listener's mind. As, in

training a creeper up a bare wall, one must from time to time drive in a nail to give it purchase, so too do these alliterations drive nail after nail, again and again, into the listener's mind; and by this artificial device many a lifeless piece of writing seizes hold of attention with astonishing speed. It is for this very reason that the panchali literature of Bengal abounds so in alliteration.

Having taken upon itself the task of amusing the crowd upon the spur of the moment, the song of the kobi-troupes sacrificed all purity and skill of metre and language, and contented itself with cheap alliteration and false ornament; nor is any particular excellence of poetic feeling to be found in it. The sentiments of the earlier Shakta and Vaishnava masters, thinned and made watery, these poets supplied at bargain price to the listeners of the town. What in the originals was restrained becomes here slack and scattered; what bloomed, in their bowers, in the shape of flowers, is here mixed together in the shape of stale seasoning.

There are many things which, dislodged from their proper place, become distorted and offensive. So too, in the songs of the kobi, many a sentiment, fallen from its rightful setting, has grown sullied. It must be granted that within the padavali of the Vaishnava poets there are passages not wholly pure — yet, set within the whole, they take on a certain grace. When the kobiwallah tears such a passage from its living context, from the beauty that once enfolded it, and sets it alone before us, in coarse language and slack metre, it assumes the ugly shape of a putrefied thing.

Among the many varieties of love depicted in Vaishnava poetry is the description of Radha in her state of khandita — the wronged and slighted beloved. In its spiritual sense this may carry some particular glory; but as literature, there is no doubt that Krishna's lustful deception here mars, in turn, the very beauty of the love-poem of Krishna and Radha. In this humiliation of Radhika the glory of the poem itself is humiliated.

But amid so vast a wealth of beauty, we do not open our eyes to see these blemishes — under the influence of the beauty of the whole, their offensiveness is largely dispelled. Taken in its worldly sense, the ideal of love in Vaishnava poetry has, in many places, faltered; and yet if, after reading it entire, a man's mind is not stirred

to some beautiful and elevated feeling, then either he has not read it properly and in full, or he is no true connoisseur of the poetic sentiment.

But our kobiwallahs, knowing that the beauty and depth of Vaishnava poetry lay beyond their own reach and that of their listeners, chiefly chose for themselves that part of it which is least worthy. Scandal and deceit — these form the chief matter of the kobiwallah's song. Again and again Radhika and her companions, with sharp and playful barbs, taunt Shyam over Kubja or some other rival. They have another favourite theme besides: the mutual recrimination of the sexes, each accusing the other of faithlessness — and to hear such contrived quarrelling again and again breeds nothing but contempt.

Those whose sense of true self-worth is firm ever disdain to make open display of wounded pride. When their dignity is struck, they either seek open redress or pass the matter over in silence. When wounded in love by one dear to them, they either bear it secretly or resolve it, fully and face to face. In our country, as one may always observe, it is the dependent who is most given to such pique — one who on the one hand is a beggar and on the other endless in his sulking; one incapable in all things is precisely the one who takes offense at every turn. This trait of wounded pride betrays a shameless weakness bred into the very marrow of the Bengali character.

Weakness may, in certain places and in certain measures, appear beautiful. On slight occasions, wounded pride sometimes becomes a woman well. So long as the heroine holds a genuine claim upon the hero's love, there is a certain sweetness in checking, now and again, in playful jest or as mock penalty for some trifling fault, the ardour of his devotion for a while. But when the hero, by grave offense or outright betrayal, strikes an axe at the very root of that love, then to sit and give the customary show of wounded pride is merely to heap contempt upon oneself; there is no beauty in it, and it deserves no place in poetry.

Unhappily, in our country a wife must, of necessity, endure and forgive every dishonour and wrong done her by a husband — she has no weapon but a few tear-moistened, sharp-tongued reproaches, or a spell of veiled, averted, silent sulking. There is, then, no doubt that this perpetual wounded pride is, among the women of

our society, a genuine reality. But it is equally certain that it is not always beautiful; for whatever reveals in a person an unmixed and abiding degradation can never be beautiful.

The pique of Radhika, as it appears in the songs of the kobi-troupes, is for the most part just such unworthy pique.

- > For pride's own sake I nursed unyielding pride,
- > and thereby Shyam himself felt slighted.
- > I did not woo him, did not look back,
- > did not speak, for pride's sake I kept still.
- > Krishna, in the very passion born of that anger, wrath upon wrath,
- > falls, perhaps, into fresh ardour for Chandravali.
- > There was the old love that was — and now what unheard-of new passion is this,
- > lest, in his anger, Shyam forget all fondness for Radha!
- > He whose regard alone gives worth to my pride — if he regard it not,
- > then what shall this pride avail?
- > Whatever regard Madhava may yet hold, be it much or little,
- > it is by his regard alone that I have become one who is proud.
- > Whichever side's pride swells the greater,
- > it falls to the other to guard that side's honour.
- > To guard Shyam's honour — pride be gone, be gone!
- > What is pride or shame to me now?

In the little history of love set down in these few lines, we can feel no reverence for Krishna, none for Radhika, and only contempt arises even for Chandravali.

Nor is it only the pique of hero and heroine; the songs of the kobi-troupes show, just as constantly, the pique of a daughter toward her parents. The querulous fretting that Uma shows toward the Mountain-King's queen provokes no vexation in the reader — everywhere it seems only sweet. The reason is that Uma's claim upon her mother's tenderness admits no doubt; and in this give and take of blow and counter-blow between mother and daughter, the very sea of affection only rises the more beautifully into waves.

That the wounded pride of mother and daughter, of hero and heroine, forms the chief matter of the kobi's songs has one reason in this: that the Bengali temperament runs somewhat overmuch to such pique — that is, his claim upon another's love is, by nature, exceedingly high; so much so that even should that love prove false, he will not, for all his pleading and weeping and raging, ever relinquish his claim upon it. Another reason is that in such displays of pique the sharpness of retort and counter-retort, and the excitement of victory and defeat, are alike preserved. In the songs of the kobiwallahs, the chief aim is not the creation of literary savour, but the arousal of momentary excitement.

It was the kobiwallahs who first introduced into modern Bengal the composing of songs meant neither to kindle religious feeling nor to please a king, but solely to entertain the leisure hours of the common people. Even now that same public holds sway over literature; but meanwhile the character of the public has changed, and with that change literature has gained in depth. A full discussion of this would require a separate essay, and so there is no need of it here.

But however far public taste may improve, however widely education may spread, there will always remain a need both for an enduring literature, to furnish true delight, and for an ephemeral literature, to serve immediate necessity and beguile idle hours. In our own day it is the newspaper and the playhouse that answer this latter need. The very slackening of high standards, the very excess of cheap ornament, once seen in the songs of the kobi-troupes, may be seen again, in somewhat altered form, in the modern newspaper and in plays written for the stage. In all such literature of the moment — born of the moment, and dying with it — we find vulgarity of language and of feeling, an infidelity to truth and to the discipline of letters, and, in every respect, coarseness and want of restraint. Before long, the

public will so far advance that even in its idle amusements we shall see established a decorum befitting gentlefolk, a deeper truth, a more exacting ideal. Of this there can be no doubt.

We have here criticized, in a general and comprehensive way, the songs of the kobi-troupes. Here and there, within them, beauty and loftiness of feeling are indeed to be found — but on the whole what one chiefly observes is transience, a wateriness of sentiment, and a neglect of the poet's craft; and the chief reason for this is that these songs were composed upon the spot, for the sake of a moment's excitement.

And yet these songs of the short-lived "kobi"-troupes remain a chapter in the history of our literature and our society; and inasmuch as, with the rise of English rule, modern literature forsook the royal court and took up residence as guest of the common citizenry, these songs were the very first to show the way.

Jyaishtha, 1302 (Bengali era)

RUSTIC LITERATURE

One day, at the close of Shravan, I was travelling by boat through the Pabna-Rajshahi region. Field and meadow, all was drowned in water. The little villages lay scattered here and there like floating clusters of nests upon the flood, home to creatures of the water. No line of shore was to be seen — only the water rippling on every side. In the midst of this, as the sun was about to set, I saw some ten or twelve men rowing a dinghy toward us. All together they had struck up a loud song, and instead of oars, each held a bamboo pole in both hands, driving the water back with a rhythmic splash and thud in time with the song, moving swiftly on. I strained my ears to catch the words, and after hearing the refrain repeated again and again, this is what I made out:

Young woman, why so heavy at heart?

From Pabna I'll bring you a motori worth a full rupee!

Whether, amid the flood-tide of a full monsoon, with the sun setting in utter silence, this song was fitting to the hour — of that the reader may well have doubts; but in

these two lines all the villages seemed, from the midst of that weed-strewn watery waste, to find a voice and speak. I saw that here too, beside this cowshed, in the shade of this jujube tree, a young wife sits heavy-hearted, and at the crooked, tear-brimmed sidelong glance of her displeasure, the poetry of the village poet springs to life across field and shore, water and land, in metre, tune, and rhythm.

Of all the misfortunes that beset the world, a young wife's displeasure ranks foremost among them; and to appease that distant wrath, poets stand ready to stake their very lives, deprived as they are of their beloved's favour. But when I heard, within the song, "From Pabna I'll bring a *motori* worth a rupee," for a moment a great reassurance rose within me. I do not rightly know what a *motori* may be, but the poet clearly had no doubt that its price could not exceed one rupee. To think that at one corner of the earth, in this district of Pabna, there exists such a place where one need not perform the impossible to please a displeased beloved, where one need not journey to some place more inaccessible than Pabna, nor gather some object rarer than a "motori" — this makes the affairs of the heart seem, by comparison, rather more manageable. Poets of the first rank, such as Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti, would in such straits surely have summoned, with undimmed countenance, the golden lotus of Lake Manasa, a star from the sky, or the parijata flower of heaven's garden. And the young women of first rank in Ujjain, hearing merely the proposal of so arduous an undertaking, could hardly have failed to be gladdened, swooning to strains of Shikharini and Mandakranta metre.

At least, that is the illusion one falls into upon reading poetry. But faithless, prose-bound folk do not credit poetic genius with quite so much power. To the question whether a whole flock of sheep may be slaughtered by the mere recitation of a mantra, Voltaire answered: yes — but only if a sufficient quantity of arsenic accompanies it. For a heavy-hearted young wife, the proposal of a star from the sky, the parijata of heaven, or the offering of one's very life, might indeed prove gratifying; but in most cases, along with all this, an armlet or an anklet is also required. The poet glosses over this point; he wishes to prove that by mantra-power alone, by metre and feeling alone, the deed is done — ornament there may be, but only the ornament of poetry. Now, the country-folk of our Pabna consider the pomp and circumstance of high poetry to be excessive, and their own faithful village poet, dispensing with all mantra and incantation, comes straight out with the plain matter of the rupee-worth *motori*, wasting no time.

And yet a metre there is, and a tune there is. Even at the edge of this world, on the shore of a Pabna marsh, these too have their place. It is by their means that the price

of that *motori* rises far above one rupee. That *motori* is touched by the philosopher's stone of feeling and sentiment. Say those same two lines of the song in ordinary prose, without tune, and a certain harshness creeps into them at once; but set to metre and melody, that harshness vanishes in an instant, and these few trivial words become clothed, out of the daily dust of existence, in a garment of feeling.

For man there is an absolute need for this. Whatever lies bound closely about him in the affairs of daily life, he wishes to adorn with rhythm and bathe in the light of everlasting beauty, that he may behold it so.

For this reason, even as ploughing and sowing proceed in the countryside, as ferries ply the rivers, as the blacksmith forges his ploughshare, the carpenter his husking-pedal, and the goldsmith his rupee-worth *motori* — so too, alongside all this, within, the work of building a literature goes ceaselessly on, without rest. Whatever is accomplished each day in scattered, disconnected, fragmentary fashion, literature strives to thread upon a string of unity and make ready for all time. Amid the countryside's manifold daily labours, there is a constant striving that an eternal melody should sound through all its gaps and crevices.

When, drifting down the Padma, one hears the clamour of sandpipers rising from a sandbank, no one mistakes it for the cuckoo's coo; one knows well enough that the fifth, the middle, and the flattened seventh notes find no proper place in it; and yet to call it the song of the Padma's sandbanks is in no way improper. For whatever be the tune, right or wrong, in that pure river-wind, in the winter sun, there sounds the note of countless creatures' joy in the mere delight of living.

In rustic literature too, however slight the flight of imagination, that same note of joy is present. The life that villagers live out, day after day, is set to rhythm by the poet who gives voice to the heart of the whole village. Like the cry of the ruddy sheldrake on the Padma's shoals, it asks no perfection of tune or measure. The poet of Meghadut journeyed as far as Alaka; he was the poet of Ujjain's royal court. Our poet of unknown songs, laden though he was with hardship, could never travel beyond the town of Pabna — indeed, had he been able to, the people of his own village would have forsaken him. It is precisely by the narrowness of his imagination that he has been able to bind his neighbours to himself in close-knit ties; and it is for this reason that in his songs it is not the solitary fancy-loving poet alone, but the whole countryside's heart, that rings out in chorus.

It is for this reason that this literature — which, in the shape of rhymes, songs, and tales scattered through the villages of Bengal, forever rocks the mind of the villager

— must, if one would take it up as poetry, be read with the whole village and the whole neighbourhood gathered up in one's mind; it is they alone who fill its broken rhythms and imperfect rhymes with meaning and life. Rustic literature depends upon the picture of the Bengali village, upon the memory of the village, more than upon anything else — and this is precisely why it holds a peculiar savour for the Bengali. When a Vaishnavi comes begging at the courtyard door of the inner apartments, crying "Jai Radhe," the curious mistress of the house and the veiled young brides grow eager to hear her. The aged grandmother, replete to the very throat with tales and rhymes and songs — she whom, through many a moonlit fortnight and many a dark one lit by stars alone, the children and youths and maidens of the household have kept awake and listening for centuries with rapt attention — to the Bengali reader, her lore is deep and inexhaustible.

Just as a tree's roots are bound fast to the earth while its crown spreads toward the sky, so everywhere the lower strata of literature remain, in large measure, entangled and hidden within the soil of one's native land; they are, in a special and narrow sense, local, regional. They are fit only for the enjoyment and comprehension of the common folk of that particular land; outsiders find no entry there. Whatever in literature is universal stands upon this regional, lower stratum. Between this lower literature and the higher literature there remains always an inner connection. What lies toward the sky cannot be compared, in its flowers and fruit and branches, with the roots buried in the earth below — and yet, to those versed in such matters, their kinship and connection can never be dismissed.

This connection between the higher and lower becomes clear when one examines ancient Bengali literature. Though the poets of Annadamangal and Kabikankan were poets of royal courts and courts of the wealthy, though both were learned men, versed in Sanskrit poetics, they could not stray very far from the literature current in the country. Between the tales of Annadamangal and Kumarasambhava the difference is slight, and yet Annadamangal was not cast in the mould of Kumarasambhava. Its deities are the village Hara-Gauri of Bengal. Kabikankan's Chandi, the Dharmamangal, the Manasar Bhasan, the tale of Satyapir — all are composed upon the foundation of rustic legend. Only by becoming acquainted with those rustic rhymes can one gain a true understanding of the poems composed by Bharatchandra and Mukundaram. In the poetry of the royal court, metre, rhyme, and poetic craft are, without doubt, wholly accomplished — but at its core, there was no essential difference between it and the rustic rhymes.

I cannot say for certain whether the rhymes that have come into my hands are comparatively old or new. But over a span of one or two hundred years, such poetry does not much alter in age. The rhyme composed by a village poet fifty years ago may, in one sense, be called contemporary with Mukundaram; for where the life of the village lies sheltered, the waves of the tide of time cannot strike with the same force. The daily course of village life, and the literature that accompanies that life, flow on for long ages in the same channel, without change.

Only very recently has the modern age, like a newfangled son-in-law come from distant parts with strange new manners, made its way even into the inner chambers of the countryside. Change has laid its hand upon the village too. For this reason those who have taken on the task of collecting rustic rhymes write to me thus:

"Save for the very old, the girls of today no longer expect to hear such poetry. They do not know it, nor do they keep any curiosity to know it. The number of elderly women is small. Among them too, many do not know it. Even those who do know it are not all alike. And so, to collect five rhymes, one must seek the shelter of five old women in five villages. Occasionally we find one or two of the old Vaishnavis of this country begging in this manner. The rhymes they recite are all on the theme of Radha-Krishna's love. Such Vaishnavis are not commonly met with nowadays, and even when met, many of them sing but a single rhyme. In such circumstances, to collect more than one new rhyme, the help of a considerable number of Vaishnavis is required. Still, by the grace of our fertile motherland, it is no great wonder that at least once a week we may hear the cry of 'Jai Radhe' from some strange new Vaishnavi."

Formerly, these rustic rhymes, passed from mouth to mouth of beggar-women and grandmothers, went from house to house to satisfy even the literary thirst of the daughters of respectable families in the village. Now, many of these women have themselves learned to read; the printed literature of Bengal has fallen into their hands. And so, it seems, rustic rhymes have now descended to a much lower stratum of society.

The subject-matter of these rhymes may be broadly divided into two categories: those concerning Hara-Gauri, and those concerning Krishna and Radha. In the Hara-Gauri songs, the domestic affairs of the Bengali household are expressed; in the Krishna-Radha songs, the sentiments of the Bengali heart find voice. On the one hand stands the social bond of matrimony; on the other, the love that transcends society.

Within the bond of matrimony broods one great affliction: poverty. The tale of Hara-Gauri surges up, wave upon wave, from every side, circling round that reef of poverty. Sometimes it is the affection of father-in-law and mother-in-law that this poverty wounds; sometimes it is the love between husband and wife that comes to be checked upon that same rock.

The heart of the Bengali poet has raised this very poverty to the height of greatness and divinity. By renunciation and self-forgetfulness, the poet has reversed the degradation of poverty and shown it to be far greater than opulence itself. Bholanath made poverty an ornament upon his body — for a society of the poor, there could be no more joyous marvel. He who says, "I have nothing," is poor indeed. But he who can say, "I need nothing" — what want can touch him? Shiva, indeed, is the very ideal of such a one.

Unlike other countries, wealth in India commands no special dignity — at least, it did not formerly. That a family or household possessed of lineage, character, and honour should be devoid of wealth is no rare occurrence in our country. For this reason, in our land, marriage alliances are ever contracted between the wealthy and the poor.

Yet whatever the social ideal, wealth has a natural arrogance of its own. In the pride of riches, the wealthy man bestows upon the poor a glance of condescending pity. Where there is no social hierarchy, the hierarchy of wealth comes in to stir up a revolution of its own. Such a state of affairs becomes a source of great affliction in matrimonial relations. When, naturally enough, a wealthy father-in-law scorns his poor son-in-law, and the wealthy daughter grows resentful of her poor husband and of her own ill fortune, the whole fabric of the household begins to tremble.

How this grave affliction of married life is resolved is celebrated in the tale of Hara-Gauri. The unshaken devotion of the virtuous wife is one element of it; another is the transmutation of poverty's degradation into the celebration of its greatness. Uma's Lord, though poor, is not thereby made base; and the wife who haunts the cremation ground is, in the honour due a wife, held greater than Indrani, queen of Indra himself.

Another great obstacle to the bond of matrimony is the old age or ugliness of the husband. This too has been overcome in the tale of Hara-Gauri. When, in the marriage assembly, Menaka lamented at the sight of her aged son-in-law, by some miraculous power the youthful beauty of that old man, in raiment and adornment, was suddenly revealed. This miraculous beauty belongs, in truth, to every aged

husband — it depends upon the sincere devotion of his wife's heart. The village's beggar-bards, its storytellers and singers, have gone door to door, again and again, awakening that same devotion through the tale of Hara-Gauri.

The poetic genius of the village did not stop even here. It has made Shiva a drunkard, wild on ganja and bhang. Nor is that all — his fondness for uncouth mountain-nymphs is unsparingly proclaimed. That boundless ocean of Kalidasa's imagination, that windless flame upon the peak — the Lord of Yogis — has met with such misfortune, come to the villages of Bengal!

But the essential point remains this: that the tale of Hara-Gauri is, through all obstacles great and small, the story of matrimony's triumph. In the theme of Hara-Gauri, a living ideal has been shaped of the woman who is the very core of our joint-family society. However poor, wretched, aged, or ill-favoured the husband may be, the wife blazes forth in beauty, in devotion, in forgiveness, and in fortitude. The wife herself is the wealth of the poor man, the goddess of plenty to the beggar, the guardian fortune of an empty house.

As the song of Hara-Gauri is the song of society, so the song of Radha-Krishna is the song of beauty. Whatever philosophical, spiritual truth may lie within it, we set aside for now. For truth, when it dons the mask of allegory to attract the general gaze, thereby conceals its own true nature; it is by its outward form alone that it draws the common heart. There is, within the allegory of Radha-Krishna, some element that appeals equally to the Vaishnava and the non-Vaishnava, to the metaphysician and the simple fool alike — and it is for this reason that it has been able to spread so widely through rhyme, song, drama, and recitation.

The attraction of love between man and woman, through the medium of beauty, is celebrated in the literature of every land. Social duty alone cannot fully satisfy it. Its dominion extends beyond society as well. The workings of the five arrows of the god of love are universal, and Spring — that is, the youth and beauty of the world — is his eternal companion.

Love between man and woman possesses this one enchanting power: that by its force, in a single moment, it draws together all the moons and suns and stars of the universe, its groves of flowers, its heavens and earth, upon a single thread, and arrays them sweetly and radiantly about itself; the power of that love, by its sudden, ineffable manifestation, in the twinkling of an eye makes wholly fulfilled this world so long fragmented, scattered, and neglected — and this very power, age after age, land after land, mankind has felt and described as the allegory of the spirit's own

power. Proof of this lies in Solomon, in Hafiz, and in the padavali of the Vaishnava poets. In the love of two human beings there is such a vast, universe-embracing quality that it seems to spiritually-minded contemplatives that the full meaning of that love is not exhausted within those two beings alone; it hints, rather, at the boundless connection and the immeasurable yearning that subsist eternally between the world and the Lord of the world.

For poetry, there exists no other material equal to this. It is at once beautiful and vast, most intimate and yet all-consuming, worldly and yet ineffable. Although, for want of open intermingling of men and women and free choice of partners, this love lies degraded, existing in secret within Indian society, yet the poets of India have, by various devices and various stratagems, summoned it into their poetry. Without openly dishonouring society, they have placed poetry outside society's bounds. Shakuntala, in the youthful bloom of her beauty, dwelling in the hermitage by the Malini's banks amid mango-trees and sylvan moonlight and bowers — imprisoned within society though she be — is the dream-vision of the poet's imagination. The love of Dushyanta and Shakuntala lies beyond society; indeed, it stands opposed to society. The love-madness of Pururavas, breaking asunder the bonds of social order, roamed wild and untamed as a drunken elephant among the mountains and rivers. Meghadut is a poem of separation. In the state of separation, when the tightly-bound thread of matrimony is momentarily loosened, man finds occasion once more to love freely, as an individual. It is in that interval between husband and wife that the heart's powerful onward current finds room to flow independently. In Kumarasambhava, had Kumari Gauri not, against prevailing social custom, served Mahadeva alone in the stony hermitage, how could such an incomparable poem as the third canto have come into being? On the one side, spring-flower-adorned, delicate as the shirish blossom, trembling Uma; on the other, the yogi Mahadeva's fathomless, ocean-vast heart, absorbed in meditation — where else, within the confines of society's ordinary rule, could such a magnificent occasion for world-conquering love be found?

Be that as it may, human-made society is never wholly self-satisfied. That power which draws society toward what lies beyond society — that beauty, that power of love — man cannot but establish, at least in the realm of imagination, to be enjoyed there through fancy. If it meets obstruction in the earthly society, then it strives, with redoubled intensity, to contain itself within some spiritual conception. This is the chief reason that the songs of the Vaishnavas have, before our very eyes, come to cover the whole of India. The song of the Vaishnava is the song of freedom. It

knows no caste, no lineage. And yet this very unruliness is disciplined in the cultivation of beauty, in the cultivation of the heart. It is no mere excess or riot of the blind senses.

Just as certain obstacles have been described in the bond of matrimony in the tale of Hara-Gauri, so too in the flow of love in the Vaishnava scriptures, one single, overpowering obstacle is mentioned — society. It alone is a thousand-fold force. In the Vaishnava padavali, the waves of love surge up on every side of that obstacle of society. Indeed, in Vaishnava poetics, the special glory of *parakiya* — love for one not one's own — is celebrated. That this glory is not meant in the sense of social morality goes without saying. It is celebrated purely in terms of love. In it, such self-forgetfulness, such forgetfulness of the whole world, such utter indifference to blame, fear, shame, and restraint, such unconsciousness of the harsh confines of custom and convention, are revealed, that through them the tremendous force of love, its unfathomable mystery, its freedom from all bonds, and a vast conception transcending society, the everyday world, place, time, circumstance, and all logic and causation, stand fully revealed. It is for this reason that upon that very sin of infidelity, condemned unanimously throughout the world's societies, the Vaishnava poets have established their celebrated love, performing, as it were, its consecration. If this all-ruining, all-renouncing, all-bond-shattering love cannot be understood in a spiritual sense, no harm is done to it as poetry — though harm is certainly done to it as social morality.

The propagation of such love-songs might seem dangerous to the ordinary person and harmful to society. But in effect, this is not entirely true. Society can never wholly uproot human nature. It expresses itself in deed, in word, in imagination, in manifold ways. Checked on one side, it flows out on another. The danger to society lies precisely in attempting to restrain human nature beyond measure and completely. In such a state, when that suppressed nature finds some outlet by which to emerge, the accumulated danger is thereby, in some degree, lessened. In our country, where love unbound by matrimony has nowhere any open, socially sanctioned place — where the front door is utterly closed to it — and yet, though scripture may bar it and society may hide it, when it becomes a ghost and, at the dead of midnight, through the crevices of the locked door, roams the world with redoubled force — in such a case, our own society is bound, by the natural law of things, to give secret refuge to that very love, branded with the mark of disgrace to family honour. The Vaishnava poets have taken that boundless, irresistible surge of forbidden love and enthroned it in the spiritual realm of beauty, thereby scattering

it, in large measure, from the path of worldly life onto the path of the imagination; they have arranged, as it were, to offer that famished, ever-hungering ghost of our society a resting place in sacred shade. To transmute lust into love, they have employed the various touchstones of disciplined imagination. I cannot say that no trace of sensual perversion has found its place anywhere in their compositions. But just as a great flowing river continually purifies itself of the countless impure and dead things that are ceaselessly added to it, so too, by the force of beauty and feeling, all such corruption has easily been purged away. It is, rather, the poet of Vidyasundar who stands truly guilty against society. Beneath the very palace of society, he has, laughing all the while, dug his secret tunnel. Into that tunnel-chamber no pure sunlight nor open air finds entry. And yet why does this poem of Vidyasundar, and the folk-drama of Vidyasundar, receive such favour in our country? It is a subtle mockery, by human nature, of an overly rigid and oppressive society. What the Vaishnava poet has painted beautifully upon the shadow-path of feeling, this poet has stamped, like a brand, upon the very back of society; and whoever beholds it feels precisely that same mischievous delight.

Be that as it may, on the whole, our rustic literature is composed around the themes of Hara-Gauri and Radha-Krishna. Of these, the story of Hara-Gauri is the story of our own home. In that story of Hara-Gauri lies a great, poignant truth of Bengal. A daughter is a heavy burden upon our households. No burden is quite like the burden of a daughter. "Fatherhood of a daughter is indeed a trouble" — so runs the old saying. Bound by the strict rule of society regarding age and a narrow circle of eligible matches, we are compelled to give our daughters in marriage. Consequently, owing to this artificial pressure, the price demanded of the bridegroom rises exorbitantly, while his looks, virtues, wealth, and capability come to matter less and less. To bestow a daughter upon an unworthy match is the perpetual domestic tragedy of our society. Around this revolve, in household after household, endless anxiety, remorse, tears, discord with the son-in-law's family, and the cruel heartache of the girl caught between her father's house and her husband's. In our joint families, we strive to keep bound to us kin both distant and near, even relations in name only — it is the daughter alone whom we must let go. Those in societies where husband and wife, and sons and daughters, are all separated from one another cannot imagine this unbearable sorrow of ours. In our tightly-knit family system, this is the one solitary rupture. And so, turn where we may, our hand falls again and again upon that same wound. The tale of Hara-Gauri is, within the joint family of Bengal, the tale of that chief sorrow. On the seventh day of autumn, the beggar-bride of the whole land of Bengal comes to her mother's home; and when, on the day of Bijoya,

that beggar-household's goddess of plenty returns to her husband's home, the eyes of the whole of Bengal fill with tears.

For all these reasons, the rustic rhymes concerning Hara-Gauri are steeped in the real. They are the very own words of the poet and of his listeners alike. In these compositions, whatever mockery of the son-in-law, whatever domestic quarrels between husband and wife, whatever description of household affairs may be found, there is in them nothing of royal or divine grandeur; in them are reflected all the everyday pettiness and meanness of the rustic Bengali cottage. In them Kailasa and the Himalayas stand right before the ghat of our own scummy pond, and their peaks have never been able to rise above the tops of our own mango orchards. Had these poets made any effort to assume their proper transcendent forms, they would have found no place among the villages of Bengal.

*"In autumn, the Queen speaks words of gentle courtesy:
Have you heard, O Mountain-King, of last night's dream?"*

From this dream the tale begins. This is the prelude to all the Agomoni songs — the songs of the goddess's homecoming. Every year, when the autumn morning breeze grows moist with dew, and the colour of the sunlight turns to raw gold, the Mountain-Queen, Girirani, suddenly one day dreams of her cremation-ground-dwelling golden Gauri, and says: "Have you heard, O Mountain-King, of last night's dream?" This dream, Girirani has been hearing, in the ragas of Lalit Bibhas and Ramkeli, since the time of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers, and yet every year she hears it anew. In which year of history I know not, but the first autumn after Hara-Gauri's marriage, when Menakarani dreamed her dream and woke with a start — that first autumn, with that same first dream, returns year after year. In water, on land, in the sky, a great sorrow rings out: "That which I gave into another's hands — where now is that which was my very own!"

*"How many years have passed, tending to Shiva's household!
Go, Mountain-King, and bring Gauri from Kailasa's peak!"*

Needless to say, the Mountain-King is by no means a person of quick temperament. In his coming and going, and even in feeling grief, sorrow, or worry, he is by nature somewhat slow. It was only after hearing, on one occasion, a few sharp words of rebuke from his wife, on account of his all-pervading sluggishness and indifference, that he rose to his feet like an elephant goaded by the hook.

*Hearing these words, the Mountain-King, stricken with shame,
On the fifth day sets forth, by the scripture's rule of counsel.*

Hearing this, Menakarani, with all swift speed,
 Filled a tray with delicacies fine.
 Sugar-cane juice, sugar-foam, condensed milk, curds, and cream,
 Sugar-froth, cardamom-seed, pearl-like sweets in rows.
"Bhang-cakes, opium!" she declared, and placed them in his mouth —
Filling the tray, the Mountain-King then took them all at once.

But such diplomatic finesse as is required for an ambassador's task cannot be expected of the Himalaya. In Kailasa, he engaged his daughter in needless argument, thereby revealing the full extent of his vast, coarse nature. Amid her complaints, the aggrieved girl said to him:

"Tell me truly, father, and speak no more falsely —
Tell me truly, how does my mother fare?
You have grown hard-hearted, forgetting me utterly.
How much you must blaspheme against Shiva — what shall I say of it!"

Since a truthful answer to her accusation would not serve him well, his anger flared the higher. The Mountain-King, given the chance, never fails to speak ill of Shiva; unable to refute this charge, he flew into a rage and burst out:

"Mother, you call me hard-hearted, heartless — your husband calls me a rock.
Hearing that fool Menaka's counsel, I came to fetch you!"
Hearing this, the Mother of the Universe wept without ceasing.
Like a sudden burst of monsoon rain it fell in a single spell.
Floating on her tears, the streams grew wild —
They gathered at Kailasa and became a single river.
"Weep not, Mother, weep not, O beauty of the three cities!
Tomorrow I shall take you to the city of stone."
Menakarani had sent a message, given into Durga's hand.
Being pleased, Narayani found comfort in it.
Uma said, "Listen, father, sit down once more."
She offered him refreshment and many gifts to eat.
With great care, Maheshwari cooked a meal;
Father-in-law and son-in-law together dined.

If those for whom this rhyme was composed have, to this day, raised no objection against its metre and rhyme, then we have nothing further to say; but the pique and affection of the daughter toward her father, come as a guest in her husband's house, and her complaint, followed by reconciliation and hospitality — this domestic scene

appears before us as vividly as if seen with our own eyes. The river stood aside on one bank, growing restless with longing from within. Father-in-law and son-in-law sit down to their meal, and Gauri, with her own hands, cooks and serves them both — this picture remains etched in the mind.

*At bedtime Durga said, "Give me leave, my lord.
I wish tomorrow to go to my father's house."
"Listen, Gauri, Kailasa's city means nothing to you at all —
I see your wretched father has no house, no door."*

The last two lines are a little confusing to understand; their meaning is this: that compared to your own dwelling, Kailasa's city is worthless, so what capacity has your wretched father to give you a place at all?

Uma must quarrel with her father on her husband's account, and then quarrel with her husband on her father's account — such is her plight.

*Gauri says, "Should I speak, it would seem a false dispute —
That very wretched father of mine, who used to beg for alms —
They are sons of kings, with mansions and palaces grand,
How many sacrifices they perform — they do not dwell in cremation grounds!
They give in charity, perform meritorious deeds, and works divine.
On one count you are indeed poor — your house has no bharg!"*

But sharp retorts accomplish no useful end. Rather, when defeated in argument, physical force only grows the greater. Understanding this, Durga then—

Prepared five or six pellets of hemp-sweets with great care.

In this matrimonial battle, these six pellets of hemp-sweets worked like the six shells of a cannon; Bholanath was overpowered in a single stroke. Suddenly father, daughter, and son-in-law became close and affectionate. The speechless river stood merrily by the doorway in reverent attendance, silently laughing to herself.

*With great respect all three sat down together.
"Durga, what shall I bring you from earth, tell me the reason."
"Each time I get nothing but bel leaves as offering.
The goddess said, 'My lord, what else is there to eat?
A dot of vermillion, a lock combed, pearls strung in my hair,
Golden champak, pure gold — Shiva has forgotten such adornment!'
A garland of gems swings at her neck, a golden waistband glitters,
As if lightning flashed on a moonlit night.*

*Bangles of bell-metal, gold, conch bangles at the upper arm,
 Curved anklets of gold, bells tinkling, her skirt swaying as she moves.
 A throne, and silken robes the goddess wears,
 Kartik and Ganesh proceed, with Lakshmi and Saraswati.
 Jaya and Vijaya, her two maids, proceed together.
 Secretly proceeds, at the end, the five-faced Lord.
 With the Mountain-King, in supreme joy, in supreme delight, they go,
 On the sixth day of the lunar fortnight they arrive on earth.
 Row upon row of pitchers, and water from the Ganges,
 Carefully, silently, they sing the auspicious hymn."*

Then—

*Girirani says, "Word, kiss me on the mouth,
 Tell me, Tarini, how happy were you in your husband's house?"*

Here this rhyme ends; there is nothing more to be said of it. Meanwhile the time of parting has come. Regarding the daughter, there is always a slight jealousy between the husband's house and the father's. It does not please the husband's side that the bride remain too long at her father's home. Before mother and daughter have even had time to be fully satisfied in their long-delayed reunion, the summons comes from the husband's house, and the fires of anxiety are kindled. This is not due to any impatience on the part of a husband separated from his wife. Whatever the case, the bride comes from another's household; to make her fit fully and completely into her husband's household is a matter of special effort. To interrupt that effort by frequent visits to, or prolonged stays at, her natural childhood refuge — separating her from the new duties, habits, and acquaintances there — hinders the process of fitting in. Especially since, at her father's house, a married daughter enjoys nothing but affection without duty, while at her husband's house she is under the rule of duty — in such a state, a prolonged stay in her father's atmosphere is not considered desirable by the husband's family for the bride. For all these various reasons, the husband's side tends to be rather strict regarding the daughter's movements at her paternal home. Such is the perpetual anguish of having fathered a daughter. On the day of Bijoya, bearing that same harsh summons from the in-laws' house so common throughout Bengal, Shiva arrives at Menaka's door. The natural claim of maternal love began to dash itself, in vain, against the wall of social rule.

*"There is no need, Mountain-King, to say this to Shiva —
 Let him go back as he came; my daughter shall stay with me."*

Then all the sorrows Durga has endured in her husband's house began to come to her mother's mind. Every deficiency in Shiva's treasury, every fault in his conduct, every flaw in his character, blazed up vividly before her. She had given her daughter in marriage unworthily; now she wished, as far as possible, to make amends, to bring Gauri back, so far as might be, into her mother's embrace. The conduct of the husband's household often seems, from a distance, unreasonable to the paternal household, and the paternal relatives, in the anguish of their affection, severely criticize it in front of the daughter herself. Menaka thus began, and Shiva, enraged by this unjust conduct, vigorously proclaimed the discipline of the husband's household.

"Coming to earth, I see you have forgotten our former agreement. Time and again I forbid you for this very reason. Growing wild in your mother's lap, I see you forget your husband. What kind of king your father is, that I too shall now see." Hearing this, the Mountain-King grew agitated. With triumphant assurance, he set out toward Abhaya. "Whoever can take her back, let them do so — else, whose power is such? Go, Tarini, to your husband's home; come again another time."

The narrow term of grace expired, and the daughter returned to her husband's home.

Now, the rhyme whose discussion I am about to take up describes a certain secret chamber of the gods and goddesses.

Shiva sits with Bhavani in intimate, playful mood. Curious, Uma says to the trident-bearing Lord: "You are the Lord, you are the Lord, essence of the three worlds, Indra, Chandra, Kuber, Varuna — all are your servants. Having become your wife, my desire finds no fulfilment, As though a poor man's wife should long for jewels galore. I have never worn divine golden ornaments upon my body, I long only to wear two conch-shell bangles, dark as Shyam's own hue. Before the Lord I die of shame, I cannot stretch out my hand — Just this once, give me conch bangles, that I may wear them in your house."

Bholanath thought, let us have some fun, and first stirred up a little mischief.

Thinking it over, Bhola laughed and said, "Listen, Parvati, I am but a beggar for hemp — where shall I get conch bangles, Tripurari?"

*The very hand-drum I own would fetch, if sold,
 Only a single cowrie-shell's worth of conch.
 If I sold my bull outright, I'd get scarcely a few cowries more.
 If you want this and that, properly arranged, O Gauri,
 I would give it if I had it.
 Your father, indeed, possesses wealth and power —
 Can he not give the mere cost of a pair of conch bangles?"*

This pretence of poverty is Mahadeva's own excessive indulgence, one naturally intolerable to womankind. When a wife asks for a bracelet, and the clerk-husband sits down to analyze at length the accounts of income and expenditure to prove his own poverty, what pious wife could endure it with unruffled patience? Especially since Shiva's poverty is purely a poverty of costume, meant only to score a point over Indra, Chandra, Varuna, and the rest, meant only to create an exquisite jest with Annapurna, mother of Lakshmi herself. Kalidasa compared Shankara's loud laughter to the terrible avalanche of Kailasa's peak. Maheshwar's white poverty, too, is one of his silent bursts of laughter. But even for a god, there is a limit to jest. How clearly the great goddess expressed her own feeling on this matter — leaving nothing to be inferred by hint.

*Gauri, indignant, said, "Listen here, Lord Shiva —
 I am Gauri, and I wish to wear conch bangles given by your own hand.
 If you were, as you are, young, and your husband too were young,
 Then this would be playful jest — otherwise, it is nothing at all.
 You are old, of middling years, mad on bhang and dhutura,
 And you call others mean, just as you yourself are!"*

It did not end here — after this, the goddess, in the heat of her indignation, spoke two or three further remarks concerning Mahadeva's personal character, which are not fit for general publication. We therefore refrain from quoting them.

Nor did the matter end even here; a wife's anger may travel as far as it wishes — that is, all the way to her father's house — and so it did.

*Taking Kartik on her hip, leading Ganesh by the hand,
 In anger, Hara's Gauri went off to her father's house.*

Meanwhile Shiva began the backstage arrangements for his own planned matrimonial farce—

He had Vishwakarma fashion conch bangles.
 Taking the conches, he set out disguised as a bangle-seller—
 Taking the name Shri Ram Lakshman for his two arms,
 He wandered about the Himalayas in disguise.
 A trident in hand, a bag at his waist, Shambhu wanders from lane to lane,
 Crying, "Conches to sell! Conches to sell!"
 Gauri sits among her companions, filled with curiosity.
 "Let's see the conches, let's see the conches," they say.
 The bangle-seller showed Gauri, and brought out his conches.
 Upon the conches it was as if the moon itself had risen.
 Strung with gems, pearls, coral, a garland of rubies,
 Shining forth in fresh splendour, like Indra's own lightning.

The goddess, delighted, asked—

"Bangle-seller, you have brought fine conches.
 What price do you ask for these conches?"

Seeing the goddess's eager desire, the clever bangle-seller at first did not discuss price at all; he said—

"Gauri, Brahmaloka, Vaikuntha, Hara's Kailasa — everyone speaks of these.
 Simply understand, and put out your hand and wear the conches — no need to delay."

It was not reasonable of Mahadeva to think that, by such vague talk about his immovable estate, the pair of bangles would come cheap.

Between Gauri and Mahadeva, hard bargaining ensued.
 All her companions said, "Durga, ask the price of the conches."
 One brought oil, one a towel, one a bowl of water.
 Placing her hand upon the god's thigh, Parvati sat down.
 The merciful Shiva said, "Conch, heed my word—
 Once in Durga's hand, become as hard as thunder.
 Do not break on the grindstone, do not shatter under the sword!"
 With Durga he exchanged such playful, teasing words.
 Hearing this, the Mother smiled inwardly.
 The Father of the Universe delights in fitting her with conches.
 "Bangle-seller, if you have brought good conches, they will suit her well.
 Whatever the broken pieces cost, I shall pay, taking full account."

At this point, the bangle-seller, judging the moment ripe, said—

*"If I am to take payment for your conches,
Disgrace shall fall on me among the stars themselves."*

These bangle-sellers, of whatever lineage they be, are quite unlike other tradesmen; they have not the slightest trace of shrewdness; they are utterly indifferent to money; once they have found the one for whom they wish to fashion bangles, they make no further claim of price. Theirs is an excellent trade indeed!

*"What strange talk is this you speak, bangle-seller, what strange talk!
Speak as if to an ordinary mortal, bangle-seller, speak thus to me!"*

The bangle-seller said—

*"There's no need to boast, Durga, no need to boast at all.
I know all the truth about this young man here.
Your husband is a wastrel Shiva — that much I know well.
Day after day, house after house, he goes about begging alms,
Smeared with ashes, a snake coiled about his body,
He wanders ceaselessly in the company of ghosts and demons."*

This is what is called "getting one's own back"! All the plain truths that Mahadeva has, from time to time, heard from the mouth of his own righteous wife about himself, he now, seizing his chance, brings to Gauri's ears as so many established facts.

*Hearing this, the mother's weeping grew all the more violent.
He tried to draw out the conches, but they would not come out.
Chandi brought a stone; the conches did not break.
Striking against the conches, the stone itself shattered to pieces.
When by no means could the conches be severed,
The goddess resolved to cut off her own hand with a sword.
If her hand were cut, the conches would fill with blood;
Once stained with blood, the conches would never come off again.
"O Menaka, mother,
In what evil hour did I set out this day!
I shall die, I shall die, mother, I shall take my own life!
With my own hand I shall cut my throat with the sword of Narasimha!"*

At last, seeing no other recourse, Durga took up incense, lamp, and offerings, and sat down in meditation.

In meditation she beheld the two feet of Mahadeva.

Then the matter became clear; the god's jest had reached its end.

*"Where now the daughter, where now the son-in-law —
All I see is my own deity!"*

It was exactly as if it had all been a dream. In an instant—

*Durga went to Kailasa, Shiva went to the cremation ground.
Cutting hemp and dhutura, Durga sat down upon her seat.
When evening fell, the two of them came together in one place.*

Here, without even waiting for the fourth line, the rhyme comes abruptly to its end.

The rhymes concerning Radha and Krishna belong to an altogether different order. There, one must pass beyond the chamber of the actual into the realm of the imaginary. Everyday events, worldly affairs, social mysteries find no place there. That extraordinary kingdom of the cowherd is the mental kingdom of the Bengali rhyme-maker and his listeners alike.

*Here and there wanders the cowherd, with none beside him,
In Vrindavan's grove Subal and Kanai graze the cattle.
Subal says, "Listen, brother Kanai,
Today I shall adorn you as Lord of the Vrindavan-groves."*

No sooner had this proposal to adorn him been heard than every flower in the grove, wherever it bloomed, grew eager and restless with longing.

*The kadamba blossom says, in the assembly gathered there,
"Adorned today, I shall dangle at Govinda's ear."
The oleander blossom says, "Who knows my inmost worth—
Today he shall keep me in the crown of Hari's beauty."
Wild-flower garlands, golden thread, jasmine string besides—
"In my heart Shyam shall swing, the crest-jewel of beauty."
In joy the lotus says, "You other flowers all,
Seeing me, your hearts shall grow restless with longing.
I dwell at his very feet, the lotus named Kamal—
I shall behold, in a single glance, the face of Radha-Krishna."*

No flower was left disappointed; that day their blooming found its true fulfilment.

With flowers his turban, with flowers his ornaments,
 Subal has adorned him well.
 With flowers his garment, with flowers his robe,
 Bihari-lal is arrayed.
 Many an ornament, flowers his adornment,
 Oleander blooms at his crest.
 Upon his brow a crown, most exquisitely made,
 His curling locks fall loose.

Meanwhile a gathering of curious bees and their mates, peacocks and peahens, wagtails and their mates, assembled. All the birds possessed of song began to praise Subal's artistry; the cuckoo came with his wife and declared, "How very fitting is this crown!"

The water-hen, the diver-bird, mynahs and parrots
 Rise up, chattering with delight.

What did they proclaim in their chattering?—

"The cowherd Subal has adorned him well,
 The playful wanderer of the woods, Vinodbihari."

Meanwhile the male and female rain-birds, mistaking Shyam for a cloud, flew round and round, crying "Give water! Give water!" Through the branches, the leaves, the breeze, the sky, a great sound spread abroad.

Kanai says, "My own dear brother Subal,
 How well you have adorned me — tell me, tell me now!"

Kanai knows his adornment is not yet complete. Whatever the cuckoos and water-hens might say, the time had not yet come to praise Subal's taste and skill.

"You have adorned me with many flowers, brother — now look to your left, my dear;
 Only then shall your Vinodbihari be truly adorned."

The chief flower of Vrindavan alone was still missing. This lack the beasts and birds might fail to notice — but Shyam himself began to feel its want keenly.

"Look, brother, toward the bower — see how, wherever I gaze,
 That joyous bower of flowers appears now dark to my eyes."

Then, abashed, Subal said—

*"Stay here a while, O new bearer of the flute;
Today I shall go and fetch that hard-hearted young beauty."*

Meanwhile, amid her companions Lalita and Bishakha, Radhika sits.

*Seeing Subal, all grew filled with joy—
"Come, come, sit down, Subal — what is this sudden visit?"*

Subal brought his news—

*"Softly, softly blows the spring breeze, as I came along the path;
Weeping, Krishna cries, 'Where is my beloved?'"*

Hearing of Krishna's sorry plight, Radha rose up weeping and said—

"With such longing I strung this garland, dear friend — for whose neck shall I give it now?

I shall leap this very day into the waters of the Yamuna and die!"

In a moment's impulse, Radha resolved upon this needless and desperate act. But at last, coming to terms with her companions, she said—

*"In whatever adornment I now stand, in this very Vrindavan,
In that same adornment I shall go to behold Krishna's face."*

*"Wait, wait, dear friend," said her companions all together.
"Go slowly, look back, O beautiful Radhika."*

Radhika called out to her companions and said—

*"Come now, all of you, bearing curds upon your heads—
May the Lord fare well; come quickly, my dears!"*

Though Radha, in her first impulse, had declared she would go just as she was, that resolve did not hold.

*Combing her hair, binding it in a knot to the left,
Applying kohl and the tilak mark, she wound her sari close.
Over her sari she scattered a shower of gold.
A golden clasp shone on her arm, an armlet of gold.
At her neck shone a five-jewelled, ruby-studded garland.
At her feet gleamed Radha's golden anklets.
At her waist jingled little bells, sweetly ringing as she moved.
"No need to worry, no need to worry," said Bishakha, coming forward,
"Take up in your arms one calf of the white cow."*

All the companions placed pots of curds upon their heads, and Radhika, taking in one arm a calf of the white cow, the band of milkmaids set out along the path of Braj toward the sight of Shyam. Krishna, meanwhile, lost himself utterly in meditation upon Radha's beauty.

*Standing before him, Rai spoke these words:
"What image has arisen in your mind, O jewel among the dark ones?
Whatever image has arisen in your mind — that very image am I."*

Radhika, with pride and yet humility, said: it is your own inward feeling that stands manifest before you, outwardly—

*"Lift up your face, open your eyes, O sapphire-hued one,
Why do you weep and make me weep too, I, your own delight?"
The garland that had hung at her waist, she placed round Krishna's neck.
The union of Radha and Krishna took place in the grove of Vrindavan.*

The adornment of the Lord of the Vrindavan-groves was thus complete; Subal's task was accomplished.

In all this, there is nothing in particular resembling the domestic scenes of a Bengali village. That milkmaids, so adorned, jingling their anklets, should walk through forest paths with curds upon their heads and calves in their arms — this is not something one sees, actually or even occasionally, on the paths of a Bengali village. Cowherds do play various games beneath banyan trees in the fields, but such a frenzy of flowers, involving themselves and their herds, is never heard of. All this is the creation of pure feeling. The separation and union of Krishna and Radha is the ideal pattern of separation and union for the whole universe of beings; in it there is no Brahmin-society of India, no Manu-Samhita — its whole scope is purely pastoral. Where society is powerful, there the mingling of the cowherding of Vrindavan with the kingship of Mathura would be utterly incongruous. But in the emotional realm where the tale of Krishna-Radha dwells, no such justification is required at all. Indeed, there, transcending all prevailing social custom, the cowherd-life of Vrindavan has been proven more glorious than the very kingship of Mathura. In our country, where the notion of division of labour, scriptural authority, and social hierarchy lies so deeply rooted in the general mind, we, through long habituation, fail to perceive just how astonishing is this freedom of feeling, defying all convention, present in the tale of Krishna-Radha.

When Krishna went to rule as king in Mathura, Radhika said, weeping—

"Will such fortune ever come again, that Hari shall return to Braj? He has gone to the city of Mathura — in vain do I nurse this hope."

That the king might again be made a cowherd is a hope everyone must admit to be a vain one. But old Brinda understands the true heart of Vrindavan; she knows there is no reason for despair. She knows that in Vrindavan and Mathura, the rules of Kashi and Kanchi do not properly apply.

Brinda says, "If I can bring him here for you, What reward will you give me then, tell me, my dear?" Hearing these words, the lotus-like one seemed lost in bewilderment— "I have given body and life as offering at Krishna's lotus feet. He to whom, once, I gave myself entirely, has now grown indifferent— No god like him exists for Radhika, none at all. Beyond this, truly, where else could I find wealth? My only ornament is the name of Krishna. We are but beggars of love, daughters of no king. That very wealth I can give unto my beloved. The messenger says: 'Listen, dear lady, you shall meet with Shyam— Then place both pairs of our feet upon my head.'"

Having secured this promise of reward, the messenger set forth. Having crossed the Yamuna, upon the road—

With a laugh she asked someone, "Tell me now, Under whose authority do you dwell here?" That person replied, "It is King Krishnachandra Ray." As rain falls upon sunshine, so this fell upon the messenger. "This shepherd-boy of Nanda has come here putting on airs; Without theft, when has the Gokul-dweller ever been called anything else?"

This title of "Roy Bahadur" bestowed upon Krishna struck the messenger as highly amusing. Krishnachandra Roy! This surely was not his real name. It was but a pompous show meant to deceive foolish people. Old Brinda knew his true name.

At last, in a beggar's guise, she arrived at the gate. Without leave, none by day or night might pass within. With great difficulty permission was obtained, and "Old Brinda the messenger went in among the assembly."

Paying her respects, the messenger stood for a while. With fixed gaze she looked upon Krishna's face. He had cast off his sari and skirt and set a crown upon his head instead; All his limbs bore royal ornaments, but no flute was in his hand. A golden necklace at his throat, armlets on his arms. A white yak-tail fan waved beside him, dazzling to behold. Banners flew, drums beat, heralds cried out warnings. With great pomp sat learned Brahmins in judgement and counsel. "One more petition I make, hear me, O Damodar— By the Yamuna I saw a lovely boat. Empty it floats, adrift upon the Yamuna's shore, For want of a boatman it wanders from ghat to ghat. Once there was a boatman, so everyone says— That thief has fled somewhere, and must now be caught. I heard he had come here, that he dwells now in Mathura. If he does not present himself, lest he be found out— Being but a woman, I speak, fearing the presence of men. The whole assembly fell silent, none dared to make a sound— My dwelling is in the city of Braj. Breaking my pot of curds, eating the curds, the thief fled away."

The title of Roy Bahadur bestowed on Krishna seemed to the messenger exceedingly amusing. Krishnachandra Ray! This was surely no true name at all — merely a piece of pomp meant to deceive simple folk. His true name, old Brinda knew well.

"To catch the thief, this wretched woman has come before this court. What kind of king are you? Judge, and I shall know this instant!"

Brinda, preserving due royal decorum toward King Krishnachandra Roy, spoke exactly as protocol demanded — at least, so it appears from the poet's account of the affair. Yet there was some measure of defiance in it too; Brinda did not refrain from showing off, before Mathura, her own pride in Vrindavan. "If he does not present himself, lest he be found out" — this is indeed a bold thing to say; hearing it, the whole assembly fell silent. The great King Krishnachandra Roy of Mathura said—

"If Brinda was a maidservant in Braj, I recall it but dimly. On what day, indeed, did we meet or converse in Vrindavan?" Then Brinda muttered, "Who knows, this may well happen— On gaining wealth, many forget the ways proper to the great."

When Krishna inquired after the welfare of Vrindavan, Brinda said—

*"In her hand no curds, the Queen calls, 'Where is Gopal now?'
The calf and cow will not touch even a blade of grass.
A hundred-petalled lotus floats there in that same ocean —
What wretched dhutura has gained such power that so many drums must sound?"*

Brinda compared the kingdom of Mathura to dhutura — a rather intoxicating comparison, with a certain grandeur to it — but where, in it, is the beauty and fragrance of Vrindavan?

Needless to say, after this, Brinda's embassy did not fail of its purpose.—

*The messenger took Krishna, and, taking leave, arrived back in the city of Braj.
Every beast and bird received him with true reverence and joy.
Blessed be the vines of Braj, blessed the leaves of the tamal tree, blessed be
Vrindavan!
Blessed, blessed the union of Radha and Krishna!*

In the rustic rhymes of Bengal, besides the tales of Hara-Gauri and Radha-Krishna, one also finds tales of Sita-Ram and of Rama and Ravana, though these are comparatively few. This must be admitted; in the west, where the story of the Ramayana is widely current among the common people, there is a greater cultivation of the heroic and manly spirit than in Bengal. In our country, the relations of husband and wife have been variously depicted in the tale of Hara-Gauri, and those of hero and heroine in the tale of Radha-Krishna; but their scope is narrow, and one does not find in them the full sustenance of a complete humanity. In our country there has been a cultivation of the sense of beauty in the story of Radha-Krishna, and of the sense of the heart in the story of Hara-Gauri, but neither has given rise to any cultivation of righteousness. In them is found no ideal of heroism, of magnanimity, of unwavering devotion, or of stern renunciation. The matrimonial life of Rama and Sita is, in many respects, far superior to, more elevated and purer than, the matrimonial life of Hara-Gauri current in our country; it is at once as stern and profound as it is tender and gentle. In the tale of the Ramayana, on the one hand the harsh rigour of duty, and on the other the boundless sweetness of feeling, are united together. In it, matrimonial love, brotherly affection, filial devotion, loyalty to one's lord, and tender care for one's subjects — all the highest bonds of the human heart find their supreme expression. In it, the stern discipline of restraining every impulse of the heart, at every step, by the great law of righteousness, is proclaimed. No other country, no other literature, offers such an

education, in every respect, for the making of true human beings. It is our country's misfortune that this tale of the Ramayana has never been able to raise its head, in the soil of Bengal, above the tales of Hara-Gauri and Radha-Krishna. Those who have taken Rama as the ideal of a man-become-god upon the battlefield and in the field of action possess an ideal of manliness, of devotion to duty, and of righteousness, higher than our own.

Falgun–Chaitra, 1305 (Bengali era)